

## Charles Sorley's 'Unenthusiastic Patriotism'

On February 1914, Charles Hamilton Sorley wrote a letter to his former Master at Marlborough College reporting his feelings on returning to his German host-family's house after an evening walk through the city of Schwerin:

And when I got home, I felt I was a German, and proud to be a German ... I felt that perhaps I could die for Deutschland—and I have never had an inkling of that feeling about England, and never shall. ... it's the first time I have had the vaguest idea what patriotism meant—and that in a strange land. Nice, isn't it? (87)

A young captain in the Suffolks, moving up to the Front Line of the Battle of Loos, Sorley died for England on 13 October 1915, aged 20, hit by a German sniper's bullet.

Critics have had difficulty explaining Sorley's willingness to enlist only for four days after his return from Germany on 6 August 1914 (Bouyssou 89-83; Silkin 70-75) since apparently he had fallen in love with the country, people, culture, and language during the period he spent in Schwerin and at Jena University from January - July 1914. Yet Sorley did decide to fight for his native country, and an obvious explanatory gap remains between joining up "in a spirit of dutiful but unenthusiastic patriotism" (Bergonzi 52) and his "strong forebodings of the tragic proportions of the conflict" (Johnston 60). As Gregson (25) has pointed out, the well-intentioned tone of Sorley's sonnet "To Germany" and the absence of all forms of the (by then) current anti-German hysteria in his poetry make it hard to understand how the poet could be led into fighting the people whose hospitality he had praised only a few months before:

You are blind like us. Your hurt no man designed,  
And no man claimed the conquest of your land.  
But gropers both through fields of thought confined  
We stumble and we do not understand.  
You only saw your future bigly planned,  
And we, the tapering paths of our own mind,  
And in each other's dearest ways we stand,  
And hiss and hate. And the blind fight the blind  
(69)

The octave, however, also shows a remarkably mature insight into the inherent paradox of a war instigated by opposing national interests which were bound to collide. Sorley, apparently, saw the war as a fatal yet inevitable means of reconciling the interests of two nations, both of which were equally dear to him. In this light, the sestet can be read as a document accepting the war for the sake of common future for both sides involved:

When it is peace, then we may view again  
With new-won eyes each other's truer form  
And wonder. Grown more loving-kind and warm  
We'll grasp firm hands and laugh at the old pain,  
When it is peace. But until peace, the storm  
The darkness and the thunder and the rain. (70)

In two letters written to friends during his military training, Sorley explained further his idea that the war was a deplorable yet effective and necessary way of bringing an end to the Kaiser's dreams of megalomania and, thus, that he was convinced to fight for a just cause:

And 'serving one's country' is so unpicturesque and unheroic when it comes to the point ... Besides the Germans are so nice; but I suppose the best thing that could happen to them would be a defeat.  
(from *Letter to A.E. Hutchinson*, 10 (?) August 1914, 91)

So it seems to me that Germany's only fault ... is a lack of real insight and sympathy with those who differ from her. We are not fighting a bully, but a bigot. ... If the bigot conquers he will learn in time his mistaken methods (for it is only of the methods and not of the goal of Germany that one can disapprove) ... I regard the war as one between sisters, between Martha and Mary, the efficient and intolerant against the casual and sympathetic. Each side has a virtue for which it is fighting, and each of that virtue's supplementary vice. And I hope that whatever the material result of the conflict, it will purge these two virtues of their vices, and efficiency and tolerance will no longer be incompatible. But I think that tolerance is the larger virtue of the two, and efficiency must be her servant. So I am quite glad to fight this rebellious servant.

(from *Letter to A.J. Hopkinson*, October (?) 1914, 94)

Though one must probably make allowance for this over-simplified humanistic reasoning, these passages illustrate how level-headed the 19-year-old Sorley was in his approach to the issue of war. His decision to take an active part in the war becomes recognizable as logical consequence to his belief that military action had become inevitable by autumn 1914. In fact, Sorley's refusal to 'rattle the sabre' is apparent in all of his letters and poems. Both his correspondence and his poetry reveal his frequent doubts about the legitimacy of the war and, at the same time, they

foreshadow the disillusion that was to be the hallmark of the later war poets, such as Owen and Rosenberg, in their utterly grim and realistic pieces.

A hundred thousand million mites we go  
Wheeling and tacking o'er the eternal pain,  
Some black with death—and some are white with  
woe.

Who sent us forth? Who takes us home again?

And there is sound of hymns of praise—to whom?  
And curses—on whom curses?—snap the air.  
And there is hope goes hand in hand with gloom.  
And blood and indignation and despair.

(from 'A Hundred Thousand Million Mites We  
Go.' 61-62)

Across my past imaginings  
Has dropped a blindness silent and slow.  
My eye is bent on other things  
Than those it once did see and know.  
(from "Lost," 62)

And though he resigned himself to what he conceived of as a fatal but inevitable development, Sorley was never tempted to unquestioning compliance with the way England ordered her best young men to the Continent. Even before he had seen real military action, he prophetically commented on its devastating consequences:

Heaven will have to wait until this war's over. It is the most asphyxiating work after the first fine glow of seeing people twice your age and size obey and salute you as you have passed off, as it does after a fortnight. ... War in England only means putting all the men of 'military age' in England into a state of routinal coma, preparatory to getting them killed. You are being given six months to become conventional: your peace thus made with God, you will be sent out and killed. At least, if you aren't killed, you'll come back so unfitted for any other job that you'll have to stay in the Army.

(from *Letter to A.E. Hutchinson*, 25 January 1915, 95)

These extracts show how Sorley did not join in the early war enthusiasm and sense of mission, as many of his fellow-poets such as Brooke and Grenfell did. He had a sober understanding of nationalism and also saw the cruel realities lying behind the propagandistic phrasing:

After all, war in this century is inexcusable: and all parties engaged in it must take an equal share in the blame of its occurrence. If only the English from Grey downwards would cease from rubbing in that,

in the days that set all the fuel ablaze, they worked for peace honestly and with all their hearts! We know they did; but in the past their lack of openness and trust in their diplomatic relationships helped to pile the fuel to which Germany applied the torch. I do wish that people would not deceive themselves by talk of a just war. There is no such thing as a just war. What we are doing is casting out Satan by Satan. ... Germany must be crushed for her wicked and selfish aspiration to be mistress of the world: but the country that when mistress of the world, failed to set her an example of unworldliness and renunciation should take to herself half the blame of the blood expended in the crushing.

(*Letter to his mother*, March 1915, 96-97)

Besides his critical yet dutiful willingness to take this own 'share in the blame,' Sorley also held a remarkable and very idiosyncratic view on the issue of religion. His refusal to accept the instrumentalization of the Christian faith as rendering a specific missionary sense to the war coupled with his general mistrust of the promises and comfort it kept in store for most of his fellow-soldiers, can be detected even in his poems dating as early as 1912:

A thousand years have passed amain;  
The sands of life are running thin;  
Thought is our leader—Thought is vain;  
Speech is our goddess—Speech is sin.  
(from "A Call To Action," 32)

There is silence in the evening when the long days  
cease,  
And a million men are praying for an ultimate  
release  
From strife and sweat and sorrow—they are praying  
for peace.  
But God is marching on.

...  
And did not Jesus perish to bring men, not peace,  
But a sword, a sword for battle and a sword that  
should not cease?

Two thousand years have passed us. Do we still  
want peace

Where the sword of Christ has shone?  
(from "Peace," 36-37)

.....I only know  
That when I have a son of mine,  
He shan't be made to droop and pine.  
Bound down and forced by rule and rod  
To serve a God who is no God.  
(from "What You Will," 44-45)

Sorley overtly states his disappointment with the way Christian tradition approaches the ways of God; his disbelief and anger take ordinary life, with all its 'base details,' as their starting-point, rather than the interpretation prescribed by the framework of Revelation. An early letter from Marlborough College underlines the vow made in "What You Will": Sorley saw his vocation not as complacent scholarship, which he renounced as arrogant and vain, but as knowledge used directly for the common man's sake. His own fear seemed to be of becoming elitist in both his thinking and his behaviour and of losing touch with ordinary life:

This is no new idea mine—to become an instructor in a Working Man's College or something of that sort... When one reaches the top of the public school, one has such unbounded opportunities of getting unbearably conceited that I don't see how anyone survives the change that must come when the tin god is swept off his little kingdom and becomes an unimportant mortal again. And besides I am sure it is far too enjoyable, and one is awfully tempted to pose all the time and be theatrical.  
(from *Letter to his parents*, 27 January 1913, 84)

Similarly, Sorley viewed death neither as a permanent threat nor as the desirable glorious fulfillment of a Christian life. Death, he seems to be saying, is nothing more than the end of life on earth. As such, it must not adapt the aura of a heroic task or praiseworthy achievement:

Earth that never doubts nor fears,  
Earth that knows death, not tears,  
Earth that bore with joyful ease  
Hemlock for Socrates,  
Earth that blossomed and was glad  
Neath the cross that Christ had,  
Shall rejoice and blossom too  
When the bullet reaches you.  
Wherefore, men marching  
On the road to death, sing!  
Pour your gladness on earth's head,  
So be merry, so be dead.  
(from "All the Hills and Vales Along," 69)

Such, such is Death: No triumph: no defeat:  
Only an empty pail, a slate rubbed clean,  
A merciful putting away of what has been.

Of nerves, and arteries, and veins  
Tortured, besides each other part,  
In a vain head, and double heart.

The sustained metaphor which makes up the poem is not, however, as in Marvell's poem, that of physical being as a

Victor and vanquished are a-one in death:  
Coward and brave: friend, foe. Ghosts do not say  
'Come, what was your record when you drew  
breath?'

But a big blot has hid each yesterday  
So poor, so manifestly incomplete.  
And your bright Promise, withered long and sped,  
Is touched, stirs, opens and grows sweet  
And blossoms and is you, when you are dead.  
(from "Two Sonnets," 71)

The central idea of these excerpts is that of 'Death the leveller.' Sorley portrays earth as indifferent and hostile, yet also holds the simple comfort that it does not care about the dead it receives, and thus any death—brave or unspectacular, for one country or the other—is the same.

As one can see, Sorley's attitude to the war and to death was free of false patriotism and sentimental glorification. Though a contemporary of Rupert Brooke, he clearly saw through 'The Old Lie' Wilfred Owen was to express in words so painfully true a few years later. Nowhere is Sorley's view expressed more directly than in what was probably his last poem, sent home in his kit from France after his death:

#### When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead

When you see millions of the mouthless dead  
Across your dreams in pale battalions go,  
Say not soft things as other men have said,  
That you'll remember. For you need not so.  
Give them not praise. For deaf, how should they  
know  
It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?  
Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow.  
Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.  
Say only this. 'They are dead.' Then add thereto.  
'Yet many a better one has died before.'  
Then, scanning all the o'er crowded mass, should  
you  
Perceive one face that you loved heretofore,  
It is a spook. None wears the face you knew.  
Great death has made all his for evermore. (77)

Moving along the street, each side I saw  
The humble, kindly folk in hewn-in rooms,  
Children at table; simple homely wives,  
Strong grizzled men, and soldiers back from war  
Scaring the gaping children with wild talk.

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