

CHAPTER IV

SASSOON, MANNING AND OWEN: THEIR TECHNIQUES AND STYLES

Sassoon's first collection of poems, the Old Huntsman, contains war poems written between early 1915 and early 1917. His early verses, some wrought out before he went to France, were typically Georgian both in diction and in sentiment. There is no attempt to deal with the physical effects of the battle.

Return to greet me, colours that were my joy,
Not in the woeful crimson of men slain,
But shining as a garden; come with the streaming
Banners of dawn and sundown after rain.

I am not sad; only I long for lustre.
I am tired of the greys and browns and the leafless ash.
I would have hours that move like a glitter of dancers
Far from the angry guns that boom and flash.

"(To Victory)"

In this poem, Sassoon has had a glimpse of the reality, but his pastoral mind hesitates to speak it out. Deliberately, he turns away from the contemporary situation, from "the lies, the truths and pain,"¹ in favour of what his Georgian imagination provides.

Sassoon was soon to react against the nature and the conduct of the War. His satiric realism is due to the sense of an obligation to voice the change and the condition that brought it about. To be sure, he was not impulsively aggressive; he was forced by circumstances. Sassoon was too honest and too sensitive to go on living in the world of romantic fantasy. "Golgotha," with its "mirthless laughter" and "brown rats, the humble scavengers", is a gradual change in his early idealistic attitude. The poet adopted a narrative form in "A Working Party,"² which relates the death of an ordinary soldier:

He was a young man with a meagre wife
 And two small children in a Midland town;
 He showed their photographs to all his mates,
 And they considered him a decent chap
 Who did his work and had not much to say,
 And always laughed at other people's jokes
 Because he did not have any of his own.

whose ordeal is such that, to reverse the heroic theme, Sassoon excludes "all possibilities of tragic interpretation."¹ The man does not understand the nature of the fighting; he does not even know what he is fighting for. Passive suffering, Johnston observed, is not a theme for tragedy. Sassoon, moreover, was the first war poet to use colloquial tone.

Deep in water I splashed my way
 Up the trench to our bogged front line.
 Rain had fallen the whole damned night.
 O Jesus, send me a wound today,
 And I will believe in Your bread and wine,
 And get my bloody old sins washed out!

"(Stand-to: Good Friday Morning)"

In his post-Somme poems, Sassoon makes full use of his ability to compose "two or three harsh, peremptory, and colloquial stanzas with a knockout blow in the last line."²

Of a soldier returning home, he writes:

But was he back in Blighty? Slow he turned,
 Till in his heart thanksgiving leapt and burned.
 There shone the blue serene, the prosperous land,
 Trees, cows and hedges; skipping these, he scanned
 Large, friendly names, that change not with the year,
 Lung Tonic, Mustard, Liver Pills and Beer.

"(Stretcher Case)"

Sassoon spent his pre-war life in a "gentlemanly paradise,"³ and even in his pre-war work, reveals a sympathy for the men excluded from it. As a war poet, he was also at his best when he combined pity

with ironic realism and satire.

The Hero begins with a mother learning proudly that her son has "died a man's death." Sorry she is, but she would have been all the more so, if he had been shot for cowardice or otherwise failed to carry out his duty. The officer who has brought her the news quietly goes out,

He'd told the poor old dear some gallant lies
That she would nourish all her days, no doubt.
For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes
Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,
Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy.

He thought how 'Jack', cold-footed, useless swine,
Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried
To get sent home, and how, at last, he died,
Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care
Except that lonely woman with white hair.

Sassoon was very temperamental. He passionately speaks out against the War because he has been optimistic about it. In his memoirs, Sassoon gives every possible detail of physical discomforts, believing that only these details constitute the humanity of an infantryman's existence.

Sassoon is known especially for his realism and satire. His intention was corrective: that such a warfare, which utilized to the maximum every species of scientific violence, should be duly avoided. Nothing could have been better than putting down the demoralizing horrors of the War, the despondency of its victims regardless of nationality, in the most realistic manner possible.

In some places it was only a foot deep, and already men were lying wounded and killed by sniping. There were high booted German bodies, too, and in the bleak beginning of daylight they seemed so much the victims of a catastrophe as the men who had attacked them. As I stepped over one of the Germans an impulse made me lift him up from the miserable ditch. Propped against the bank, his blonde face

was undisfigured except by the mud which I wiped from his eyes and mouth with my coat sleeve. He'd evidently been killed while digging, for his tunic was knotted loosely about his shoulders. He did not look to be more than eighteen. Hoisting him a little higher, I thought what a gentle face he had, and remembered that this was the first time I'd ever touched one of our enemies with my hands. Perhaps I had some dim sense of futility, which had put an end to this good-looking youth...⁴

Not long after this incident, while he and Lance-Corporal Kendle, who joined his exploration with an adventurous spirit, were having great fun together over an attempt to take over an enemy's sniper-post:

Kendle was half kneeling against some broken ground; I remember seeing him push his tin hat back from his forehead and then raised himself a few inches to take aim. After firing once he looked at me with a lively smile; a second later he fell sideways. A blotchy mark showed where the bullet had hit him just above the eyes.⁵

In such circumstances, he had no justification for feeling either shocked or astonished by this sudden extinction. Kendle and the dead German he had met had cancelled one another out in the process called "attrition of man-power." They now lost all touch with life and became part of the wastage of war.

Sassoon's satiric "bites" are directed against the Church, the civilians, the officers and especially the Government.

As I walked away from Markington my mind was clamorous with confused ideas and phrases. It seemed as if, until today, I had been viewing the War through the loop-hole of a trench parapet. Now I felt so much 'in the know' that I wanted to stop strangers in the street and ask them whether they realized that we ought to state our War Aims. People ought to be warned that there was (as I would have expressed it) some dirty work going on behind their backs. I remembered how sceptical old Lord Asterisk had been about the redemption of 'gallant little Belgium' by the Allies. And now Markington had gloomily informed me that our Aims were essentially acquisitive, what we were fighting for was the Mesopotamian Oil wells. A jolly fine swindle it would have been for me, if I'd been killed in April for an Oil Well!⁶

Sassoon found it hard to revoke "the laughter of war". If there is any humour at all in his work it is very bitter and mostly sarcastic. His close friend's, Robert Graves', is far from that. When billeted in an undamaged village behind the line, Graves finds the deserted gardens there very pleasant to walk in:

One garden has currant bushes in it. I and the company sergeant-major started eating along the line from the opposite ends without noticing each other. When we did, we both remembered our dignity, he as a company sergeant-major, and I as an officer. He saluted, I acknowledged the salute, we both walked away. A minute or two later, we both came back, hoping that the coast was clear and again, after an exchange of salutes, had to leave the currants and pretend that we were merely admiring the flowers. I don't quite know why I behaved like that. The C.S.M. is a regular, and therefore obliged to stop eating in the presence of an officer. So, I suppose, courtesy to his scruples made me stop, too. Anyhow, along came a couple of privates and stripped the bushes clean.⁷

Sassoon is outspoken in his realism because of his strong corrective purpose. He wanted to disturb civil "complacency". Manning is reticent, comparatively; nevertheless, in a few words, he makes his attitude and viewpoint of the War clearly understood.

Men had reverted to a more primitive stage in their development, and had become nocturnal beasts of prey, hunting each other in packs; this was the uniformity, quite distinct from the effect of military discipline, which their own nature had imposed on them. There is an extraordinary veracity in war, which strips man of every conventional covering he has, and leaves him to face a fact as naked and as inexorable as himself...⁸

Manning is more interesting in his dealing with psychology. He is much concerned with mental reaction upon warfare speculations. En route to a battle on the Somme, for instance:

Bourne felt a kind of melancholy, a kind of home-sickness, stilling the excitement which filled him a little while ago. He watched the colour draining out of earth, leaving

all its contours vague and grey, except where the shadowy woods and downs took a sharper outline against the sky as luminous and green as water flowing over limestone. Some stars, pallid as yet, hung in it. He had the feeling that he had relinquished everything. It was not that silly feeling of sacrifice, the sense of being a vicarious atonement for the failure of others: the wind with which some men puff out an idle vanity. Memory drifted up on the verge of his thought a phrase: 'la resignation, c'est la defaite de l'ame; but it was not quite that, for there was no sense of defeat. He had ceased, in some curious way, to have any self-consciousness at all; it was as though his mind were brimmed up with peace, with a peace that still trembled a little on its surface, as though a breath would suffice to spill it; though he had the certainty in his heart that presently it would become still, and mirror only the emptiness of the night.⁹

Private Bourne is the author's mouthpiece. Thus in making each point, he does well by showing rather than by just telling. Manning approximates Owen in viewing all the sufferings as the effect of sin and guilt. (cf. Owen's "Mental Cases").

...the company marched off to their drills, and the specialists to their duties, well aware that presently there would be another big killing of men. They marched out of ^{the} village, past the stone calvary at the end of it, and men who had known all the sins of the world lifted, to the agony of the figure on the cross; eyes that had probed and understood the misery of suffering.¹⁰

Manning believes that "partialities" and "prejudices" provide most of the "driving power" of life. All through the story, he emphasizes that this is always true. After briefly taking a commission as a Lance-Corporal, Bourne is ordered to join a raid in which he is killed. His new captain does not like him too well. So the order is purely an act of spite. In peacetime society, when there are more opportunities for rivalry, it is all the more certain that Manning's opinion holds good.

Manning shows much understanding of human nature. Men are so

quick to forget; no matter how impressed they might be by anything, time will obliterate all before long. He knows that the soldiers going to war can stand a desperate prospect or actual suffering better than a little touch of gentleness or kindness, which "struck them with a hand harsher than death's."

No mortal is fearless. The difference between a coward and a brave man is that the latter knows how to suppress his fear. Miller, the deserter in the book, is ruined because he lets his fear get the better of him.

Manning is a prose-writer of acute sensibility.

In the distance, a star-shell would rise, and as its light dilated, wavered and failed, one saw against it the shattered trunks and boughs of trees, lunatic arms uplifted in imprecation, and as though petrified in a moment of shrieking agony. The communication trench was deep, and one looked up out of it to a now tranquil sky, against which the same stark boughs were partly visible. Then on the right appeared the ruins of a shattered farm, an empty corpse of a building. There was for Bourne an inexplicable fascination in that melancholy landscape: it was still, so peaceful, and so extraordinarily tense. One heard a shell travel overhead, or the distant rattle of a machine-gun, but these were merely interruptions of a silence which seemed to touch the heart with a finger of ice...¹¹

The atmosphere of Her Privates We is that of resignation.

After all, the dead are quiet. Nothing in the world is more still than a dead man. One sees men living, living as it were, desperately, and then suddenly emptied of life...¹²

In his introduction to Her Privates We, Edmund Blunden

comments:

Among war books of its period, Frederic Manning's has a time-scheme which assists in its powerful unity of movement. It all belongs to the Somme Offensive of 1916, and a few diversions to places a little away from the Somme battlefield do not alter the sense of a current of destiny, in which Bourne and his companions were plunged that July.

Owen is not a satirist like Sassoon; he was more of a prophet. There is a prophetic power in The Seeds, despite the poet's lack of experience when it was written. Already in 1914, he saw the War not as a "heroic deliverance," but as a terrible international disaster, "the winter of the world."

Owen's poems on war expresses many aspects, but perhaps pity is the one he felt most. In the Preface to his projected volume of war poems, he wrote:

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.
My subject is War, and the Pity of War.
The Poetry is in the Pity.

The first "poetry" seems to mean "poetry" in the conventional, romantic sense of the word. His "poetry" is not to be found in beauty of rhymes or images. It is in the "Pity". Like any writers of the War, Owen felt himself under the compulsion to report, inform and warn. Subject-matter is that which characterizes the literature of this period. Owen did not let it determine his styles. His style, to be exact, is in the subject-matter. His poetry is originated in anger and bitterness; but the "positive" emotions of love, pity, and admiration are also present. The coexistence strengthens the poetry.

No mockeries for them from prayers or bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,--
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.