

Disability in the First World War English Poetry: An “LDS” Approach

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Abstract

Despite the critical popularity of the “L[C]DS”, only a handful of war poetry scholars have holistically studied the first World War poetry. That is why it is not that easy to put many war-poetry scholars in the league of the “L[C]DS” critics of war poetry, such as K. D. Laird, N. Markotic, S. Das, D. T. Mitchell, J. Kazantziz, P. Hunt and J. Anderson. Laird, while critiquing Wilfred Owen’s ‘disabled’ form of the perspective of L[C]DS, has not gone beyond the issues related to physical impairment in Owen’s war poetry. The aim of this neo-historicist study of first World War poetry, in general, is to prove that first World War poetry in English is immensely amenable to be studied from the perspective of “LCDS” because of the prominence given to the Icarus syndrome by most of the broken heroes and ineffectual.

Keywords: War Poetry, LDS approach, Discursive Viability, Icarus Syndrome, Linguistic Impairment, Stylistic Inadequacy

“Literary Disability Studies” (LDS) owes a lot to Reilly (1981), Marsland (1991), Kerr (1993), Caesar (1993), J. Lesley (1993), Comer (1996), Campbell (1997), Bannigan (1998), Synder, Brueggemann and Garland Thomson (2002), and D. T. Mitchell (2002). Hence, it is quite logical to submit that war poetry scholars like Santanu Das (2005, 2007), N. C. Ruth (2008), Virien Noakes (2006) and A. Borsay (2015) have attempted re-appraisal of the (British) war literature from the perspective of impairment and disability only after the critical reinforcement of the tenets of “LDS” including “LCDS”- (literary and cultural disability studies). So, appreciation of the war poetry in English has come from the topic of pity, anger, loss, pain, patriotism, loyalty and combative Gnosticism (Campbell, 2005, 261-279). Perhaps because of the impact of the literary and cultural reappreciation/reevaluation of the war poetry in English from the perspective of disability, impairment, dismemberment, imputation, and atrophy, war literature in English between 1914 to 1944 has gained some critical comeuppance. In other words, new vistas of critical studies related to war poetry in English have been opened up. So, war poetry scholars have laid more informed emphasis on linguistic “impairment” (Comer, 1996), “narrative prosthesis” (Mitchell, 2002), “tyranny of words” refusing to be under the control of the broken heroes “of war poetry (The Nation, 10.11.1917) and linguistic inadequacy to verbalize the war poets’ shocking awareness of the hurt/wastage/pity of war than on futility, “desolation”, ‘death’, ‘silence’, ‘speechlessness’, ‘immobility’ and black realism. So, first world war poetry in English has been able to get critical attention, more focused and more studied response.

Despite the critical popularity of the “L[C]DS”, only a handful of war poetry scholars have holistically studied the first World War poetry. That is why it is not that easy to put many war-poetry scholars in the league of the “L[C]DS” critics of war poetry, such as K. D. Laird, N. Markotic, S. Das, D. T. Mitchell, J. Kazantziz, P. Hunt and J. Anderson. Laird, while critiquing Wilfred Owen’s ‘disabled’ form of the perspective of L[C]DS, has not gone beyond the issues related to physical impairment in Owen’s war poetry. Similarly, for Markotic, no war poet/no soldier poet/poet-soldier/ trench poet is a Daedalus. He has studied the war poetry from the perspective of the Icarus syndrome. Taking a cue from J. Kazantziz who has appreciated the war poetry as the poetry of scars, Markotic has attempted a holistic analysis of the war poetry from the perspective of “disability”. However, he has not paid attention to the thematics of “rehabilitation”. So, his is a truncated study, quite unlike the one effected by J. Anderson in 2011. The effort of A. Borsay in this regard is quite admirable. In the learned paper, “Disability in British Poetry” (2015, 499), he has expanded the discursive analysis made by S. Das. But none of the war-poetry scholars named above has paid critical attention to the linguistic impairment of the war poets. Though J. Lesley (1993) and S. Hynes (1998) and N. Clausson (2006) have tried to affect some sort of “LCDS” studies of the first World War English poetry from the perspective of the linguistic failure/impairment of the soldier-poets, they have not affected any full-fledged study. Hence, studies of the first World War poetry like “The Soldier’s Tale”, Hynes’ “perpetuating the language”(Clausson), “voices of silence” (Noakes, 2006) et al are schematical. That is why it

is submitted that the first World War poetry (in English) is in crying need of being re-examined and re-explored as per the tenets of "L[C]DS" with a view to doing justice to its poetics/stylistics/narratological or discursive impairment.

The aim of this neo-historicist study of the first World War poetry, in general, is to prove that the first World War poetry in English is immensely amenable to be studied from the perspective of "LCDS" because of the prominence given to the Icarus syndrome by most of the broken heroes and ineffectual. Verbal fusiliers and to prove that, it is affected by manifest linguistic/stylistic disability/impairment in its corpus of poetry.

To do justice to the aforesaid critical agenda, some of the iconic first World War poems anthologized in "The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry" (John Silkin, 1979) such as "The Disabled" (Owens, 179), "Poem XXVII" (Charles Hamilton Sorley), "When you see millions of mouthless dead" (Sorley, 109) "Report on Experience" (Blunden, 109), "War Books" (Gurney, 113), 'Recalling War' (Graves, 116), "Repression of War Experience" (Sasson, 128), "The Dead Beat", "In Sensibility", "Smile, Smile, Smile", and "Spring Offensive". (Owen, 176, 184, 194 and 195), and "The Poet and War" (Ehrenstein, 228) are to be reexamined from the perspective of "L[C]DS". It is clarified at the outset that illustrative material in support of the thesis of this paper is to be drawn from the poems, specified above. However, as and when required, other war poems, may also be re-critiqued from the perspective of "DS"/ "LDS"/ "LCDS".

The history of war poetry is at least as old as the history of civilization. Since the conflict between the "maker and the wrecker" is the most pristine archetype in the world dictionary of archetypes to decode war poetry one has to go to the "Iliad", the "Mahabharat", the "Ramayan" and other epics on/about all sorts of war, such as "giantomachia", "Paleontomachia. In the pristine poems on/about war, not in any way/degree against war, war is not a fun/game. In other words, war is exalted and has been described as Cathartic, purgative and redemptive. So as the "Song Celestial" shows, the style is sublime, answerable and "Homeric", full of linguistic flourish. In such epics of war, the poet discharges two functions, that of the chronicler and that of the 'bard'. Since the purpose is to glorify the topos of the victory of the virtue over the vice, the style is 'grand', never mediocre. So, in the archetypal war poetry, experiences of the "political conscience" are more highlighted than those of "historical consciousness" (Das, 2005). While poetically bemoaning the concepts of 'guilt', 'tragic flaw', 'libido', 'passion', 'morbidity', "hybris" and megalomania, the war poets celebrate the ideals of virtue, chivalry, courage, bravery, resilience, compassion, righteousness, dutifulness and moral uprightness. That is why, one can find two different styles/registers/codes in the pristine war poetry-one is related to the poetry of valorization of war and the other, to the castigation of evil/vice/viciousness. That is why, "the Battle of Maldon", like the 'Iliad' bears testimony to the ubiquity of war. Eventually, war poetry is branched off into two main streams, namely exotic/romantic war poetry, and realistic war poetry. In the romantic/exotic war poetry, war is 'desirable' because it promotes heroism, patriotism and pietism. In the realistic war poetry war is denounced and the backlash/aftermath of war is given more importance than the horror/waste/pity of war. In other words, in the exotic war poetry, the poet is not argumentative and diagnostic, whereas in the realistic war poetry, the poet is not an idealistic maker of war poetry.

In the realistic war poetry, "black realism" (Ford, 1990, 203) is preferred to "ivory towerism". So, in the works of Guillaume Apollinaire, Vera Brittain, Ford Madox Ford, R. Graves, Siegfried Sasson, Isaac Rosenberg, Wilfred Owen, J. Gurney, John McCrae, P. Larkin, Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes, poetic flourish is "doomed", "minimizing", "shrivelled", "manicured" and "defrilled". Since they have to show and substantiate the savagery and waste of war, they have to effect poetic denunciations of war and the atrocities and attritions caused by war. So, they have to discard the style/register/code used by war-poets like Homer, Spenser, Milton, Rudyard Kipling and R. Brooke. They have to liberate war-poetry from the mind of the topos, "dulcet et decorum est, pro patria Mori" ('It's better to die for one's father land') and have to re-visit all the sites of war, such as Ilium, Lanka, Kurukshetra, Maldon, Ypres, Flanders, Somme et al as "soldier-poet(s)" (Hervey Allen), "trench poets" (Edgell Rickword) not as the "hero" but as "the broken hero", "not making it home" (Kucera, 2019). In other words, they have to question and discard the heroic code to re-embrace the humanity code, held in high esteem by the Soldatendichter. So, they have to use an off-the-cough style/register/code to reframe the traditional war poetry, essentially on/about homage to an appreciation of the virtues, of the soldier-martyrs, soldier-heroes by the poetieroei (hero poets).

With reference to the original discussion, it is submitted that in the new dispensation, the new "war-poets" have not lent their support to the concept of "Regis Suprema voluntas Lex". For them, the State/Nation/Clan/Class is not everything. For them and to them, "Being Lied about" (Kipling, "If") is not important. So, they have tried to "bear to hear the truth" related to the horrendousness of war/battle. So, they have refrained from twisting facts, from making poetic traps/blandishment. Since they have showed the truth of war, so long "buried under words", they have discarded extra-ordinary language filled with abstract euphemistic

spiritualized words and phrases. Consequently, they have come away from the word-mazes to respond to the most naked reality related to the backlash of war, such as disability, impairment (both physical and psychological), ennui, fatigue, desolation, defeatism, dereism and angst. So, they have poeticized various nuances of disability, not necessarily followed up by the concept of rehabilitation and restoration. Hence, the war poets between 1914 and 1944 have tried to give a new orientation to war-poetry by harping on the thematics of the disability/impairment imposed on the actants and experiencers of war.

It is, therefore, quite natural to suggest that while ideating various nuances of disability/impairment, the war-poets have made their chosen style/register/code also "disabled"/shrivelled as a result of which in their radiographic accounts of the pity/hurt of war; poetry, in general, modern poetry in particular, has suffered from stylistic anaemia, emotional dehydration and dereistic obsessions. So, it is suggested that despite its metaphoric materiality, the first world war poetry in English does need "narrative prosthesis".

As it is commonly known, the very term "war-poetry" is really "problamatic". But for the war-poetry scholars, war is not the prime "focus" of any re-evaluative enterprise. Santanu Das has argued quite forcefully in support of the DS approach to war poetry. Since it is "easy to be dead" (Charles Hamilton Sorley, "poem-XXVII") in war, it is not important to ideate death, rather it is more important to deal with other issues related to war such as the disability/impairment thrust upon the soldiers, treatment of the wounded soldiers, the misery of the war destitute, plight of the civilian victims of war, and detailed documentation of the barest facts related to the issues specified above without saying "soft things as other men have said". In other words, in the opinion of Santanu Das, neo-historicist scholars should pay critical attention to both the "lyric testimony of the broken body", mind/body disabled and impaired in the war poetry and the empirical testimony to the broken/disabled narrative in the war poetry, in need of linguistic prosthesis. Since legions of war-poetry scholars have evaluated war poetry from "non-DS" perspectives, it is suggested that appreciation of war poetry from the perspective of "DS"/"LDS"/"LCDS" could be and is more rewarding.

The first World War poetry is mostly about the skull and the war-zones. It is "The Dead" (Brooke, 77) even speak with/without the agency of their respective ghosts/doppelgangers. Not necessarily, they do glorify "humanity" in "some corner" of the battlefield ("The Soldier", Brooke, 77). And they even plead to "take up (their) quarrel with the foe" (John Mc Crae, "In Flanders Fields", 81). In the poem, "As the Team's Head Brass (95)" Edward Thomas has dwelt upon the mental agony of the soldier, afraid of being disabled in the war.

"I could space an arm. I shouldn't want to lose leg. If I should lose my head..." so the soldiers/soldiers-poets between 1914-1944 have been conscious of the trauma of disability and its backlash, that is, the PTSD. So, they, in the view of Edmund Blunden, dread the "Murmurings of dismay" (1916 seen from 1921,108). The disabled soldiers bear the brunt of amputation, prolonged confinement in military hospitals, and physical handicaps, legless and elbow less, they are ill-treated by their old acquaintances as "some queer disease" (Owen, "Disabled", 179). As it is evident the first World War poetry is not imperious to the black and the black realism of disability and impairment. So, it is announced that it is annexable to be studied from the view point of ("DS"/"LDS"/"LCDS").

As the critics have proved, the inter-world war poetry has been at its peak, when the modern poetry in English has been at its most vivacious structure and texture. Hence, modernists have appreciated the interworld war poetry on/about war from the perspective of the abiding nuances of modern poetry: variety/obliquity, allusiveness and anxiety. And not surprisingly enough, most of them have found the inter world war poetry to be stylistically moronic, thematically jaded and jarring, and technically tame and mechanized. In the words of M. R. Mahmud:

The war poets have "realized" the "full horror" of the world wars and this realization has affected both their imaginations and their poetic techniques, their ways of "expressing the terrible truths" (2007, 26). That is why, J. Lesley finds war poetry to be pale and boring, breeding monotony and mental fatigue. Moreover, N. C. Ruth has redefined it as a sort of anti-war "propaganda" (2008, 8), loaded with some sort of fine balls of "Myth and Memory" (D. Todman, 2006, 32).

In the DS study of the first World War poetry, it has been proved that it is immensely fit to be reinterpreted in terms of the tenants of "DS"/"LDS"/"LCDS". Moreover, for most of the war-poets, the disabled soldier's condition can be assessed by means of the Icarus syndrome more than in terms of his mentor Daedalus. Despite being a coeval of the modern poetry, it is less qualified by the abiding nuances of than modern poetry, for a variety of limitations it has been affected with such as variety, obliquity, allusiveness and plurisignification.

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