In Search of God: The Lost Horizon in Rupert Brooke's Poetry

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I

The British poet Rupert Brooke (1887-1915) is one of the poets who should be reread and reassessed. Brooke's reputation as a poet has been very much apt to doubt and controversies by admirers and detractors alike. Unlike many other poets, Brooke prospered greatly as a poet when he was only twenty. At his time, he was a "poetic…model" (Willdhardt, 49). Unlike the majority of poets, again, shortly after his death at the age of twenty eight, his reputation declined drastically and his poetry was vehemently criticised, attacked and undervalued. This makes of Brooke a unique phenomenon worthy of rereading and reassessment. Indeed, what happened with Brooke as a poet is exactly the opposite of what usually happens with poets during their lifetimes and after their deaths. One can just think of such poets as John Keats (1795-1821)and Alfred Tennyson (1809-92) and Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) who were severely attacked during their lifetimes, but were explored and championed after their deaths.

Ever since the 1920s and the 1930s of the past century, Brooke's name as a poet has been diminishing, and almost vanishing, indeed. There seems to have been a general consent among writers and critics of one generation after another either to mention the poet askance, undervalue his poetic contribution, or else to ignore him totally. To give one example, The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry, one of the most prestigious, referential anthologies in English, mentions nothing at all about Brooke or his poetry. No single poem of Brooke's appears in the 1456 pages of the volume, though many other names of less known poets that were Brooke's contemporaries, including Ann Spencer (1882-1975), E. J. Pratt (1882-1964), John Crowe Ransom (1888-1974) and Conrad Alken (1889-1973), figure in the anthology (Ellmann). Truly enough, as one critic once commented, "Brooke has suffered at the hands of his literary guardians" (Parker, 66). The first full-length biography about Brooke saw light in 1970, i.e. fifty six years after Brooke's own death (Parker, 66). One would remember Sir Ifor Evans's words about the English poet Robert Burns (1759-96), "So much that is false has been written about Burns, particularly in his own country…that the truth is worth recording" (43). This may, indeed, be more applicable to the "dismissed" Brooke (Stephen, 278) than any other English poet. In his poem 'A Letter to a Live Poet', Brooke says, "I sometimes think no poetry is read" (Marsh, 324). He was largely true, especially when his own poetry is a case in point.

Most of the readers and students of English poetry, whose knowledge of the poet is formed through his one or two poems, "The Soldier" and "Safety", that are mostly anthologized, come to form an opinion of Brooke as a patriotic, jingoistic, WWI poet, and that is all. This is an oversimplification, even an underestimation of such a considerable poet which, in its turn, outpoured countless criticisms of Brooke's poetry. This remarkably shows the extent to which literary patrons, i.e. anthologists, critics and reviewers, can direct and "shape" our vision of one poet or another. Differentiation should be made here between the history of the poet and the poet in the context of history. Unfortunately, critics sacrificed the former to serve certain purposes of the latter. Thus, all of Brooke's great poetic tradition has been reduced to the few, last poems the poet wrote just after England's announcing of war against Germany in 1914. This is unfair because by that very date, Brooke had already been writing poetry for ten years at least; and, more importantly, he died in the first half of the very next year.

In their turn, many critics unjustly contrasted Brooke, the early soldier-poet, who actually never saw war, with the veteran, war-poets Wilfred Owen (1895-1918) and Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), the former of whom died in the last week before WWI ended in November 1918, while the latter died forty nine years after that war ended (Spurr, 271).

Thus, dazzled by the Great War, the greatest event in the century, critics and anthologists overlooked all of Brooke's previous poetic production reducing the career of that submerged poet to the few poems he wrote at the beginning of the Great War in 1914. Even then, all of their attention was paid not to the poetic qualities of these poems, but, unjustly again, to the poet's idealistic sense of patriotism, heroism and jingoism is expressed in the poems.

Brooke is a multifaceted poet. A thorough reading of his poems can open up many of the new vistas invaluable to the poetry of the past century. To give one example, Brooke's search for God as his poetry reveals it is worth considering. Search for God has remained, so to speak, the lost horizon in Brooke's poetry; and it is time to explore that dimension in his poetry. Of at least forty books and authenticated online sites consulted about Brooke and his poetry, most of which take the twentieth-century poetry to their focal interest, only the book entitled The Georgian Poets, by Rennie Parker, laid a finger on Brooke's interest in religion, "Religion was an early concern for Brooke, and on balance he favours pagan Earth and Sun alternatives as exemplified by the pre-Christian world" (69).

Even here, the writer focused on the poet's being influenced by pagan thoughts; without the idea being developed any further. In its turn, the idea of God was only referred to in passing. It is the aim of this paper, therefore, to unearth one Brooke's ardent search for God as revealed in his

poetry, an asset essential to a proper appreciation of the poet and one that has remained unique in English poetry.

Prior to getting down to Brooke's poetry, a short biographical outline is needed for better understanding and evaluation of the poet and his work. Rupert Brooke was born on the 3rd of August 1887, in Rugby, Warwickshire, where his father served as a headmaster at Rugby school. John Donne (1572-1631), John Milton (1608-74), Robert Browning (1812-90), and A[lgernon] C[harles] Swinburne (1837-1909) were among the early literary influences on the poet. From these poets, young Brooke learnt the magic power of words. The formative impact of such poets on Brooke was so profound that they seem sometimes to flow, consciously or unconsciously, into the young poet's stream. This is not, after all, any kind of shortcoming or weakness. This is how poets usually take their first steps. Brooke started writing poetry at the age of nine, and had two of his poems, 'The Pyramids' (1904) and 'The Bastille' (1905), published by school.

In 1911, Brooke published Poems 1911, his first volume of verse; and his only volume published in his lifetime. He was quickly widely recognised and acclaimed by poets and critics of his time. With this debut, Brooke showed prominence as an "extremely promising young poet" (Stephen, 278). Edward Thomas, a prominent poet of the time, expected Brooke to emerge as a poet, "He will not be a little one" (Parker, 72). Brooke became friends with a great many eminent poets and the towering literary figures of the time including Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), Sir Edward Marsh (1872-1953), Edward Thomas (1878-1917) and Edmund Blunden (1896-1974).

Many of Brooke's contemporary fellow poets who were at the time still unknown or scantly recognized by the public, such as Robert Frost (1874-1963), who achieved his breakthrough as a poet through the Georgianism, owe a debt of their being published and, therefore, recognised to Brooke himself (Parker, 3). Brooke will ever be remembered as founder of the Georgian poetic movement (Childs, 30-1), i.e. a school of poets that included, in addition to Brooke himself, Walter de la Mare (1873-1956), W. H. Davies (1871-1940), D. H. Lawrence (1889-1930), Edmund Blunden (1896-1974), and many others. Their main expression was the five Georgian Poetry anthologies edited by Sir Edward Marsh between 1911 and 1922, i.e. during the first half of the reign of King George V (1865-1936), who ruled from 1910 to 1936. The signal sent out by the anthologies was that "the new century created possibility of a new energy and a new direction for English poetry" (Peck, 238). As one critic observed, Georgian poets were able to write "a great deal of interesting verse, but for most part it remains unread" (Peck, 238).

In 1912, and after, Brooke had a number of incomplete love relationships, some of which took place through the trip he made to New Zealand in 1913. Such were unhappy love experiences

that had a profound impact on him and on his poetry. These included his relationships with the attractive Violet Asquith, the Prime Minister's daughter, the actress Cathleen Nesbitt, Katharine (Ka) Cox, Taatamata of Tahiti in addition to many others.

Soon after World War I broke out, Brooke enlisted in the Royal Navy Division as a volunteer; then he became a commissioned officer. Brooke died on 23 April 1915, on board the ship destined to the Dardanelles, from blood poisoning as a result of an insect's bite on the lip.

Despite his early death, Brooke left a considerable literary production, especially poems. It is important to mention that Rupert Brooke was a versatile writer. He wrote poetry and drama.

II

Ever since his tender years and all through his life, Brooke was very much preoccupied with the idea of searching for God. His was simply a life spent in search of God. This deep interest in search of God overshadowed the poet's *oeuvre*. The question that haunted Brooke's mind early enough was:

> …is there anything Beyond?
>
> This life cannot be All, …
>
> For how unpleasant, if it were! (Marsh, 298)

'The Vision of Archangels', 'On the Death of Smet-Smet the Hippopotamus Goddess', 'The Song of the Pilgrims', 'The Life Beyond', 'The Goddess in the Wood' and 'Mary and Gabriel' are but few of the poems that take the topic to their focal interest. This may be surprising to many readers who meet Brooke only through anthologies which, if ever, provide only few of his patriotic, war poems. A thorough reading of the poet's *oeuvre*, however, will undoubtedly reveal this endless and restless endeavour on Brooke's part, one that took the poet his whole lifetime to resolve.

Brooke's preoccupation with the concept of finding God was more of an obsession than a mere interest. From the start he was quite aware of such a massive task, but he was adamantly determined to take it up as it was all in search of "God of all desirous roaming" (Marsh, 186).

Such an interest can largely be attributed to Brooke's early, avid readings of Donne and Milton on the one hand and Swinburne on the other. Such readings must have sharpened the young reader's interest through their clash of ideas. Further, they provided Brooke with an audacious spirit that is hard to parallel among the English poets at such an early age. This attracted the attention of critics and reviewers who saw in Brooke a "young…daring…pugnacious poet" (Parker, 71).

From the beginning, it has to be acknowledged that such is a thorny issue to discuss due to the poet's ambivalent attitudes towards God as revealed in the poems.

Early enough in his life, Brooke was attracted to pre-Christian paganism. Such an interest found a voice in a number of poems foremost among which are 'On the Death of Smet-Smet, the Hippopotamus Goddess' and 'In Examination' both of which written in 1908. The first of these, 'On the Death of Smet-Smet, the Hippopotamus Goddess', can be looked at as crystalising the core of Brooke's notions about the relationship between man and God. The poem is subtitled 'Song of a Tribe of the Ancient Egyptians'. In its essence, the poem is a philosophic debate deeply expressive of the poet's own conception of deity in the way it explores the relationship between people and God.

To start from the title, the image of the Goddess, a "Hippopotamus", an ugly, abominable and disdainful beast, as chosen by the poet, readily arouses the reader's sense of disgust. This is deliberately done, and it is largely revealing of the poet's own scorn of the notion of deity at the time when the poem was written. Importantly, Brooke's interest in the relationship between man and God led him to delve very deep in history to explore one of the most ancient and the most deeply-rooted theologies in the world. The poem takes the form of a dialogue between "The Priests within the Temple" on the one hand and "The People without" on the other. The poem ambivalently celebrates and laments the death of the Goddess Smet-Smet. In addition, it is elegiac as well as satiric in tone, and is marked by its choral quality.

The ritualistic obituary mood of the poem shows that God has just died. The poem depicts God as a hated, obnoxious despot, who people, out of a sense of obligation, believe they must worship, just because they must have a deity, and "we had none other" (184). The poem opens with the priests expressing their emotions of deep hatred to and indignation with the old God:

> She was wrinkled and huge and hideous? She was our Mother.
>
> She was lustful and lewd?- but a God; we had none other. (Marsh, 184)

The people outside the temple reply of how "She" humiliatingly enslaved, despised and conquered them; but it was also She who solaced their grief. Now they undergo a sense of complete loss as their God has died:

> She sent us pain,
>
> And we bowed before Her;
>
> She smiled again

And bade us adore Her.

She solaced our woe

And soothed our sighing;

And what shall we do

Now God is dying? (Marsh, 184)

The Priests go on revealing more of their hatred of the dead God by exposing Her predatory nature:

She was hungry and ate our children;- how should we stay Her?

She took our young men and our maidens;- ours to obey her. (Marsh, 184)

The priests continue their commentary on their own relationship with their God, that is now dead:

She fed us, protected us, loved us, and killed us; now She has died. (Marsh, 185)

Though strikingly shocking with its remarkable ambivalence, the line can be taken as the best guide to sum up Brooke's own concept of God, and of man's relationship to God.

More elaboration of the idea is proffered in the lines, uttered by people outside the temple, that bring the poem to a close:

She was so strong;

But Death is stronger.

She ruled us long;

But Time is longer.

She solaced our woe

And soothed our sighing;

And what shall we do

Now God is dying. (Marsh, 185)

God, as the poem shows, is not the Almighty controlling the forces in the universe but is Herself controlled by these forces; so God gets old, "wrinkled", and dies. Further, She is not impeccable or infallible, rather, She is "lustful and lewd" (184).

The poem reveals a dexterous poet in excellent command of his words and rhymes. The short terse lines spoken by the people outside are indicative of the people's sorrow and worry over the death of their God. Ordinary people, as the poem shows, are more loyal to God than the priests whose job is mainly to worship God devotedly. The increasing hatred the priests' words imply that those nearer to God should not necessarily be the most pious or the most devoted.

This poem is important in that it can be looked at as a manifesto of Brooke's concept of and views on deity. The ideas the poem puts forth are typically Brookean and they are essential to understanding the poet. The relationship between people and God is mainly built on obedience and fear of the former and protection and control of the latter.

It was from Paganism, and not from Christianity, that Brooke came to formulae his conception of deity. In 'In Examination', the poet idolizes the sun, "my Lord the Sun!" (179). Furthermore, in 'Our Mother the Earth', Brooke describes 'Our Mother the Earth', as being "in a state of pain due to the "strife" heaped upon her by men:

> …from the earth is fled
>
> The first clean rapture of her primal life.
>
> She is sore grieved; laden with men's strife
>
> Woe of the living – burden of the dead" (Parker, 69)

Brooke drank so deep from the fountain of Paganism that it remained of central importance in his poetry. With these same ideas of paganism at the background of his mind, Brooke got to grips with God in Christianity. To quote Parker, "the Christian version of God does not stand up to Brooke's expectations" (70). Brooke's poems about God show a poet oscillating between the extremes of blasphemy on the one hand and piety and religiosity on the other. What is really astounding about the issue is that Brooke can take his readers from one extreme to another in two successive poems. This can mystify his readers greatly; but, on the other hand, this is exposing of the state of complete loss the poet himself suffered. In his poem 'Failure', one of his earliest poems, he announces blasphemy:

Because God put His adamantine fate

Between my sullen heart and its desire,

I swore that I would burst the Iron Gate,

Rise up and curse Him on His throne of fire.

Earth shuddered at my crown of blasphemy. (Marsh, 190)

Surprisingly enough, the poem 'Ante Aram' appearing on the opposite page in The Collected Poems is a supplication revealing a repenting, "sorrowful", humble, pious, dedicated worshipper:

Before thy shrine I kneel, an unknown worshipper,

Chanting strange hymns to thee and sorrowful litanies,

Incense of dirges, prayers that are as holy myrrh.

Ah! Goddess, on thy throne of tears and faint low sighs,

Weary at last to theeward come to feel that err,

And empty hearts grown tired of the world's vanities.

… … …

I come before thee, I, too tired wanderer

To heed the honour of the shrine, the distant cries

And evil whispers in the gloom, or the swift whirr

Of terrible wings-I, least of thy votaries. (Marsh, 191)

In the footnote to this poem, the editor Edward Marsh remarks that "I think the poet must have meant to write 'wayfarer'" instead of wanderer (191). The contrary is right. The very word "wanderer" suits best in this context.

These two poems unveil the extent to which Brooke's concept of God oscillated to and fro between belief and disbelief. Time and time again, the poet oscillates between these two extremes.

The contradictions these two poems show reverberate throughout Brooke's poetry; sometimes even in a more striking way. Thus, in the very same poem the speaker can be the pious, god-fearing worshipper and the blasphemer. This can remarkably be captured in poems such as 'Sonnet' (205), and 'Sonnet' (206). Even in 'The Call', one of his most passionately poems devoted to God, Brooke concludes the poem with a reference to the death of deity. It is interesting here to refer to the fact that Brooke was well aware of how shocking his ideas were, but he was determined to give a voice to his thoughts. In 'The Call', he assertively says, "The eternal silences were broken" (Marsh, 193).

This can account for the oxymora, singular oxymoron, i.e. a deliberate combination of two words that seem to mean opposite to each other, appearing here and there in the poems. To give a few examples of this phenomenon, In 'Sonnet', a poem that puts forth the poet's sadness and doubt about the world, and one that is remarkably full of antitheses, the poet speaks of "the bitter-sweet" risk (206), and in 'Choriambics-II' the poet addresses his God as, "God, immortal and dead!". Further, in 'Tiare Tahiti', the poet describes "hearts and bodies" as "brown as white" (305). This is revealing of the antitheses in the poet's mind, which can easily mystify the reader.

The ideas the Brooke digested from paganism struck a sensitive chord in the poet's mind and were later to have a strong hold of his thinking. In the poem entitled 'The Beginning', Brooke expresses his ambivalent thoughts on God in a way that directly conjures that of the pagan worshippers depicted in 'On the Death of Smet-Smet the Hippopotamus Goddess'. Those worshippers say, "She…loved us, and killed us" (185).

As Brooke's poetry shows, God in Christianity, as in paganism, exercises his powers on people, or, to use Brooke's own word "zanies" (217), i.e. mimicking, buffoonery clowns, who are just as weak and helpless as puppets manipulated by strings of Fate, a recurrent concept in Hardy's poetry, while God Himself is too weak to resist or defy the conquering and the defeating forces of Time and Death. In many of his poems, Brooke shows how such two conquering forces play havoc with deity.

Time is a defeating force that God cannot challenge, "*Time is longer*" (185). The destructive power of Time is reflected on again and again in Brooke's poetry, especially with God as the helpless victim of that force. In 'The Beginning', for instance, the poet is tormented and is greatly baffled and confused by the image of God he had in mind in the past and what he expects Him now to be like. He is torn between past and present images of God; and this leaves him in a state of remarkable indecision and fatal loss:

So then at the ends of the earth I'll stand

And hold you fiercely by either hand,

And seeing your age and ashen hair

I'll curse the thing that once you were,

Because it is changed and pale and old

(Lips that were scarlet, hair that was gold!)

And I loved you before you were old and wise,

When the flame of youth was strong in your eyes,

-And my heart is sick with memories. (Marsh, 196)

It is very difficult for a poet to put so much tumult of ideas in this way. The very words on the page seem to rebel and go unbridled. What can hold such surges of tumultuous, rough currents and cross currents of such a restless mind except the very act of printing on the page? This is, indeed, one of the great traits of Brooke as a poet. He could handle the most difficult ideas with great craftsmanship.

The speaker in Brooke's poems on deity is sure that the vicissitudes of time drastically change the features of God, "the sullen years and the mark of pain / Have changed you wholly" (196). Infirmities and feebleness of God echo abundantly throughout Brooke's poetry. The poet believes that one day he will see God and, then, will be able to identify his God by his time-worn features, and by his feebleness. The speaker will, thus, be able to identify his God by his "brown face" (207) and "ashen hair" (196), and in 'The Vision of Archangels', the poet speaks of "God's little pitiful Body lying, worn and thin / And curled up like some crumpled, lonely flower-petal" (182).

In its turn, Death is the other a defeating force that God cannot defy or escape, "*Death is stronger*" (185). Brooke's poetry is replete with these ideas. In 'Sonnet', for example, the poet speaks of the death of God:

One day, I think, I'll feel a cool wind blowing,

See a slow light across the Stygian tide,

And hear the Dead about me stir, unknowing,

And tremble. And *I* will know you have died. (Marsh, 205)

The poet's mind even speculates what God can turn into after His Death. In 'Dust', he says, "I / Shall meet one atom that was you" (208).This is how the poet believes his God will end up like.

Though Brooke suffered greatly from what he believed to be the utter absence of any divine guidance, it is worth noting that the speaker in his poems is sure about the existence of God and that he is never skeptical about that existence. Further, he was never skeptical about the existence of God. In his poetry, we should never expect to come across lines like the following by John Betjeman, for instance:

I, kneeling, thought the Lord was there.

Now, lying in the gathering mist

I know that Lord did not exist. (Blackburn, 74)

The poet's main problem was, however where and how to find God.

The poet's pursuit in this respect went through important phases of development. The poet employed a cluster of important images, such as the image of the wanderer and that of the woods, and concepts, such as loneliness, whispering and dreams, that suitably portray the phases his journey in search of God. These images and concepts are worthy of studying in some detail.

To begin with, the long road taken at night by an aimless wanderer is a dominating image in Brooke's whole poetry. This is a motif that ubiquitously crosses and recrosses throughout the poet's *oeuvr*, bringing about an internal unity of the poet's output. Brooke himself, in one poem after another, we see the "wanderer" (191) "roaming" (187) about "the long road!...into the waste we know not. Into the night" (195). The poet comes even to identify himself as the "Most individual and bewildering ghost!" (205). A similarly recurrent image is that of the speaker in the poems straying aimlessly through "empty spaces" (194) "full of vacant echoes" (190) and "faint horizons" (186). Importantly enough, the dark, gloomy night is always at the background of such poems of wandering functioning as a motif revealing the poet's state of loss and aimlessness. Night itself sometimes turns into a cell confining the poet, "And the wind blows, and the light goes / And the night is full of fear" (226), "with darkness fall[ing], with scornful thunder" (193).

It is noteworthy that the speaker in Brooke's poems never seeks God in churches or among priests. This can be taken as showing the poet's disbelief in both. He was, indeed, confident that he

himself would find God at one of the remotest, unpopulated parts of the world, as the poems reveal. Such a place could be the densely intricate woods (201), beyond the ocean (242) or at the "world's far ends" (196). This was probably the main reason behind the poet's deciding on the States and then on New Zealand, both in 1913, as destinations for his trips.

In his poem, 'Dining-Room Tea', the poet speaks of the arduous, exhausting effort he has taken in search of "The eternal holiness of you" (249). The poet says:

> You never knew that I had gone
>
> A million miles away, and stayed
>
> A million years. (Marsh, 249)

To take the idea a step beyond, the solitary attitude the poet adopts in his search of God is revealing of the poet's mysticism. The American Heritage College Dictionary defines the word "mystic" as "Of or stemming from direct communion with ultimate reality or God" (903). This is genuine to Brooke's own stance in this respect. The Dictionary of Literary Terms defines the term "Mysticim" as, "The belief in the possibility of the union of man's soul with …a deity" (124-5). This, also, is not difficult to identify in Brooke's poetry particularly as he shifts from using "I" to using "we", as it is it occurs in 'Victory' and 'The Wayfarers', for instance. As the first of these opens it shows a poet desolately "Alone" (252). In the third line of the poem, the poet uses, "you and I" (252) to refer to God and himself. Then, as the poem proceeds, the poet uses the pronoun "we" to refer to the two of them, "We, silent and all-knowing" (252), "Lightly we turned, through the wet woods blossom-hung, / Into the open" (252). Further, in the second, 'The Wayfarers', the poet identifies himself with God:

> Do you think there is 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? (Marsh, 195)

The image of the woods is another weighty one in Brooke's poetry. Indeed, this image stands as another very important image permeating the poet's *oeuvre* due to its rich symbolic

connotations whereby the poet skillfully reduces the macrocosm to the microcosm. The woods, with their labyrinthine nature, allegorically symbolize life itself as the poet experienced it, with all its struggle, hazy vision, endlessly branching directions that can lead to completely different destinations, or even to more loss. Introducing the image of the woods, with their tangling trees and bushes, dim vision, lost horizons, and the real lack of any guidance is a very important development in Brooke's poetry; to find God, the poet tackled the intriguingly tangled woods.

Brooke's idealizing, even idolizing, of the woods manifests itself in the poem entitled 'The Voice' in which he gives a new definition of the "wholly three" as "Night, and the woods, and you" (245).

'Choriambics-II' is one of the poet's greatest poems that have passed unnoticed. This is believed to be Brooke's best poem to depict the poet's inner dilemma. Due to its significance, the poem is worth quoting in its entirety:

> Here the flame that was ash, shrine that was void, lost in the haunted wood,
>
> I have tended and loved, year upon year, I in the solitude
>
> Waiting, quiet and glad-eyed in the dark, knowing the once a gleam
>
> Glowed and went through the wood. Still I abode strong in a golden dream,
>
> Unrecaptured.
>
> For I, I that had faith, knew that a face would glance
>
> One day, white in the dim woods, and a voice call, and a radiance
>
> Fill the grove, and the fire suddenly leap…and, in the heart of it,
>
> End of laboring, you! Therefore I kept ready the altar, lit
>
> The flame burning apart.
>
> Face of my dreams vainly in vision white
>
> Gleaming down to me, lo! hopeless I rise now. For about midnight
>
> Whispers grew through the woods suddenly, strange cries in the boughs above
>
> Grated, cries like a laugh. Silent and black then through the sacred grove

Great birds flew, as a dream, troubling the leaves, passing at length.

I knew,

Long expected and long loved, that afar, God of the dim wood you

Somewhere lay, as a child sleeping, a child suddenly reft from mirth.

White wonderful yet, white in your youth, stretched upon foreign earth,

God, immortal and dead!

Therefore I go; never to rest, or win

Peace, and worship of you more, and the dumb wood and shrine therein. (Marsh, 201-2)

This poem ushers us into the poet's jungle of the mind with its densely entangled thoughts and endless details. The very appearance of the poem on the page communicates very important messages. The long, "untrimmed" lines of the poem simulate the unkempt trees in the wood. This is further supported by the fact that the poem is intensely packed with ideas that overlap and entangle. The very length of the lines is indicative of the long roads the poet has taken in search of God; and, still further, of the long roads still untaken which seem to be waiting for the poet to tackle. The poem is, thus, richly multidimensional.

It is probable that the poet found in the very graphing of the word "woods" with its circular o's a representation of the vicious circles of thoughts in which he was involved. Are these woods real? Did the poet really abide in the woods "waiting for God" to come or to appear to him? This remains a matter for guessing.

Loneliness is another key concept in Brooke's poetry. In his search of God, Brooke was always alone. It seems he believed solitude was a must in this respect. Thus, in his poem entitled 'The Beginning', he says:

…I shall rise and leave my friends

And seek you again through the world's far ends,

You whom I found so fair,

(Touch of your hands and smell of your hair)

My only god in the days that were.

My eager feet shall find you again. (Marsh, 196)

In one poem after another, the poet asserts his being alone in his search of God. In 'Sonnet', he says that Death will "swing me suddenly / Into the shade and loneliness" (205), and in 'Dust', he is "left alone / To crumble in …separate night" (208). He is sometimes scared by the idea of being alone. In 'Finding', "I, little and lone and frightened / In the unfriendly night" (242). What was really unbearable to the poet was his "heart's loneliness" (206). The concept of "heart's loneliness" is handled in a number of later poems. In 'Sonnet' (206), for instance, the poet refers to "my heart with buds of pain" (268).

At a later stage, the poet came to think of himself as a victim to evil whispering. He is the unguided wanderer left to the obsessive whispers that add a great weight to his mind that is overburdened with the sense of loss and agony. The idea of whispering, with its allusion to Satan's whispering to Adam and Eve while in Paradise, is another important development. Such an idea is developed in a number of poems in which the speaker in the poems is an Adam-like figure. In 'Desertion', one of Brooke's most interesting poems, the speaker laments his "fall" from glory, and is able to identify the enemy that the enticed him:

And have you found the best for you, the rest for you?

Did you learn so suddenly (and I not by!)

Some whispered story, that stole the glory from the sky,

And ended all the splendid dream, and made you go

So dully from the fight we know, the light we know?

O faithless! The faith remains, and I must pass

Gay down the way, and on alone. Under the grass

You wait; ...

O little heart, your brittle heart; till day be done,

And shadows gather, falling light, and, white with dew,

Whisper, and weep. (Marsh, 204)

The idea of whispering, recurrently appearing as it does, conjures up to the mind Satan's whispering to Adam and Eve in Paradise, and how they were driven out of paradise when they obeyed Satan's whispering and disobeyed God. The idea is further enhanced by introducing the image of the serpent, the shape in which Satan finally disguised, after failing to disguise first as a cormorant and then as a toad, when he finally managed to persuade Eve to eat from the forbidden Tree, i.e. the Tree of Knowledge, as in Milton's epic 'Paradise Lost'.

The lines are so telling in the way they put forward the speaker's sense of loss of all that was paradisal. "Falling" is the key word to understanding the poem. Yet, the allusion to "light" and "dew" at the end of the poem give the impression that the speaker's hope, like Adam's own, is renewed; and a fresh vision of the future is there.

With their representation of the unconscious side, dreams were importantly introduced at a later stage of Brooke's poetry to reveal the almost hypnotic, daydreaming state the poet went through. Dreams were thus an important transitional phase in the way it shows how the conscious and the unconscious could co-exist inseparably within the poet's mind. In his poem 'Day and Night', the poet says, "when I sleep, …all my thoughts go straying" (253). 'Finding' is the poem that captures this transitional stage best. The poem weaves the threads of the conscious and the unconscious so phantasmagorically that the reader is left asking which is real and which is not.

'Finding' is the poem that captures this mood best. This poem can be looked at as a turning point in the poet's pursuit in search of God. The significance of the poem consists in the fact that this was the first poem in which the poet introduced the idea of God's companionship to him. Though its ostensible simplicity, the poem is so difficult to penetrate. The difficulty underlying the poem consists largely in the way reality and dreams overlap. This, after all, is one of Brooke's greatest poems.

And suddenly

I found you white and radiant,

Sleeping quietly

Far out through the tides of darkness,

And I there in the great light

Was alone no more, nor fearful. (Marsh, 243)

This poem can be taken as marking an important psychological turn within the poet. The poet is almost hypnotic in the mood he handles the idea. This was the beginning of a phase when the poet got vulnerable to reveries and daydreams. The idea is further supported by the recurrent appearance of the ellipses throughout the poem. This intricate weaving of dreams with reality is the nearest thing to what is called, "the stream of consciousness" in novel. Reference must be made here to Brooke's own friendship with the novelist Virginia Woolf who was very much interested in adopting this technique, as in her novel To The Lighthouse shows. It was only after 'Finding' that other ideas such as of immortality of both God and the poet found their way to Brooke's poetry.

This was not, however, the end of the journey. The poet still suffered stumbled and faltered many a time, and this incurred the poet's anger. In return to all these industrious labours on the poet's part to find God and, hereupon, God's guidance, God remained unresponsive and indifferent all the way through. Despair was impending and there came times when the poet acknowledged that he did not love God and others in which he spoke of the death of that love, "I said I splendidly loved you; it's not true" (206), the poet confesses. In 'The Life Beyond', the poet addresses God saying:

> I thought when love for you died, I should die.
>
> It's dead. Alone, most strangely, I live on. (Marsh, 225)

Another important feature of God in Brooke's poetry is that He is never caring, and is totally indifferent to his creatures, "hope is fleet and thought flies after" (215).

To take the point a step beyond, Brooke's state of loss, restlessness and aimless wondering depicted repeatedly throughout his *oeuvre* can be accepted as representing and portraying the the modern man's dilemma of religion, i.e. a dilemma that reached its apex in the post-WWI period.

It is clear that Brooke could never rid his mind of that obsession. Countless thoughts flowed into his mind. In 'Day and Night', he says, "Through my heart's palace Thoughts unnumbered throng" (253). In 'A Channel Passage', one of the last poems of 1908-1911, the poet still insists that

> I knew
>
> I must think hard of something, or be sick;
>
> And could think hard of only one thing- you! (Marsh, 251)

God's unresponsiveness and indifference feature prominently in Brooke's poetry; sometimes even, "God is asleep" (188). It is interesting to refer here to the monologic and the

apostrophic nature of Brooke's poetry in this respect. The monologues and the soliloquies, two prevailing features of Brooke's poetry in this respect, never turn into dialogues, as it happens, for instance, in George Herbert's poem 'The Collar'. In its turn, this filled the poet with sorrow for the "tears that fill the years" (267). Out of despair, the poet cries, in the poem ironically entitled 'Success', protesting against God's neither answering his prayers nor guiding his steps, "Myself should I have slain? or that foul you?" (207); "But still there came no answer to the cry", as he says in 'Our Mother the Earth' (Parker, 69). Furious, in 'Finding', he says, "I wish that you were dead" (246), and, in his lengthy poem 'The Fish', the poet speaks of God as "Sans providence", and declares his despair:

> O world of lips, O world of laughter,
>
> Where hope is fleet and thought flies after,
>
> Of lights in the clear night, of cries
>
> That drift along the wave and rise (Marsh, 214)

God is never guiding or helpful in Brooke's poetry. He never guides the wanderer's steps, despite all the wanderer's earnest endeavour to find any guidance. God is never such a caring, Beneficent, Merciful Creator.

Expectedly enough, with such a restless, caustic, mind replete with these biting thought, the poet fell victim to despair. A sense of failure and despair haunted the poet and resulted in depression (Colbourn, online), which, in its turn resulted in "nervous breakdown" in 1912(Marsh, 85). "My cure" said Brooke, as "my amiable specialist" prescribed, "consists in perpetual eating and over-sleeping, no exercise, and no thought. Rather a nice existence, but oh God! weary" (Marsh, 85). Christmas 1913 found the poet in New Zealand, reached by way of Hawai, Samoa, Fiji, and, a month later, he was in Tahiti. These were attempts to, so to speak, discharge the poet's his mind from such obsessions and solicitudes, but, even then, the concept was always standing at the background; and, stealthily and steadily, creeping to the foreground retaking a firm hold of the poet's thoughts as some of his latest poems of 1914 make clear.

III

Conclusion

Brooke is a genuine poet who has left a very considerable poetic tradition worthy of being "unearthed" and reassessed. He has, however, suffered a lot from the layers of unjust and unscrupulous layers of criticism that have accumulated over his poetic tradition by one generation of critics after another. One critic once observed that, "most of [Brooke's] poems are hard going now…because they are uniformly and conventionally dull" (Childs, 32). A meticulous reading of Brooke's poems can confute this claim. What is true is that many important dimensions in Brooke's poetry still need to be excavated.

Brooke's concept of God emanated and from and was largely fostered by his acquaintance of paganism. His concept of God was never purely Christian; rather, it was, so to speak, a hybrid of paganism and Christianity, with more features from the former than the latter. It is important here to note that Brooke was never skeptical about the existence of God, but he was doubtful about where and how to find Him. Brooke's poetry depicts the poet's earnest, incessant endeavour in search of God who the poet never reached or found, a God who remained, as the poems reveal, indifferent and unresponsive to the poet.

Deity was, indeed, an enigmatic obsession to the poet. In his attempts to find God, the poet was drawn into a labyrinth of thoughts and riddles. Such thoughts remarkably oscillated between piety and devotion sometimes and blasphemy, loss and despair at many other times. His thoughts and ideas in this respect are hard to parallel or equal among English poets.

Brooke's poetry ushers the reader excellently into the inner goings-on of the poet's mind. Yet, it sometimes leaves the reader at loss whether the world the poet puts us face to face with is real, imaginary or a mixture of both. After all, part of the poet's greatness lies in the way he knits the real with the whimsical and the phantasmagorical in his poems.

The poet's entire interest revolved around the concept of finding God, and the poet, willingly enough, spent his life in search of God. Brooke's poetry is his prayers, soliloquies and supplications through which he sought God and looked forward to find Him. The world Brooke tried to explore was beyond his ken, and his unfailing curiosity, his incessant search for God, as well as his impatience with God's unresponsiveness played havoc with the poet's restless mind.

It would be very difficult to guess what kind of poetry such a poet could have written had he lived longer and experienced the First World War.

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