

RUPERT BROOKE

NO poet since Francis Thompson has won such immediate acceptance as Rupert Brooke. He came, he sang, he conquered. He was a sudden voice; a voice that died away suddenly far from the land he sang and loved. And his death gave a new life to his song.

In Thompson the critics had found a poet complete, crowned in his own right with his own imperishable bays, a poet's poet. They were denied the luxury of watching him grow. While they slept he had taken Parnassus at a bound. They woke to find him with nothing to learn and everything to teach. He let loose upon them *The Hound of Heaven*, and from that moment they were prepared for anything. His vision had no limitations but the horizons of beauty and truth; it was a spiritual unity that had no parts; it was so comprehensive that it could enclose eternity in a poppy's fragile cup. His moods were all one mood: a mood towards God by which he interpreted everything aright.

Brooke was saluted in his own day as a poet who would become great. Certain undoubted successes convinced men that he would undoubtedly be a success. Until then he was the most interesting of the younger poets. He conducted his emotional and poetical education in public; that was the abiding interest. He faltered and swerved and failed many times. But always the conviction prevailed that he would one day find his feet and run in the straight and find with certain eye the goal.

But Death found him 'long before he tired,' and he left a mosaic of moods for memory.

* *Poems*. By Rupert Brooke. (Sidgwick and Jackson).
1914 and *Other Poems*. By Rupert Brooke. (Sidgwick and Jackson).

Rupert Brooke

For this reason one is haunted and restrained by a certain delicacy of feeling in thinking of his work. His vivid, appealing personality is on every page, in every word. Man, mood and metre are inseparable. There is for ever a living identification. What he would have achieved now matters little. He wrote what he was and what he then knew. It is so we accept him and try to understand him.

Contrast is of the essence of his work. He can dwell among the shadows and rise transfigured into the light. He can doubt and splendidly affirm. He can immortalise himself and laugh himself to eternal scorn. No principle of unity proclaims itself, save the love of beautiful relative things, fickle and elusive. Unlike Thompson, he has no steadfast point of vision, no static view-line, to guide his sight. In this there is no condemnation, only regret. He was denied that attitude to thought and conduct which Thompson learned from the Catholic Church. It was his misfortune, not his fault. He was thrown back upon himself to become the interpreter of his own heart and mind. For this reason he is absolved from all fickleness in his shifting gaze. He can condemn and praise, laugh at and weep upon, the same thing. But throughout he is the master of his word and phrase.

Not many poets nowadays make us halt upon a word or pause upon a phrase, to proclaim both with a swift joy of appreciation absolutely inevitable. Alice Meynell, that royal mistress of song, does it constantly; Charles Williams, too little known as yet, occasionally. It is one of Rupert Brooke's first achievements. A 'slow light' and a 'most individual and bewildering ghost' occur to perfection in one poem. 'Ecstasies unwist,' 'lights unutterable,' 'weary unreturning feet,' 'wet strong ploughlands,' come to mind at random. His happy epithets would make a long list.

Blackfriars

Some of his phrases haunt the mind for days. Their context sanctions and explains them. In that most wistful of sonnets, *The Busy Heart*, we find ' . . . ploughlands, scarred for certain grain,' ' the young heavens, forgetful after rain ' ; in *The Night Journey*, ' as a man, caught by some great hour, will rise, slow-limbed ' ; in *Peace*, the first of the famous five sonnets, ' now, God be thanked who has matched us with His hour ' ; in the fourth sonnet, *The Dead*, ' These hearts were woven of human joys and cares.' Any one of these phrases would have redeemed a smaller poet from mediocrity and conferred at least one distinction upon his work. But they are the atmosphere of Brooke, the constant witness to his sure perception of literary values. They lay bare to our astonished gaze his intuition of the heart of life.

It has been suggested by a critic that Rupert Brooke is the poet of the five senses. In its highest sense the suggestion is valid. But he was no sensualist in his verse. Sensuous, in that he could rightly estimate and fitly exalt the delicate senses of sight and touch and hearing, he most certainly was. They become to him sweet handmaids of memory that lift with reverent fingers the veils of remembrance. The octave of the immortal sonnet, *The Dead*, is a subtly woven catalogue of sensuous experience.

Dawn was theirs,
And sunset, and the colours of the earth.
These had seen movement, and heard music; known
Slumber and waking; loved; gone proudly friended;
Felt the quick stir of wonder; sat alone;
Touched flowers and furs and cheeks. All this is ended.

No sensualist, dulled by habit, could have written that final tribute to youth's first tryst with life, made tragic with that gesture-phrase, ' All this is ended.'

In *The Great Lover*, even more openly, Brooke

Rupert Brooke

avows his love of things of sense : familiar, homely things that have summoned forth and held in after-years our unconscious love. Detail is here of common household wares from the 'blue lines' of plates and cups, 'the strong crust of friendly bread,' to 'the cool kindness of sheets, that soon smooth away trouble,' and 'the benison of hot water.' 'The good smell of old clothes,' and other such—'The comfortable smell of friendly fingers'—these are the usual lovable things we keep in mind and heart, but leave unhallowed and unsung. Not so Brooke. He gathers up these tiny fragments from the day's greater feast and enthrones them in the high niche of memories that endure. And we love his tenderness and learn a new tenderness from his love. He had a 'sacramented covenant' with these simple things.

Brooke had no need to journey to the South Seas to learn the meaning of the colours of the world. Nature from the first had made him immediately aware of her many-coloured cloak. His palette is as varied as any painter's, his brush as deft. He can suggest atmosphere, vague horizons, endless gloom. But he has the power of minute detail as well. Colour had found home and interpreter within his eyes. He can travel

Over the plain, beyond the hill,
Unhesitating through the shade,
Amid the silence unafraid,
Till, at some sudden turn, one sees
Against the black and muttering trees
Thine altar, wonderfully white,
Among the forests of the night.

Or, 'from the sad west turning wearily,' see

. . . the pines against the white north sky,
Very beautiful, and still, and bending over
Their sharp black heads against a quiet sky.
And there was peace in them . . .

Blackfriars

He knows, exquisitely, the 'Blue Evening' of an
April twilight,

The straight grey buildings, richly dimmer,
The fiery windows, and the stream,

With willows leaning quietly over,
The still ecstatic fading skies . . .

And all these, like a waiting lover,
Murmur and gleam, lift lustrous eyes,

Drift close to me . . .

I heard the pale skies fall apart.

'Quiet skies,' he loves, and 'hills at noon,' 'the splash
of sun, the shouting wind,' 'the brave sting of rain.'
Voices he finds in winter silences and strange lights
quivering amid the gloom. He can hear and think in
colours grave or gay.

A mood of delicious foolery, the true humour that
appreciates situations as they are, plays mischievously
among his work. Here, too, is he always himself, in
direct utterance and downright statement. Occasion-
ally, even, he is not afraid of a little vulgarity. The
picture of the 'one with a fat, wide, hairless face,'
creeping in, 'half wanton, half asleep,' to listen to
Wagner is characteristic.

His heavy eye-lids droop half-over,
Great pouches swing beneath his eyes.
He listens, thinks himself the lover,
Heaves from his stomach wheezy sighs;
He likes to feel his heart's a-breaking.

The music swells. His gross legs quiver.
His little lips are bright with slime.
The music swells. The women shiver.
And all the while, in perfect time,
His pendulous stomach hangs a-shaking.

The two sonnets, *Menelaus and Helen*, are a glorious

Rupert Brooke

contrast in high bravery and bathos. The sestet of the second is perfect burlesque :

Often he wonders why on earth he went
Troyward, or why poor Paris ever came.
Oft she weeps, gummy-eyed and impotent ;
Her dry shanks twitch at Paris' mumbled name.
So Menelaus nagged ; and Helen cried ;
And Paris slept on by Scamander side.

Brooke, in a second-class railway carriage, between Boulogne and Milan, at dawn ; confronted by two snoring and sweating Germans, found congenial material for a realistic sonnet ; while a channel passage, on a lurching and slithering ship, made him acutely conscious of the conflict between a sea-sick body and a love-sick soul.

But if Brooke can exploit a salutary sense of humour, he finds the summit of expression in his emotional poems, and, especially, in the love-poems proper. Here he escapes convention at every turn. Love is to him a city fair upon a hill, whose peaceful heights he has never really won. He dallies along the slopes and seeks content by the wayside. But his eyes are always lifted to the hill-top, and he knows he has not yet attained. He realises that loving is but a poor compensation for love. He proclaims :

Love is a breach in the walls, a broken gate,
Where that comes in that shall not go again.

But this is not his experience. The love he knows, he can analyse and dissect, ruthlessly, almost cruelly : and this analysis means to him dissolution and disillusion. There is a terrible gesture of despair in his words ; doubt, uncertainty, hopelessness haunt his lines. He builds up his dream, asserts his right, only to demolish both at a stroke. He pleads his urgent need and ends by doubting his capacity. Caprice and bitterness are his last unworthy refuge. What has never really lived in him he gives over to the grave.

All, except only Love. Love had died long ago.

Blackfriars

In the deeper meanings of life he is a confirmed agnostic. Aspiration, striving, speculation bring him always to the grim altar of doubt. He stands 'T'wixt tears and laughter,' 'pitiful with humanity,' with uncertain 'hints of human ecstasy' in his heart. Meanings there are and final purposes beyond the material fringes of things. Simplicity and perfection somewhere stand disentangled from the fret and fever of the world. Thought somewhere dwells apart serene and still. Some Word informs and can explain all. But what or how he knows not. Conscience may affirm, the will reach out; but the mind remains always guessing.

How can we find? how can we rest? how can
We, being gods, win joy, or peace, being man?
We, the gaunt zanies of a witless Fate . . .
Who want, and know not what we want, and cry
With crooked mouths for Heaven, and throw it by.
Could we but fill to harmony, and dwell
Simple as our thought and as perfectible,
Rise disentangled from humanity,
Strange whole and new into simplicity,
Grow to a radiant round love . . .

A seeker in his every mood, a true man of desires, he might have found the great answer had death not found him first. Truth and Beauty might have fused.

Weary at last to theeward come the feet that err.

But he remains wondering, desirous, asking; a way-farer, leaving some resting-place made fair by transient joy, for the long road . . . Wistfully, like a child perplexed, comes the eternal question :

. . . Do you think there's a far border town, somewhere,
The desert's edge, last of the lands we know,
Some gaunt eventual limit of our light,
In which I'll find you waiting; and we'll go
Together, hand in hand again, out there,
Into the waste we know not, into the night?

The technique of Rupert Brooke's work will have in time its due essayist. His mastery of form, genius

Rupert Brooke

for rhythm and swift movement, natural aptitude for rhyme, merit special consideration. He had little use for *vers libre*; the traditional forms of English poetry were spacious enough for his ample thought.

What he achieved within the span of his twenty-eight years far outweighs the limitations of his vision. He saw with eyes of youth what age and wisdom too often miss : and it is as a young man who saw visions in the darkest day of our history that he will be for ever remembered. That lonely grave in the Aegean, 'that is for ever England,' is not likely to be a heart of controversy.

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