

The Reputation of Rupert Brooke

Smart lad, to slip betimes away
From fields where glory does not stay
And early though the laurel grows
It withers quicker than the rose.

A. E. HOUSMAN.—*To an athlete dying young.*

“IN the island where Theseus was buried and whence the young Achilles and the young Pyrrhus were called to Troy, Rupert Brooke died and was buried on Friday the 23rd of April, the day of Shakespeare and of Saint George.” In this romantic account of the passing of a minor poet, Sir Edward Marsh in his memoir of Brooke records the beginning of a legend on which, after the lapse of more than thirty years, a little critical plain speaking is still badly needed.

Brooke died in 1915, on board a French hospital ship in the Aegean. He was 28 years old. They buried him ashore, and on the back of the wooden cross which marked his grave a Greek interpreter pencilled an inscription describing him as *ὁ δούλος τοῦ θεοῦ*, the servant of God, and stating that he had died for the deliverance of Constantinople from the Turks. Some time afterwards one of Brooke's friends passing Scyros at sunset described it as “Rupert's island,” as though his fame had already eclipsed that of the great Achilles and the rugged Pyrrhus.

The circumstances were propitious for the making of an immortal. People associated the young soldier with a great predecessor among the English poets because he had written nostalgically of Byron's pool at Cambridge and had died, like “his ghostly lordship,” among the isles of Greece “where burning Sappho loved and sung.” Winston Churchill wrote a letter to *The Times*, full of spirited recruiting slogans, to acclaim Brooke as the voice of his generation because he had welcomed the war with a whoop and gone into it “like swimmers into cleanness leaping.” In 1918 appeared the memoir of Sir Edward Marsh who, though his senior by 15 years, had known Brooke at Cambridge. It was a tribute to the death of a beloved friend, and little critical detachment could be expected. In an article which he later contributed to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* Sir Edward repeated his highly personal evaluation of Brooke as a man and writer, praised his standard anthology pieces and added: “The fragments written in his last voyage, in their union of profound feeling with the perfection of phrase and movement, hold more surely than anything else he had written the promise of a great poet.”

Brooke, it will be seen, was fortunate in his literary friendships at Cambridge and elsewhere. Among his contemporaries and admirers was Geoffrey

Keynes who, after attaining literary renown (in addition to his fame as a surgeon) as the editor and biographer of Donne, Browne and Blake, has now added Brooke to this distinguished company by undertaking a new edition of his poems (*The Poetical Works of Rupert Brooke*, Faber, 8s 6d). This, like the earlier edition by Marsh, is a monument of undying friendship rather than of critical acumen. It has received the imprimatur of a literary trust appointed by the poet's mother and including Walter de la Mare, the Provost of King's and Dudley Ward, in consultation with Wilfred Gibson and the late Frances Cornford. In his preface the Editor remarks that "the public demand for Brooke's poems has never abated;" that "he has passed his third decade of posthumous fame and come to be accepted as a national possession;" and that "the notes he sounded in his later poems were those of a sincere and deep feeling which cannot be silenced by academic criticism."

The poems for which these claims are made are the product of a very minor talent and, for those who never knew the author in the flesh, of not a very pleasing personality. Though there is plenty of evidence that Brooke took his vocation as a man of letters very seriously, there is none to substantiate Sir Edward Marsh's "promise of a great poet." Certainly there is no such evidence in the "fragments written in his last voyage," of which Marsh prints an unimpressive selection in his memoir. There is indeed no reason to suppose that if Brooke had lived he would have become even a minor poet of good quality. That there is a public demand for his poems proves nothing whatever. There is a public demand for Patience Strong. If Brooke has attracted admirers from among those who should know—or among those who should know better—it is owing, I think, to fortuitous circumstances which have little to do with his literary merits.

First, there is Cambridge. The nostalgic appeal of *The Old Vicarage*, *Grantchester* is apparent even to those who have only a tripper's nodding acquaintance with Cambridge, and must, I suppose, be overwhelming for any who have spent their formative years there. And the nostalgic sentiment is not restricted simply to Cambridge. *The Old Vicarage* is a poem about Home Thoughts from Abroad—the reverie, not merely of a Cambridge alumnus, but of anyone who looks back with sentimental regret at a happy adolescence or a distant home. Little wonder that it has become the old school song, so to speak, of the disgruntled colonial servant, the expatriate empirebuilder and the browned-off serviceman stationed overseas.

Next, there are the circumstances of Brooke's death. There is a vague but widespread belief that he died in action. I do not know why this should have affected his literary reputation, but there is no doubt that it has done so. It should not affect our judgment of him as a poet either way if I point

out that he did not die on the field of battle, any more than Byron did. He died, unwounded, of septicæmia. For what it is worth I may add that, of the poets of his generation, the deaths of Wilfred Owen and Julian Grenfell were more conventionally heroic. Grenfell died of wounds at the age of 27 in a Boulogne hospital in 1915, and Owen died in action, aged 25, while attempting to get his company across the Sambre canal in November 1918. This does not of course make them better poets than Brooke, nor even better soldiers. But on his literary merits Owen was certainly a writer of much greater promise than Brooke, while Grenfell was at least as good.¹

An early death preserved Brooke from the fate of those

runners whom renown outran
And the name died before the man.

The gods, it is evident, must have loved him; but it does not follow that the Muses were equally enamoured. Indeed at the time of his death Brooke was not particularly young, as young poets go;² at any rate his youth could not be pleaded in extenuation of the limited quantity or imperfect quality of his work. He had never attempted anything big, although except for a part of his last year he had always had plenty of leisure for literary activity and had generally enjoyed the kind of background which should have conduced to it. His most ambitious piece of writing is his dissertation for his fellowship at King's on *John Webster and the Elizabethan Drama*—a "very youthful book" which a later fellow of King's, J. L. Lucas, while acclaiming it as "far the

1. Grenfell's fame admittedly derived something of its immediate splendour from the fact that his poem *Into Battle* appeared in *The Times* on the day on which his death was announced. But Owen has a solid claim to be regarded as the Sir Philip Sidney *de nos jours*. His position is not likely to be challenged by Sidney Keynes (who died at the age of 20 a prisoner of war in Tunisia in 1943) and his lesser contemporaries of the second World War, nor by the handful of English poets who lost their lives in the Spanish Civil War.

2. For example, Chatterton, admittedly not a very important poet, died at 18. Rimbaud renounced poetry at 19 after presenting the world with several adult masterpieces. These are extreme instances, no doubt; but there is Marlowe, who was only one year older than Brooke when he was "slab'd with a dagger and dyed swearing;" there is Keats, two years younger than Brooke when he died; there is Shelley, drowned at thirty, with the greater part of his voluminous work, except for *Epipsychidion*, *Adonais* and *The Triumph of Life*, already written by the time he was 28. Even if we restrict our comparisons to the poets of his own generation, Owen and Grenfell were by no means the only other poets cut off in their prime during the war years. Flecker, who died at 31, had already shown years earlier the promise of much greater technical ability and poetic insight than Brooke. So had Edward Thomas, who died, it is true, at 39, but had only just begun his career as a poet. And if the merits of these poets are difficult for our more sophisticated vision to focus, it may help to restore our sense of proportion if we compare Brooke with noteworthy poets who are still living. Thus T. S. Eliot published *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* when he was 27 and had written it some years before; while W. H. Auden at 28 had given us his *Poems* (1930), *The Orators* and *The Dog Beneath the Skin*.

best book on the subject," has eclipsed and superseded with his own scholarly edition of Webster's plays.

Though Brooke had a passion for the drama, the only play he wrote himself was a piece in one act entitled *Lithuania*, once performed at a charity matinée at His Majesty's Theatre with Lillah M'Carthy, Clare Greet, Leon M. Lion and John Drinkwater. No great claims have been made for this effort even by Brooke's warmest admirers, and today it derives an extraneous interest only from the fact that it happens to have more or less the same plot as a dramatic masterpiece of our own time—Camus's *Le Malentendu*.

In the last resort then Brooke's reputation, once we have disentangled it from his personal popularity and his "remarkable good looks," rests upon a handful of poems. Mr. Keynes has with difficulty increased the canon from 82 pieces to 120 by the addition of some uncollected early worked for which, very wisely, he has "no wish to make any exaggerated claims." Though we are informed that "many others still remain uncollected," we are obliged to infer that these are, even to the initiates of the cult, patently unworthy of publication.

Of the published poems, I suppose *The Old Vicarage, Grantchester* will always retain its appeal. "One would have loved him for it," said Henry James, somewhat ambiguously, "if one had never known him."³ Though it will be viewed with real enthusiasm only by those whose tastes were formed on *Georgian Poetry* and *Poems of Today* and have ossified since, it does deal very prettily with the kind of soothing generalities which are "not to be silenced by academic criticism." But the Cambridge critics of a later generation, like Leavis and Richards, who are academic by the standards of Brooke's editors, would certainly, and rightly, make short work of *Grantchester*: it is charming, quite charming, but really that is all that can be said about it.

3. The ambiguity seems to have been entirely without malice. Desmond MacCarthy, reviewing a new book on James (in *The Sunday Times* of 20 April 1947), tells the following story:—

One morning at Cambridge, after breakfasting at King's with some of his young admirers, among them Rupert Brooke, a breakfast to which I was also invited, those two went out in a punt together. I watched them depart, Henry James loling in obese comfort against scarlet cushions, while the golden son of Apollo poled him along the waters of the sluggish Cam. Later in the day I asked Rupert Brooke what the great man had talked about. "He didn't say much, but he repeated several times, 'Don't be afraid to be happy.'" I thought the advice excellent, especially for the person to whom it was addressed. Still later in the day I went for a sight-seeing stroll with Henry James. He wanted to hear anything I could tell him about his late companion, and when I told him that Rupert wrote poetry, he stopped in dismay, and then asked anxiously, "Is it any good?" to which I replied, "No." (At that time Rupert had published only a few of his poems in *The Westminster Gazette*). "Ah! if with that appearance he was also a good poet, it would really be too unfair."

There is perhaps more of the essential Rupert in *The Great Lover*. It is clear that the impression Brooke wanted to create here was that of a zest for life, and in particular for the life of the senses, somewhat like that of the young Marlowe, whom he greatly admired. But his mechanical catalogue of impressions and sensations does not appear to be the product of genuine sensuous feeling, but rather of an attempt by the poet to convince himself that he was, in this sense, a "great lover." His method is merely to mention in succession the objects and experiences of which he has been "so great a lover" and to leave it to the reader to supply from his own experience their emotional colouring and intensity. If his perfunctory hieroglyphs of the sensuous life move you at all, it is because they evoke your own experience, not because they recreate that of the author—just as a list of placenames in a railway timetable might have, for someone who knows the country, an emotional significance which it has not necessarily for the railway official who compiled the list, possibly without having visited the places mentioned.

Brooke's occasional attempts in *The Great Lover* to convey a vivid tactual sensation are far from being a success. Take for instance "the rough male kiss of blankets." It is not a matter on which every critic can have an opinion, but I am credibly informed that the sensations of receiving rough male kisses and of sleeping in a blanket are quite dissimilar, and that Brooke was clearly innocent of one or the other of these experiences, and possibly of both. Elsewhere his efforts in this direction are even less accurate and successful. His "cool kindness of sheets" and "many-tasting food" are conventional and vapid platitudes; so are such visual impressions as "blue-massing clouds" and "radiant raindrops couching in cool flowers." Brooke wanted you to feel these experiences as he claimed to have felt them himself, so that you could share

The inenarrable godhead of delight

in the beauty of the created world which is the ostensible subject of his poem. But his windy eloquence and extravagant posturing fail of their purpose. You are left with a piece of verse which is pleasant enough as mere noise, but at the end of it—"Nothing remains."

More revealing than the blanket passage is the line:

The comfortable smell of friendly fingers,

on which Sir Edward Marsh has the gloss: "When asked whose fingers, he said his nurse's, and admitted it might have been the soap." For Brooke was in essence a poet who never matured beyond the precocity of the school-boy; and here in one of his best known poems is at least one passage where he has not yet emerged from the nursery.

Immaturity is the keynote of those poems for which the promise of greatness has been claimed. Three which according to Sir Edward Marsh "mark the highest level of his achievement" are *Tiare Tahiti* and the sonnets on psychical research and on *Clouds*. It is difficult to discern on what grounds the learned translator of Horace and La Fontaine found these pieces especially admirable. *Tiare Tahiti* is one of the South Sea pieces, written at Papeete in 1914. Its theme is that after death the individual is supplanted by the eternal, the beautiful object by the idea of Beauty; and this according to Brooke is a sad loss, though you would not imagine it could make much difference to him, so very general are the terms in which he describes the particular attractions of the earthly paradise of Tahiti:

Oh, Heaven's Heaven!—but we'll be missing
The palms, the sunlight and the south;
And there's an end, I think, of kissing
When our mouths are one with Mouth. . . .

The point of this poem is the argument for remaining "well this side of Paradise;" but it misses fire because his South Sea island is as shadowy and unreal as his imagined heaven, and *au fond* he does not seem to have made up his mind which he preferred. The truth is that they were both equally places of escape.

Of the sonnet *Clouds* it is sufficient to remark that the octave presents a Pacific cloudscape crediting the "unending columns of the sky," by some strange perversion of the pathetic fallacy, with a desire to "pray good for the world," which is foiled because they know

Their benediction empty as they bless.

From this conventional opening the sestet makes a surprising but not very convincing departure:

They say that the Dead die not, but remain
Near to the rich heirs of their grief and mirth.
I think they ride the calm mid-heaven, as these,
In wise majestic melancholy train,
And watch the moon, and the still-raging seas,
And men, coming and going on the earth.

The sonnet "suggested by some of the proceedings of the Society for Psychological Research" is another instance of Brooke's recurrent preoccupation with the death wish and with escapist fantasy. It looks forward to the prospect of a life "beyond the sun" (i.e., after death) when we shall

Learn all we lacked before; hear, know and say
What the tumultuous body now denies;
And feel, who have laid our groping hands away;
And see, no longer blinded by our eyes.

These concluding lines are the only flicker of originality in this disheartening poem—and they are, as John Drinkwater has pointed out, a reminiscence, conscious or unconscious, of Marvell's *Dialogue Between the Body and Soul*:

O who shall from this dungeon raise
A Soul inslav'd so many ways?
With bolts of Bones, that fetter'd stands
In Feet; and manacled in Hands.
Here blinded with an Eye; and there
Deaf with the drumming of an Ear? . . .

Since this borrowing from Marvell has been pointed out, it is not perhaps fantastic to detect another in the lines of *Tiare Tahiti* quoted above, where

There's an end, I think, of kissing

may be an attempt to catch the tone of Marvell's lines *To His Coy Mistress*:

The Grave's a fine and private place,
But none I think do there embrace.

The derivative nature of Brooke's inspiration has never been adequately stressed. In *Thoughts on the Shape of the Human Body* Sir Edward Marsh is disposed to find the influence of Donne; and it is sad to reflect that these gauche and amateurish lines, inspired by

Unfluctuant passion for some perfect sphere,

were undoubtedly intended as an exercise in the manner of Donne. There is nothing here which resembles Donne closely enough to make a detailed contrast worth while: the "sly shade of a rural dean" from the bucolic landscape of Grantchester always intrudes, the tone is that of the prim ecclesiastic, not of the erudite, subtle and inspired divine.

There are occasional reminiscences of Byron; but it is unlikely that "his ghostly lordship" would have been flattered by the Byronic twist at the end of *A Channel Passage*:

'Tis hard, I tell ye,
To choose 'twixt love and nausea, heart and belly.

Then there is the halfway-Housman who took, in *The Chitherns*,

The Roman road to Wendover
By Tring and Lilley Hoo,
As a free man may do.

and wrote, in *The One Before the Last* (1910):

Oh! bitter thoughts I had in plenty,
But here's the worst of it—
I shall forget, in Nineteen-twenty,
You ever hurt a bit!

There is the pseudo-Swinburne of "But heart, she will not hear" (*Unfortunate*);
 "Between the seawall and the sea" (*Seaside*); and

My night shall be remembered for a star
 That outshone all the suns of all men's days.*
 (*The Great Lover*)

From Swinburne too Brooke seems to have borrowed his artificial machinery of personified abstractions and the irritating metrical mannerism of accenting the last syllable in words like *love-making* and *lute-player*; while a poem like *There's wisdom in women* is almost a parody of the early Yeats. One is pleased with the ending of the sonnet *Last* until one realises with distress that it is an insipid reminiscence of the second line of Baudelaire's sonnet beginning

Une nuit que j'étais près d'une affreuse Juive
 Comme au long d'un cadavre un cadavre étendu.

It is equally distressing to find in the opening of *Sorrow* a faint and feckless echo of

Ma douleur, donne-moi la main, viens par ici (*Recueillement*).

4. The idiom here is that of Swinburne's *Anactoria* (*Poems and Ballads*, First Series) an improvisation woven round disconnected fragments of Sappho; but the sentiment goes back to Sappho herself and the epigrams on her in the Greek Anthology. Sappho boasted that "even when she was dead she would not be forgotten" (Lobel: *The Fragments of the Lyrical Poems of Sappho* p. 74, Incerti libri 77), while Pinytus declared: "This grave contains the bones and the dumb name of Sappho, but her wise sayings are immortal" (*Anth. Pal.* 7. 16) and Tullius Laurea represents her as saying: "You shall know that I have escaped the darkness of death, and no sun shall ever be unmindful of the poetess Sappho":

γνώσει δὲ Ἄϊεω σκόρον ἔκφυγον' οὐδέ τις ἔσται
 τῆς Ἄσυρκῆς Σαρπούρος νέκυρος ἡέλιος. (*Anth. Pal.* 7. 17).

Twenty-five centuries have justified the vainglory of Sappho and the claims made on her behalf. Other great poets, including Shakespeare in his 18th sonnet and Yeats in *He thinks of those who have spoken evil of his beloved* have made similar boasts; but it seems presumptuous of Brooke to have echoed them.

The Greek Anthology seems to have been part of Brooke's favourite reading. I do not know whether it has been pointed out before that in the following lines from *The Old Vicarage*:

Εἴθε γυνώσκην, would I were
 In Grantchester, in Grantchester

he is echoing the famous epigram (VII 669) ascribed to Plato:

ἄστέρης εἰσαθρεῖς ἄστῆρ ἄμρό' εἴθε γυνώσκην;
 Οὐρανός, ὡς πολλαὶς ὄμμασιν εἰς σὲ βλάπτω.

"My star, you gaze upon the stars: would I were heaven, that I might look at you with many eyes." The phrase εἴθε γυνώσκην, which must have appeared to Brooke as a characteristic expression of escapist fantasy, seems to have been a stock cliché in the amatory epigrams. For example there are two consecutive ones in Book V (83 and 84) where the anonymous epigrammatist, wishing he were the wind to kiss the beloved and a rose to lie between her breasts, uses the phrases εἴθ' ἄνεμος γυνώσκην and εἴθε ῥόδου γυνώσκην.

and in *Dead Men's Love* a feeble and slangy effort to reconstruct the effect of *Don Juan aux Enfers*. Similarly Brooke's *Goddess in the Wood* is an ill assorted chop sney of Tennyson's arrested waterfall in *The Lotus Eaters*, the randy Greek god from the opening chorus of Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon* and (perhaps) Mallarmé's Venus from *L'Après-midi d'un faune*.

From these regurgitations of Brooke's undigested reading, mixed with "the sobs and slobber of a last year's woe," I turn to the five war sonnets written during the last two months of 1914. It was these which evoked the enthusiastic admiration of Winston Churchill's and earned a place in all anthologies of the Georgian period. Today their position is not quite so secure: a writer in *The Times Literary Supplement* (22-3-47), reviewing Brooke's Cambridge lecture on *Democracy and the Arts*, understates the prevailing antipathy to Brooke among the younger generation when he remarks that "his embodiment of the 1914 ecstasy has wrapped him in a slightly suspect aura." Brooke's war poems afford a notable illustration of the dictum of Abraham Cowley that "a warlike, various and tragical Age is best to write of, but worst to write in." Though war is prodigal with the experiences which it offers to the artist, he must be a very great man to keep unblunted in that atmosphere the sensibility needed to work upon them, and to preserve himself untainted from the vulgarity, hysteria and sentimentality all around him. Brooke was not merely incapable of resisting these influences, he was even incapable of seeing that it was required of him.

He had been spoiling for a fight for some time. The background of these much admired poems is a xenophobia as extreme as that of Lord Vansittart. *The Old Vicarage* was written more than two years before the outbreak of war, but even at that time the German people were symbolised, for Brooke, by

Temperamentvoll German Jews

drinking beer in the Café des Westen; and in a singularly depressing poem entitled *Dawn* (from the train between Bologna and Milan, 2nd Class) the lowest point of human misery is represented by the line

Opposite me two Germans sweat and snore.

5. "A voice had become audible, a note had been struck, more true, more thrilling more able to do justice to the nobility of our youth in arms engaged in this present war, than any other. . . He was willing to die for the dear England whose beauty and majesty he knew; and he advanced towards the brink in perfect serenity, with absolute conviction of the rightness of his country's cause, and a heart devoid of hate for fellow-men. The thoughts to which he gave expression in the very few incomparable war sonnets which he has left behind will be shared by many thousands of young men moving resolutely and blithely forward into this, the hardest, the cruellest, and least rewarded of all the wars that men have fought. . . He was all that one would wish England's noblest sons to be in days when no sacrifice but the most precious is acceptable, and the most precious is that which is most freely proffered." (Winston Churchill in *The Times* of 26th April 1915, quoted by Sir Edward Marsh.)

His letters from Berlin just before the war are more explicit as to the exact direction and intensity of his Hun-hatred.

Oh! you fat, muddy-faced, grey, jolly Germans who despise me because I don't know your rotten language! Oh! the people I know, and you don't! Oh! you poor things! . . . I am wildly in favour of nineteen new Dreadnoughts. German culture must never, never prevail. The Germans are nice, well meaning, and they try; but they are SOFT. Oh! they *are* soft!

As they could scarcely be expected to unlearn the "rotten" language of Goethe and Rilke, to get to know Brooke's friends, or to acquire the cloistered culture of Rugby and Cambridge, it followed that the only hope of curing them of their "softness" was the Dreadnought and the "hand made sure, clear eye and sharpened power" of Britannia in arms.

Once the war began it is hardly surprising to find him writing of it with a queer mixture of sentimentality and bloodlust. It is from this mixed inspiration that his war poems derived their undeniable, if perverted, vigour; but it becomes completely comprehensible only when we turn to his letters and read:

All these people at the front who are fighting muddledly enough for some idea called England - it's some faint shadowing of goodness and loveliness they have in their hearts to die for . . . The central purpose of my life, the aim and end of it now, the thing God wants of me, is to get good at beating Germans.

Read in the light of these off-the-record utterances in his letters, the war poems are seen to be inspired not merely by a positive love for "some idea called England" but by a chauvinistic hatred of everything outside the English tradition. He not merely leapt into the war like a swimmer, he took possession of it like an heir. "Blow, bugles, blow!" he wrote (irrelevantly recalling Tennyson's *Princess*):

Honour has come back as a king, to earth,
And paid his subjects with a royal wage;
And Nobleness walks in our ways again;
And we have come into our heritage.

To welcome a war is not necessarily reprehensible; but clearly it was not the responsible adult in Brooke which did so, but the schoolboy, the jingo and the sentimentalist. These are the traits in him which make his war poems, and his poetry as a whole, so peculiarly offensive. Oddly enough he has been admired for his very immaturity. When he was still living Frances Cornford wrote an epigram on him which has often been quoted with approval:

A young Apollo, golden haired,
Stands dreaming on the verge of strife,
Magnificently unprepared
For the long littleness of life.

A graceful compliment to a friend; but is there anything admirable, still less magnificent, about his unpreparedness for the business of living? Compared with the maturity and honesty shown in their attitude towards the war by poets like Owen and Sassoon, Brooke's sentimental and narcissistic reverie "on the verge of strife" is as guilty and evasive as a pipedream. You may forgive him, and even feel sorry for him, but you will certainly not think him magnificent, when you realise how utterly unprepared he was—how completely he had failed to outgrow the mentality of the schoolboy. It is evident from his letters that to him good and evil were equivalent to *rippling* and *rotten*, *nice* (or *lovely*) and *awful* (adverb *awfully*). Characteristically, he derived little benefit from a visit to the United States except "the adorable little touch of an American accent;" and his private correspondence is written in an ecstatic "little language" abounding with exclamation marks and such interjections as *Oh! Oh dear!* and *God!*

These letters, to judge from those quoted in Marsh's memoir, are as lush, mushy and gushing as the outpourings of a bookish schoolgirl. They indulge, occasionally, a feeling for "Nature" which can only be compared with that of Disney at his most sugary. Away from Grantchester, he wrote the best prose comment on his poem about the Old Vicarage:

I'm a general nuisance. Oh! and I'm so sad and fierce and miserable not to be in my garden and little house at Grantchester all this term. I loved being there so much more than any place I've ever lived in. I'd thought of being there when the spring was coming, every day this winter, and dreamt of seeing all the little brown and green things.

But when he was back at his little house matters did not mend:

The apple-blossom and the river and the sunsets have combined to make me relapse into a more than Wordsworthian communion with Nature; which prevents me from reading more than a hundred lines a day, or thinking at all.

At another time he wrote:

In a flicker of sunlight on a blank wall, or a reach of muddy pavement, or smoke from an engine at night, there's a sudden significance and importance and inspiration that makes the breath stop with a gulp of certainty and happiness.

With this strain of mawkish sentimentality went a belief that he was remarkably sensitive and for that reason one of the chosen people, both poetically and politically. "It is our duty to understand, for if we don't no one else will." And again:

It's queer to see the people who do break under the strain of danger and responsibility. It's always the rotten ones. Highly sensitive people don't, queerly enough I was relieved to find that I was incredibly brave.

At the war, in the South Seas, in pre-war Berlin, he never for a moment forgot his superiority to the lesser breeds. He had felt it even at home in England.

At The Pink and Lily at Princes' Risborough he had written some informal verses beginning :

Never came there to The Pink
Two such men as we, I think—
So broad, so supple and so tall,
So modest and so brave withal :

and it needed the deflating candour of his friend Jacques Raverat to add :

Never came there to The Lily
Two men quite so richly silly.

As temporary housemaster at Rugby he had discovered that he was an "admirable schoolmaster" with a "bluff Christian tone that is wholly pedagogic;" and he carried a patronising Public School complacency with him wherever he went in later life. In Samoa, which he described as "*Endymion* without sugar," he wrote: "One feels that one's a White Man (*vide* Kipling *Passim*) ludicrously. I kept thinking I was in the Sixth at Rugby again. These dear good people, with their laughter and friendliness and crowns of flowers—one feels one must protect them." One feels too that the young man who wrote in this strain was, despite his jibe at Kipling, an empire-builder *manqué*. That he was aware of these reactionary promptings is evident from his self-conscious attempts to justify them :

If I've gained facts through knocking about with Conrad characters in a Gauguin *entourage*—I've lost a dream or two. And because I'm a clever writer, and because I'm forty times as sensitive as anybody else, I succeeded a little. *Es ist vorüber; es ist unwiederwärtlich zu Ende*. I am what I came out here to be. Hard, quite hard. I have become merely a minor character in a Kipling story.

The Kipling touch in this attempt at self-analysis is revealing, but the only other part of it that is valid is the statement that he was a "clever writer" who "succeeded a little". He was about as hard as a jelly that has not set; and if he was living in a world that resembled Endymion without the sugar, he had at least brought his own supply of saccharine. Despite his claim to be forty times as sensitive as anyone else, the only emotion which rings true in his poetry is the ineffectual hankering for the lost paradise of Rugby, King's and Grantchester and the mob feeling evoked in the first frenzy of enthusiasm at the outbreak of war.

In vain the *Saturday Review* warned him to "mar no more trees with writing love songs on their barks"; for like many another writer of inferior talent he took a perverse delight in being depreciated and misunderstood. It enhanced his narcissistic pleasure in the extravagant praises of his friends and admirers—like Marsh, to whom we find him writing: "God! it's so cheering to find someone who likes the modern stuff and appreciates what one's at".

Today, little more than thirty years later, anyone who "likes the modern stuff" will find it singularly difficult to appreciate Brooke. It is obvious enough what he's at; but it is obvious too that his literary reputation has been kept alive, in some circles, because by a trick of fate he happened to achieve the destiny he had prophetically described in *The Soldier*, and became a

corner of a foreign field
That is forever England.

That he has also become "a pulse in the eternal mind" is by no means certain. He has left no *momentum aere perennis* other than the semi-fabulous example of his heroic death. He made no contribution, comparable to that of Owen, to the technical development of English verse. He did nothing to give a new direction, as Edward Thomas did under the influence of Robert Frost, to the poetic sensibility. His style never attained the classical finish, nor the near-oriental fervour, of Flecker. His essential poetry is as parochial—and as cloying—as the pot of honey on the vicarage teatable on which his thoughts were always centred; and the symbol of his arrested development is the church clock standing permanently at ten to three.

That development was not arrested, as his friends have claimed, by his untimely death. The hands of the clock had hardly moved since this young Apollo had delivered, during his first term at Cambridge, an address on his memories of Rugby—a recollection of "golden and radiant" days "always increasing in beauty as I grew more conscious." It had been ten to three ever since he "played for the school at various violent games." Inextricably intermingled with the scent of blood on the battlefield was the exotic fragrance of the South Seas, the "unforgettable forgotten river-smell" of Cambridge, and beyond that the childhood memory of someone's hands redolent of soap and kindness. He is the Christopher Robin of his generation. Though he has secured a place in the popular imagination as a romantic figure strangely compounded of Achilles, Saint George, Christopher Marlowe and Robert Taylor, the legend that he was a potentially important writer is no longer acceptable save to those who created it—the dwindling coterie of friends who came under the spell of his boyish charm and have created a literary myth out of their private loss.

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