

The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke

By

Rupert Brooke

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Introduction by George Edward Woodberry

I

Rupert Brooke was both fair to see and winning in his ways. There was at the first contact both bloom and charm; and most of all there was life. To use the word his friends describe him by, he was "vivid". This vitality, though manifold in expression, is felt primarily in his sensations -- surprise mingled with delight --

"One after one, like tasting a sweet food."

This is life's "first fine rapture". It makes him patient to name over those myriad things (each of which seems like a fresh discovery) curious but potent, and above all common, that he "loved", - he the "Great Lover". Lover of what, then? Why, of

"White plates and cups clean-gleaming,
Ringed with blue lines," --

and the like, through thirty lines of exquisite words; and he is captivated by the multiple brevity of these vignettes of sense, keen, momentary, ecstatic with the morning dip of youth in the wonderful stream. The poem is a catalogue of vital sensations and "dear names" as well. "All these have been my loves."

The spring of these emotions is the natural body, but it sends pulsations far into the spirit. The feeling rises in direct observation, but it is soon aware of the "outlets of the sky". He sees objects practically unrelated, and links them in strings; or he sees them pictorially; or, he sees pictures immersed as it were in an atmosphere of thought. When the process is complete, the thought suggests the picture and is its origin. Then the Great Lover revisits the bottom of the monstrous world, and imaginatively and thoughtfully recreates that strange under-sea, whose glooms and gleams and muds are well known to him as a strong and delighted swimmer; or, at the last, drifts through the dream of a South Sea lagoon, still with a philosophical question in his mouth. Yet one can hardly speak of "completion". These are real first flights. What we have in this volume is not so much a work of art as an artist in his birth trying the wings of genius.

The poet loves his new-found element. He clings to mortality; to life, not thought; or, as he puts it, to the concrete, -- let the abstract "go pack!" "There's little comfort in the wise," he ends. But in the unfolding of his precocious spirit, the literary control comes uppermost; his boat, finding its keel, swings to the helm of mind. How should it be otherwise for a youth well-born, well-bred, in college air? Intellectual primacy showed itself to him in many wandering "loves", fine lover that he was; but in the end he was an intellectual lover, and the magnet seems to have been especially powerful in the ghosts of the men of "wit", Donne, Marvell -- erudite lords of language, poets in another world than ours, a less "ample ether", a less "divine air", our fathers thought, but poets of "eternity". A quintessential drop of intellect is apt to be in poetic blood. How Platonism fascinates the poets, like a shining bait! Rupert Brooke will have none of it; but at a turn of the verse he is back at it, examining, tasting, refusing. In those alternate drives of the thought in his South Sea idyl (clever as tennis play) how he slips from phenomenon to idea and reverses, happy with either, it seems, "were t'other dear charmer away". How bravely he tries to

free himself from the cling of earth, at the close of the "Great Lover"! How little he succeeds! His muse knew only earthly tongues, -- so far as he understood.

Why this persistent cling to mortality, -- with its quick-coming cry against death and its heaped anathemas on the transformations of decay? It is the old story once more: -- the vision of the first poets, the world that "passes away". The poetic eye of Keats saw it, --

"Beauty that must die,
And Joy whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu."

The reflective mind of Arnold meditated it, --

"the world that seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain." --

So Rupert Brooke, --

"But the best I've known,
Stays here, and changes, breaks, grows old, is blown
About the winds of the world, and fades from brains
Of living men, and dies.
Nothing remains."

And yet, --

"Oh, never a doubt but somewhere I shall wake;"

again, --

"the light,
Returning, shall give back the golden hours,
Ocean a windless level. . . ."

again, best of all, in the last word, --

"Still may Time hold some golden space
Where I'll unpack that scented store
Of song and flower and sky and face,
And count, and touch, and turn them o'er,
Musing upon them."

He cannot forego his sensations, that "box of compacted sweets". He even forefeels a ghostly landscape where two shall go wandering through the night, "alone". So the faith that broke its chrysalis in the first disillusionment of boyhood, in "Second Best", beautiful with the burden of Greek lyricism, ends triumphant with the spirit still unsubdued. --

"Proud, then, clear-eyed and laughing, go to greet

Death as a friend."

So go, "with unreluctant tread". But in the disillusionment of beauty and of love there is an older tone. With what bitter savor, with what grossness of diction, caught from the Elizabethan and satirical elements in his culture, he spends anger in words! He reacts, he rebels, he storms. A dozen poems hardly exhaust his gall. It is not merely that beauty and joy and love are transient, now, but in their going they are corrupted into their opposites, -- ugliness, pain, indifference. And his anger once stilled by speech, what lassitude follows!

Life, in this volume, is hardly less evident by its ecstasy than by its collapse. It is a book of youth, sensitive, vigorous, sound; but it is the fruit of intensity, and bears the traits. The search for solitude, the relief from crowds, the open door into nature; the sense of flight and escape; the repeated thought of safety, the insistent fatigue, the cry for sleep; -- all these bear confession in their faces. "Flight", "Town and Country", "The Voice", are eloquent of what they leave untold; and the climax of "Retrospect", --

"And I should sleep, and I should sleep," --

or the sestet of "Waikiki", or the whole fainting sonnet entitled "A Memory", belong to the nadir of vitality. At moments weariness set in like a spiritual tide. I associate, too, with such moods, psychologically at least, his visions of the "arrested moment", as in "Dining-Room Tea", -- a sort of trance state -- or in the pendant sonnet. Analogous moods are not infrequent in the great poets. Rupert Brooke seems to have faltered, nervously, at times; these poems mirror faithfully such moments. But even when the image of life, imaginative or real, falters so, how essentially vital it still is, and clothed in an exquisite body of words like the traditional "rainbow hues of the dying fish"! For I cannot express too strongly my admiration of the literary sense of this young poet, and my delight in it. "All these have been my loves," he says, if I may repeat the phrase; but he seems to have loved the words, as much as the things, -- "dear names", he adds. The born man of letters speaks there. So, when his pulse is at its lowest, he cannot forget the beautiful surface of his South Sea idyls or of versified English gardens and lanes. He cared as much for the expression as for the thing, which is what makes a man of letters. So fixed is this habit that his art, truly, is independent of his bodily state. In his poems of "collapse" as in those of "ecstasy" he seems to me equally master of his mood, -- like those poets who are "for all time". His literary skill in verse was ripe, how long so ever he might have to live.

II

To come, then, to art, which is above personality, what of that? Art is, at most, but the mortal relic of genius; yet it is true of it that, like Ozymandias' statue, "nothing beside remains". Rupert Brooke was already perfected in verbal and stylistic execution. He might have grown in variety, richness and significance, in scope and in detail, no doubt; but as an artisan in metrical words and pauses, he was past apprenticeship. He was still a restless experimenter, but in much he was a master. In the brief stroke of description, which he inherited from his early attachment to the concrete; in the rush of words, especially verbs; in the concatenation of objects, the flow of things `en masse' through his verse, still with the impulse of "the bright speed" he had at the source; in his theatrical impersonation of abstractions, as in "The Funeral of Youth", where for once the abstract and the concrete are happily fused; -- in all these there are the elements, and in the last there is the perfection, of mastery. For one thing, he knew how to end. It is with him a dramatic secret. The brief stroke does this work time and time again in his verse, nowhere better than in "at dead YOUTH's funeral:" all were there, --

"All, except only LOVE -- LOVE had died long ago."

The poem is like a vision of an old time MASQUE: --

"The sweet lad RHYME" ----

"ARDOUR, the sunlight on his greying hair" ----

"BEAUTY . . . pale in her black; dry-eyed, she stood alone."

How vivid! The lines owe something to his eye for costume, for staging; but, as mere picture writing, it is as firm as if carved on an obelisk. And as he reconciled concrete and abstract here, so he had left his short breath, in those earlier lines, behind, and had come into the long sweep and open water of great style: --

"And light on waving grass, he knows not when,
And feet that ran, but where, he cannot tell."

Or; --

"And feel, who have laid our groping hands away;
And see, no longer blinded by our eyes,"

Or, more briefly, --

"In wise majestic melancholy train."

And this, --

"And evening hush broken by homing wings,"

Such lines as these, apart from their beauty, are in the best manner of English poetic style. So, in many minor ways, he shuffled contrast and climax, and the like, adept in the handling of poetic rhetoric that he had come to be; but in three ways he was conspicuously successful in his art.

The first of these -- they are all in the larger forms of art -- is the dramatic sonnet, by which I do not mean merely a sonnet in dialogue or advancing by simple contrast; but one in which there may be these things, but also there is a tragic reversal or its equivalent. Not to consider it too curiously, take "The Hill". This sonnet is beautiful in action and diction; its eloquence speeds it on with a lift; the situation is the very crest of life; then, --

"We shall go down with unreluctant tread,
Rose-crowned into the darkness! . . . Proud we were,
And laughed, that had such brave true things to say.
-- And then you suddenly cried and turned away."

The dramatic sonnet in English has not gone beyond that, for beauty, for brevity, for tragic effect, -- nor, I add, for unspoken loyalty to reality. Reality was, perhaps, what he most dearly wished for; here he achieved it. In many another sonnet he won the laurel; but if I were to venture to choose, it is in the dramatic handling of the sonnet that he is most individual and characteristic.

The second great success of his genius, formally considered, lay in the narrative idyl, either in the Miltonic way of flashing bits of English country landscape before the eye, as in "Grantchester", or by applying essentially the same method to the water world of fishes or the South Sea world, both on a philosophic background. These are all master poems of a kaleidoscopic beauty and charm, where the brief pictures play in and out of a woven veil of thought, irony, mood, with a delightful intellectual pleasuring. He thoroughly enjoys doing the poetical magic. Such bits of English retreats or Pacific paradises, so full of idyllic charm, exquisite in image and movement, are among the rarest of poetic treasures. The thought of Milton and of Marvell only adds an old world charm to the most modern of the works of the Muses. What lightness of touch, what ease of movement, what brilliancy of hue! What vivacity throughout! Even in "Retrospect", what actuality!

And the third success is what I should call the "melange". That is, the method of indiscrimination by which he gathers up experience, and pours it out again in language, with full disregard of its relative values. His good taste saves him from what in another would be shipwreck, but this indifference to values, this apparent lack of selection in material, while at times it gives a huddled flow, more than anything else "modernizes" the verse. It yields, too, an effect of abundant vitality, and it makes facile the change from grave to gay and the like. The "melange", as I call it, is rather an innovation in English verse, and to be found only rarely. It exists, however; and especially it was dear to Keats in his youth. It is by excellent taste, and by style, that the poet here overcomes its early difficulties.

In these three formal ways, besides in minor matters, it appears to me that Rupert Brooke, judged by the most orthodox standards, had succeeded in poetry.

III

But in his first notes, if I may indulge my private taste, I find more of the intoxication of the god. These early poems are the lyrical cries and luminous flares of a dawn, no doubt; but they are incarnate of youth. Capital among them is "Blue Evening". It is original and complete. In its whispering embraces of sense, in the terror of seizure of the spirit, in the tranquil euthanasia of the end by the touch of speechless beauty, it seems to me a true symbol of life whole and entire. It is beautiful in language and feeling, with an extraordinary clarity and rise of power; and, above all, though rare in experience, it is real. A young poet's poem; but it has a quality never captured by perfect art. A poem for poets, no doubt; but that is the best kind. So, too, the poem, entitled "Sleeping Out", charms me and stirs me with its golden clangors and crying flames of emotion as it mounts up to "the white one flame", to "the laughter and the lips of light". It is like a holy Italian picture, -- remote, inaccessible, alone. The "white flame" seems to have had a mystic meaning to the boy; it occurs repeatedly. And another poem, -- not to make too long a story of my private enthusiasms -- "Ante Aram", -- wakes all my classical blood, --

"voice more sweet than the far plaint of viols is,
Or the soft moan of any grey-eyed lute player."

But these things are arcana.

IV

There is a grave in Scyros, amid the white and pinkish marble of the isle, the wild thyme and the poppies, near the green and blue waters. There Rupert Brooke was buried. Thither have gone the thoughts of his countrymen, and the hearts of the young especially. It will long be so. For a new star shines in the English heavens.

G. E. W.

Beverly, Mass., October, 1915.

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1905-1908

Second Best

Here in the dark, O heart;
Alone with the enduring Earth, and Night,
And Silence, and the warm strange smell of clover;
Clear-visioned, though it break you; far apart
From the dead best, the dear and old delight;
Throw down your dreams of immortality,
O faithful, O foolish lover!
Here's peace for you, and surety; here the one
Wisdom -- the truth! -- "All day the good glad sun
Showers love and labour on you, wine and song;
The greenwood laughs, the wind blows, all day long
Till night." And night ends all things.

Then shall be

No lamp relumed in heaven, no voices crying,
Or changing lights, or dreams and forms that hover!
(And, heart, for all your sighing,
That gladness and those tears are over, over. . . .)

And has the truth brought no new hope at all,
Heart, that you're weeping yet for Paradise?
Do they still whisper, the old weary cries?
"MID YOUTH AND SONG, FEASTING AND CARNIVAL,
THROUGH LAUGHTER, THROUGH THE ROSES, AS OF OLD
COMES DEATH, ON SHADOWY AND RELENTLESS FEET,
DEATH, UNAPPEASABLE BY PRAYER OR GOLD;
DEATH IS THE END, THE END!"

Proud, then, clear-eyed and laughing, go to greet
Death as a friend!

Exile of immortality, strongly wise,
Strain through the dark with undesirous eyes
To what may lie beyond it. Sets your star,
O heart, for ever! Yet, behind the night,
Waits for the great unborn, somewhere afar,
Some white tremendous daybreak. And the light,
Returning, shall give back the golden hours,
Ocean a windless level, Earth a lawn
Spacious and full of sunlit dancing-places,
And laughter, and music, and, among the flowers,
The gay child-hearts of men, and the child-faces
O heart, in the great dawn!

Day That I Have Loved

Tenderly, day that I have loved, I close your eyes,
And smooth your quiet brow, and fold your thin dead hands.
The grey veils of the half-light deepen; colour dies.
I bear you, a light burden, to the shrouded sands,

Where lies your waiting boat, by wreaths of the sea's making
Mist-garlanded, with all grey weeds of the water crowned.
There you'll be laid, past fear of sleep or hope of waking;
And over the unmoving sea, without a sound,

Faint hands will row you outward, out beyond our sight,
Us with stretched arms and empty eyes on the far-gleaming
And marble sand. . . .

Beyond the shifting cold twilight,
Further than laughter goes, or tears, further than dreaming,
There'll be no port, no dawn-lit islands! But the drear
Waste darkening, and, at length, flame ultimate on the deep.

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