A Body For England, or of War? Contrasting Perspectives on World War I

Through the Poetry of Thomas Hardy and Rupert Brooke

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When considering the poetry of the first World War, one encounters two primary trains of thought and expression. The first revolves around the nationalistic, proud ideals that were prevalent at the onset of the war. As the conflict trudged on, however, a more grim, although realistic, outlook began to emerge amongst the writing of the time. The first is considerably more uplifting and optimistic, but could also be considered naive. The other, more stark illustrations of the fighting were not necessarily what people wanted to see but ultimately painted a more realistic portrait of the brutalities of the war. Two poets of the era who best embody these two contrasting styles of writing are Rupert Brooke and Thomas Hardy. Brooke, a young and enthused recruit, was decidedly more nationalistic, whereas the elder and more seasoned Hardy wrote with disdain on the greater consequences of war. While both poets come from different backgrounds in relation to the war, two of their respective poems share a common element of the deceased body of the soldier. Both Brooke and Hardy use these bodies as a poetic vehicle to illustrate their respective takes on the war, particularly evident in Hardy’s “Drummer Hodge” and Brooke’s fifth sonnet, “The Soldier”. For Brooke, this body upholds the pride and glory of the fight, whereas for Hardy this body serves as the stark reminder of the repercussions of war.

To better understand the differing use of deceased bodies as a poetic device within their poems, one must first take into consideration the personal histories of Brooke and Hardy, which are themselves contrasting. Brooke, who was very well educated and came from the ruling class, had a considerably younger outlook on the war than Hardy, who was himself in no shape to be physically involved with the war. In regards to Brooke’s poetry, critics have often commented how his poetry is rather naive and ignorant of the true realities of war, as explained by the author Elizabeth Vandiver (70). While his prose may be in praise of the idea of battle more so than the
likes of the later poetry of the war, it was not as a result of naivete. In fact, Brooke was 27 when he enlisted in the war, and quickly developed as a writer from his brief experience on the front (Vandiver 70-71). Coming from a conflicted period in his school days, according to the professor Martin Lockerd, the war gave Brooke “not only a purpose but also a means of cleansing himself of the unmanly sins of his youth” (7). For Brooke, the war was an opportunity to prove himself, as well as providing an escape from his complicated relationships of the past (Vandiver 71). Like many of his young, upstart companions, he grew to assume a very nationalistic and proud picture of the experience of enlisting and engaging in the fight. These sentiments are clearly demonstrated in his 1914 sonnets, which uphold the glory and honor of serving in the war. These sonnets paint a beautiful image of the soldier in war, and in particular the glory in self-sacrifice as seen in the description of the deceased body in “The Soldier”.

Hardy, on the other hand, had a comparatively distanced look on the events of the war as he wrote about its consequences. However, Hardy was not completely foreign to understanding the themes present in wartime—he had written a series of poems surrounding the Anglo-Boer Wars of the late 19th century, including “Drummer Hodge”. While he may not have actively been involved in the fight, Hardy made a conscious effort to understand not only the underpinnings of the war but as well the lives of the men marching off to battle. Dating back to Hardy’s connection to the Boer Wars, John Stallworthy makes mention of how “Hardy cycled down to Southampton to see the troops leaving for South Africa, and he’d spent his life thinking about Wessex and countrymen like young Hodge” (261). Hardy maintained this personal connection with his material that he was writing, and this was partially why Hardy’s poems are so rooted in the realistic perspective. Though he was distanced from the fighting due to his age,
Hardy still engaged with the conflict through his writing in presenting an honest picture of the war. While Brooke was caught up in seeing the beauty of war, Hardy was able to contemplate its greater implications by remaining outside the realm of the front lines.

In this sense, given his older age and perspective, it could be argued that Hardy had a better understanding of the likely outcome of war than the idealistic Brooke. As Paul Fussell writes on the subject, given that Hardy had seen the toll war can have through the events of the Boer Wars, he had developed a certain foresight as to what might transpire with the onset of the first World War (1). However, Hardy’s realism was not necessarily what the public wanted to see or hear when imagining their soldiers fighting on the front. Author Tim Kendall remarks how Hardy himself admitted that he could “not do patriotic poems very well” due to the fact that he saw too much of the other side and was not swept up in the excitement of enlistment (202).

Particularly at the beginning of the war, the proud patriotism of the soldiers was also a national sentiment, which explained why Brooke’s sonnets became so popular upon their creation. Even after his premature death of blood poisoning at 28 during the Gallipoli expedition, he was soon publicly celebrated, as Vandiver describes, “as not merely a war poet, but the war poet” (73).

While his poetry may have been idealistic in certain respects, Brooke maintained his status in defending the national pride of England that resonated with many, on the front as well as at home. All the same, whether glorified or not, the difference between Brooke and Hardy’s poetry lies in the resting corpse contained within their poems, and their treatment of this deceased body.

While the mindset and experiences of the two poets in question vary, they touch upon a similar consequence that involves the human body of the soldier: death on the battlefield. “Drummer Hodge” of Hardy and “The Soldier” of Brooke meet on the grounds of the deceased
body of a soldier of each poem. Brooke presents the soldier as not a mere body but a ‘body of England’s, breathing English air/ Washed by rivers, blest by suns of home’ (8). For Brooke, death on the battlefield does not signal the end of all things, but rather a continuation of the soldier’s allegiance to England and her beauty. For this soldier, there is no question that, even in death, he will live on with the soul and life of England. While he may rest in “some corner of a foreign field”, he still remains under an “English heaven” (2, 14). Even if this soldier meets his fate in this foreign country, the spiritual stars above him will be those of England. Brooke views this death as a noble sacrifice, and one that England herself will reward by blessing the body as it rests. Brooke’s beautiful lines within his fifth sonnet accentuate these romantic emotions within his idea of death, and how the soldier is once again reclaimed by the English body who bore him.

For Hardy, the soldier’s body is considerably less glorified and is more rooted in the grounds in which they lie, rather than the rooted to the country for which they fought. In “Drummer Hodge”, Hardy depicts the unceremonious burial of the young drummer, which does not instill any pride in the fight. “They throw in Drummer Hodge”, Hardy writes, “to rest uncoffined--just as found” (2). The fact that Hodge is ‘uncoffined’ likely alludes to the fact that he was thrown into a mass grave, similar to those that littered France and Belgium years later in the first World War (Fussell 6). Within this unmarked grave, Hodge now rests in the “dusty loam” of the African bush, far from his native home in Wessex. Compared to “The Soldier” of Brooke, who himself is described as a “richer dust” that lies in “that rich earth”, Hodge is absorbed into the landscape that surrounds him, lying under “foreign constellations” rather than an “English heaven” (4, 14) For Brooke, the soldier, even in death, is still maintained as the valiant and loyal hero. For Hardy, Drummer Hodge seems lost and out of place, unaware of this
new and foreign environment. In this way, the body of Hodge no longer represents any of the virtues of England that the soldier of Brooke’s sonnet embodies and thus mirrors Hardy’s realist sentiments on the war.

When considering this type of death on the battlefield, one must also realize the true fate of what is the dead body of the soldier. However much Brooke may glorify this type of death and the pride of sacrifice, the fact still remains that it will soon be a nothing more than forgotten corpse being consumed into the soil. Mary Borden’s poem, “The Song of the Mud”, characterizes the mud of Flanders’ field and others in the ravaged landscape of Europe in World War I, and describes how these bodies of soldiers are swallowed up by this mud. Borden writes how “It has drowned our men–/Its monstrous distended belly reeks with the undigested dead”, suggesting the mud as a monster that lurks below as a holding tank of death (qtd. in Howarth, 1-2). Here too, is the image of drowning in this mud, which brings in the curious element of water. It can sustain life, yet in this context it sustains the decay of the bodies that drowned in the mud, symbolically or otherwise. This is a far cry from the cleansing water of Brooke’s fifth sonnet, that washes and blesses the body of the soldier. Whereas the mud of Brooke may wash away the terrors of war, the muddy waters of Borden’s poetry serves to drown out life and sustain the memories of death in these trenches.

As much as Borden’s character of the mud symbolically portrays the fate of the soldiers, true accounts of the war are further illuminating of the themes present in the poetry of Brooke and Hardy. Edwin Campion Vaughn’s memoir, “Assault on ‘Springfield’” provides a vivid first hand perspective on some of these graphic episodes that soldiers had to contend with on a regular basis. Vaughn repeatedly writes how this awful, muddy water would fill the shell-holes that were
littered about, which also brings to mind the image contained within Borden’s poem. Vaughn provides a stark and jarring encounter with such a body, himself struggling in one of these wretched shell-holes. Vaughn depicts how “...I felt myself sinking, and struggle as I might I was sucked down...[t]he leg of a corpse was sticking out of the side, and frantically I grabbed it; it wrenched off...” (178). This image Vaughn presents further grounds the reader in the brutalities of the war, and of these realities that can only be represented by the physical consequence of war. The corpse that Vaughn reaches for could very well have been a young man such as Drummer Hodge, or the venerated “body of England” of Brooke’s soldier. In this way, the actual account from Vaughn illustrates how, no matter their background, the body of a soldier remains a physical corpse, and either way is consumed into the landscape.

While the truth remains that the deceased bodies that Hardy and Brooke allude to in their poetry are in fact rotting corpses, these figures are not left to be forgotten. Though Hardy and Brooke diverged on their ideals of the war, both poets memorialize the deceased soldier in each of their poems. Hardy, while opposed to war and what it did to men and society, did not outright blame any one party in particular; instead, he only reflected upon who was impacted by war, in this case Drummer Hodge. In contrast to “The Soldier”, who has not yet perished and is able to speak of his proud death in the field, Hodge is no longer able to speak his peace, and Hardy assumes this role for him in writing his final moments. This rhetorical move of giving a voice to the dead was a well known strategy of Hardy’s, and is certainly used to good effect in “Drummer Hodge” (Fussell 2). Rather than let Hodge lay to rest as one of the many ‘uncoffined’ souls, Hardy marks his grave by addressing his loss as a result of the war. While it is not glorified in the manner of Brooke’s style, he does offer an honest and true picture of Hodge’s fate. Hardy felt for
these young and bright men who were marching off to war, and his tribute to the deceased body of Drummer Hodge helps this individual to live on, in a similar fashion to Brooke’s soldier.

Though the tribute to the soldier of Brooke’s fifth sonnet may be voiced by Brooke, it could also be said that these lines were a memorial to Brooke himself. As Brooke found new purpose and meaning to his life in his short time in the war, it reasonable to believe that he imagined his own death on the battlefield and all the glory that would come with it. As beautiful as Brooke’s final resting place may be, however, the fact remains that he did acknowledge that death was very much a reality of war and that it could strike any soldier, no matter what their background. In this regard, Brooke aligned with Hardy in recognizing this consequence of war. “If I should die, think only this of me” are the opening lines to Brooke’s fifth sonnet, to which he is addressing a larger audience as well as himself, realizing what could very well be his fate (1). While the pride and deep roots to England are evident in Brooke’s lines, it still emphasizes the memory of the body that lays in “some corner of a foreign field” (2). Whether or not this body is his own, Brooke’s poetry reminds the reader, as with Hardy’s poetry, that many of the soldiers who were brought down in war were left to be taken by the earth on which they fell, without any proper burial. Whether or not “The Soldier” can be interpreted as Brooke’s memorial to himself, through this epitaph he encompasses the recognition that was due for every fallen soldier.

While Thomas Hardy, the aged realist, and the young and idealistic Rupert Brooke contrasted in regards to their poetry of war time, their beliefs converged on the poetic element of the soldier’s deceased body and its fate on the battlefield. For Brooke, to be brought down in the thick of battle was to be embraced and a mark of glory, even as the soldier’s body lays to rest in a land that was not his own. Interestingly enough, it is important to note how Brooke met his fate
as a result of the war, though perhaps not in the romanticized way that he had imagined in his fifth sonnet. Hardy, on the other hand, had a distanced perspective which allowed him to see the opposite side in greater detail than the pride-driven Brooke. For Hardy, war was anything but romantic, and the deceased bodies of war, like those similar to Drummer Hodge, served as a reminder of such repercussions. While these differences in their poetry are apparent, the element of death and its toll on the soldiers impacted everyone, whether on the war or the home front. For many wartime poets, incorporating the implications of death on the battlefield offered an element of war to which many could relate. Hardy and Brooke’s poems, in particular, though, offer an additional consolation of death on the front in upholding the memory of these soldier’s bodies who would have otherwise gone unrecognized. Whether solemn or celebratory, the poetry of the war helped to remind those back home of the men that these soldiers once were and not just of the bodies laid to rest in the fields of war.
Work Cited:


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