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***THE MOTHERS' SONS:
KATHARINE TYNAN'S WAR POETRY***

Keywords: Poetry; Katharine Tynan; Great War; women; motherhood; Ireland

Abstract: *The focus of attention of the article are images of motherhood in Katharine Tynan's war poems, selected mainly from three volumes, 'Flower of Youth', 'The Holy War' and 'Late Songs'. As a non-combatant, Tynan does not attempt to depict war's atrocities in her war-related poetry. Her poems are also devoid of any stock features of war poetry, such as patriotic jingoism or vehement protest against the war. Tynan personalises war and with a detailed observation and delicacy of statement portrays motherhood in wartime in all its various facets. The aim of the article is to analyse some of Tynan's poems in order to reveal yet another dimension of poetry written during the Great War, one which, for obvious reasons, cannot be found in the poetry written by combatants, but is also unique as far as women's poetry of the Great War is concerned.*

The term war poetry is often limited to the account of war's atrocities, usually recorded by those immediately involved, soldiers in particular. This is particularly true of British poetry written during the Great War, as most people asked about war-related poems of the period will immediately mention poets of canonical status such as Owen, Sassoon, or Rosenberg, all of whom wrote poetry while on active service.

Much as these poets remain synonymous of the Great War poetry, one cannot escape the feeling that, to an extent, their poetry is, to use Robert Graves's expression, of 'journalistic' (quoted in Buckman and Fifield 96) nature, mostly based on the depiction of the battlefield. By no means is this a deficiency; on the contrary, the poetic record of war left by critically acclaimed poets of the period remains the very core of what is regarded as war poetry, valid in literary terms, but also as a testimony of the war years.

However, both critics and poetry readers occasionally fail to take into account the whole literary area which George Parfitt refers to as 'the context of war' (116). This context, broad as it is, leaves room for all who wrote about the war even though they had never experienced life in the trenches. The list ranges from non-combatants involved in various forms of auxiliary services to anyone who simply based their writing on what Stout calls 'contemplation' (58) of war. Among those who attempted to give a literary account of the Great War were women, for whom the war had obviously a different dimension, not only because they did not take part in active service, but also because of the numerous

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social roles they played in wartime, to mention, for example, the huge increase in the number of women employed in the traditionally male-dominated industries.

However, as Stout rightly claims with regard to war poetry, the ‘insistence on the primacy of the battlefield excludes women from having a voice about war’ (58), and her statement is particularly relevant to the Great War years, when women’s attitudes, also those voiced in verse, were often scorned by war poets themselves. Siegfried Sassoon in his “Glory of Women” seems to equate women’s perception of war with utter misapprehension:

You love us when we're heroes, home on leave,
Or wounded in a mentionable place.
You worship decorations; you believe
That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace. (Hart-Davies 100)

Sassoon’s opinion is only partly justified, for it is relevant within the context of the initial euphoria of war in which many British women expected men to participate in active service, and encouraged them to do so, presenting those who refused to join the troops with a white feather, synonymous of cowardice.

Much in Sassoon’s vein, Wilfred Owen defines women’s ignorance about the war in a similarly definitive manner. In his “Greater Love”, he particularly mocks women’s attempts to voice their feelings in a literary form:

Red lips are not so red
As the stained stones kissed by the English dead. (Stallworthy 143)

The quoted line is generally thought to be addressed to armchair poets, such as Jessie Pope, who, though relatively popular at the time, were in fact one of a few popular ‘gung-ho patriots’ as Montefiore calls them (53).

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in women’s poetry of the Great War, though often the driving force behind such tendencies stems from feminist, rather than purely literary, or literary-oriented interest. This attitude is perfectly epitomised in Jon Silkin’s note to the 1996 edition of his anthology of war poetry, in which he admits that he had included ‘under feminist pressures’ (13-14) a few poems written by women.

Admittedly, although there have been a significant number of publications on women’s poetry of the Great War since the edition of Silkin’s anthology¹, not to mention numerous dissertations, the main perspective remains of a feminist nature. Such an approach does not do justice to the women who, either as mere witnesses of war, or emotionally involved due to the loss of beloved ones: husbands, fiancés, brothers, or even fathers, often tried to leave their sincere poetic imprint, a tale of war in verse, whatever

¹ Particularly two anthologies of women’s war poetry offer a substantial selection of poems: Khan, Nosheen, ed. *Not with Loud Grieving: Women’s Verse of the Great War. An Anthology*. Lahore: Polymer, 1994. Reilly, Catherine, ed. *Scars upon my Heart: Women’s Poetry and Verse of the First World War*. London: Virago Press, 2000.

the poetic value. And even if this value most often falls short of poetic quality, it is worth consideration, if not often for the literary merit, then certainly for their documentary value. In the context of the literary imprint of the war years, women's poetry cannot and should not be ignored, for it is also a genuine record of the moods and feelings of the period as seen through the prism of witnesses, rather than participants.

The focus of attention of this article is such contextual war poetry written by a literary personage whose output, however prolific, remains neglected, if not forgotten. Katharine Tynan (1861-1931), married name Katharine Hinkson², is indeed rarely mentioned nowadays in literary criticism or textbooks, save for a number of websites. However, during her life she published an impressive number of poems, novels, autobiographical works, and many others³. She was one of the youngest figures of the Irish literary revival, or Irish Renaissance as it is also called, and she belonged to the younger generation of poets who tried to 'give a new impulse to Irish poetry' (Boyd 1968: 95). Her early involvement⁴ and contribution to the Irish literary revival is viewed by some as considerable and most significant (Fallon 174). W. B. Yeats was fascinated by her poetry and edited a selection of her poems⁵.

The main subjects of Tynan's poetry are nature, family and religion, but she also wrote poetry set in the context of the 1914-18 war. Her contribution to war poetry is, in a sense, unique, for she does not write about the war as such, but the human condition that has been affected by the war. Tynan's poetry is intimate and heartfelt with no echoes of the anti-war moods that were prevalent among the Irish at the time.⁶

The principal images in Tynan's war-related poems pivot around the theme of motherhood in wartime, and they can be found in three volumes of her poetry, *Flower of Youth*, *The Holy War*, and *Late Songs*⁷, in which she portrays motherhood in wartime in all its various facets. With a detailed observation and delicacy of statement, Tynan personalises war and presents the '...forgotten army of women ... caught up in the machinery of war' (Jones and Ward v). In the case of Tynan's poetry, these women are

² For more biographical details see, for example, Colman, Anne Ulry. *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Irish Women Poets*. Galway: Kenny's Bookshop, 1996. 219-228.

³ Various sources estimate her oeuvre between 150 to 170 different publications. Her best collection of poems *Ballads and Lyrics* was published in 1891 (Tynan, Katharine. *Ballads and Lyrics*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co.).

⁴ Her poems appeared in *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland* published in 1888 in Dublin by M.H. Gill and Son.

⁵ Yeats, W. B., ed. *Twenty one Poems*. Dunderum: Dun Emer Press, 1907.

⁶ Despite the fact that many Irishmen participated in the war, often serving in Irish formations, such as the 36th (Ulster) Division, or the 10th Division, which was regarded as representing nationalist Ireland, the Great War was not only unpopular in Ireland, but also bitterly opposed, especially by the revolutionary circles.

⁷ A selection of poems from these three volumes can also be found in *Herb o' Grace: Poems in War-Time*.

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mothers who have to endure torment when their beloved sons set off for the trenches in France⁸. A perfect example here is “Joining the Colours”:

There they go marching all in step so gay!
Smooth-cheeked and golden, food for shells and guns.
Blithely they go as to a wedding day,
The mothers’ sons. (Tynan 1917a: 9)

This is a superb example of how Tynan depicts young boys who go to war: with smooth complexion and golden hair, they are their mothers’ favourites. The boys are innocent and carefree, and zealous to join the troops, almost ‘ardent for some desperate glory’ to quote Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce Et Decorum Est” (Stallworthy 2000: 117). They seem to be like lambs destined for slaughter, and the mothers cannot safeguard them:

Foolish and young, the gay and golden boys
Love cannot save. (Tynan 1917a: 9)

In Tynan’s depictions such cherubic boys are ever present, with a dreamy aura surrounding them as in “The Vision”:

His mother dreaming of his curls
And his soft boyish ways at night. (Tynan 1916: 9-12)

This idolisation of the boys serves the purpose of magnifying the contrast between what is innocent and evil, a good example here being “The Temple”:

Beautiful from head to foot,
Young, dear darlings all unflawed
For their mother’s kiss. What brute
Dares deface the image of God? (Tynan 1917a: 29)

Here, once more, the boys, cherished, if not worshipped, are set beside the destructive force of war. This hyperbole underscores the atrocity of war, which, though not referred to directly, is omnipresent in the background. Tynan does not introduce the war as such, but implies its sinister proximity by employing the imagery of youth and innocence. There is something fiendish about the way Tynan introduces contradictions, expounding the hideous nature of war by contrasting it with qualities which epitomise innocence (which is, again, reminiscent of Owen’s treatment of the topic, to mention his “Anthem for Doomed Youth”). It is to a great extent owing to this ‘...innocent tenderness...’ (Boyd104) that Tynan’s poems are so potent in the rendition of the war theme. What makes the expression even more emphatic is the fact that Tynan often employs collective reference in her poetry, particularly transparent in “The Old House”:

⁸ Writing about 10th Division, Keith Jeffrey refers to the harrowing experience of mothers parting with their beloved sons. See Jeffrey, Keith. *Ireland and the Great War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 44.

Not alone, not alone!
Thronged is the road the young feet go. (Tynan 1918: 30)

It is not just a mother's son, it is an army of innocent boys in an en masse call to arms. Tynan's voice here, much as in a number of other poems, is first and foremost of a spokeswoman who exhibits sympathy with other mothers whose sons had to join the troops, and with whom she finds common ground. Although she herself needs solace and support, she appears to write her poems partly in order '... to console English mothers who have lost their sons in the war' (Potts 84). In "To the Others" the initial repetitions of 'your son and my son' reinforce the power of the point she makes and emphasise her compassion and her understanding of the mothers whose sons are in active service:

Your son and my son, clean as new swords,
Your man and my man and now the Lord's!
Your son and my son for the Great Crusade,
With the banner of Christ over them – our knights, new-made. (Tynan 1916: 15-16)

This communion with other mothers is emphasised in the poem by the repetitive mode of 'your son and my son'. The poem exhibits empathy, but also an element of pride that the sons die for a justifiable cause and thus become, as it were, their mothers' heroes. In "Any Mother", a similar effect is achieved by the use of a dialogic mode:

'What's the news? Now tell me.'
"Allenby again advances."
"No, it's not Allenby
But my boy, straight as a lance is" (Tynan 1918: 57-58)

In "Meetings", another poem in which Tynan identifies her case with other mothers, the roles customarily ascribed to mothers and their sons are, as it were, reversed. Paradoxically, the mothers whose presence ought to provide a haven for their sons are actually presented as the ones who are protected by their sons:

The mothers of our men-at-arms I meet
Who die for mine and me,
That we go safe and free,
Sit in the sun, sleep soft and find life sweet. (Tynan 1917a: 53)

Here again, Tynan presents a community of interests with mothers whose sons are on active service. This motif is recurrent in many of her poems, and it gives prominence to the bond existing between mothers and their sons, which can best be comprehended by women who undergo the very same experience.

Tynan's poems can be equally straightforward or perplexing, for she occasionally puzzles the reader with images which seem to be idiosyncratic to her style. This is particularly transparent in "Flower of Youth", where the deaths of young soldiers are accounted for by the fact that God himself wishes to rejuvenate Heaven:

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Lest Heaven be thronged with grey-beards hoary,
God, who made boys for His delight,
Stoops in a day of grief and glory
And calls them in, in from the night.
When they come trooping from the war
Our skies have many a new gold star. (Tynan 1917a: 54-55)

As a result of his astounding plan, the soldiers die in order to refurbish, as it were, God's heavenly milieu:

Heaven's thronged with gay and careless faces,
New-waked from dreams of dreadful things,
They walk in green and pleasant places
And by the crystal water-springs ... (54-55)

"Flower of Youth" is a superb example of a poem in which Tynan tells a story within the space of a few stanzas. This narrative mode is recurrent in a number of her poems⁹, as is, in fact, the image of heaven, which appears to be not only an ultimate refuge, but a point where all the paths of life meet in order to reunite mothers and sons parted by war. This is particularly well-pronounced in "The Only Son", a poem which, again, offers quite a paradoxical approach to the war theme. In the poem, it is a young soldier's mother who dies, and, a long time after her departure from the world of the living, she retains the motherly apprehension of her son's predicament. Her maternal duty will not be fulfilled until she has her beloved son by her side again:

His mother died last year and yet
She wearied Heaven with fear and fret,
Wanting the son she left behind ... (Tynan 1916: 70-71)

In her characteristic manner, Tynan delineates motherly love as one whose sole aim is to be the ultimate guardian who protects her beloved child:

He was so beautiful, so young,
Slender as a tall tree, wind-swung;
Innocent, gay: she went in fear
Something might hurt him, lacking her. (70-71)

Even in her afterlife she does not cease in readiness to tend her son, and she is tormented by every single portent of military barbarity he might have to face:

She heard amid the starry mirth
Rumour of dreadful things on earth.
Of sweet youth slain and beauty marred
Beyond all balm and spikenard. (70-71)

⁹ However, Tynan can also be extremely terse in her poetic expression, and relay the very core of her message in just one line. The diction in "Missing" is condensed but at the same time extremely expressive: "Missing!" Almost better "Killed." (Tynan 1916: 46-47).

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The mother implores God to terminate the son's earthly existence in order to reunite him with his mother. This peculiar transposition, the realignment of a most natural motherly instinct to protect the life of a child is used here to underscore maternal love:

At last God heard her. Swift as the wind
His messenger went forth to find
Her son and bring him to her breast
So that at last her heart might rest. (70-71)

The mother remains unsettled until, almost victoriously, she reclaims, as it were, her beloved son, whose death is nothing more than an act of deliverance that results in his return to the one who gave birth to him:

She died a year ago and still
Her cup of Heaven's untasted till
God's messenger returns to say:
"He fell in action yesterday." (70-71)

The preposterous image of mothers who somehow relish their sons' death, though seemingly odd and striking, has a consolatory function. This is also fairly atypical of war poetry written during the Great War by women, for such a consolation is more likely to be found in Tynan's poetry than a more obvious and expected elegiac tone.

Another idiosyncratic poem in Tynan's poetic oeuvre is "'Mid the piteous heaps of dead", a touching projection of a mother's anxiety. The mother visualises her beloved son, 'golden head', who calls the mother in the moment of ultimate distress:

'Mid the piteous heaps of dead
Goes one weary golden head
Tossing ever to and fro,
Calling loud and calling low.

Mother, mother, step so light,
Mother, lay your fingers white
On my forehead like a dew!
Mother, mother, where are you? (Tynan 1917a: 39-40)

The haunted son wanders like a ghost among dead corpses, though it is not clear whether he belongs to 'the piteous heaps of dead', or is, in fact, alive. He prays to find comfort in his mother's presence. However, he is not alone in his prayer, for the mother seems to entreat Mother Mary to comfort the son, in lieu of his own mother's attention. What is striking here, is that Mother Mary is presented as a form of substitute who is only performing the motherly act:

Mary, Mary, step so light.
Mary lay your fingers white
On his forehead! He shall dream
That his mother comforts him. (39-40)

As Donna Potts claims, “Tynan gains authority from the maternal role as well as from its simultaneous association with two powerful symbols in Irish Catholic culture: Mother Ireland and Mother Mary” (2000: 84). Obviously, the latter association is skillfully interwoven in the last stanza, but the invocative manner can also be traced in another of Tynan’s poems, “A Woman Commends her Little Son” being a point in case:

To the aid of my little son
I call all the magnalities-
Archangel, Dominion,
Powers and Principalities. (Tynan 1918: 49-45)

The poem is, in fact, a prayer in which the ‘magnalities’, apart from the ones enlisted in the quoted stanza, are Mary, Joseph, the Twelve Apostles, and various Irish Saints. Tynan also uses invocation in “The Message”, where the addressee of the prayer is the mother’s guardian angel, whom the mother implores to act on behalf of her son and intercede with the son’s guardian angel:

Dear angel friend, speak to his angel for her;
Tell him a mother prays his angel keep
Her little son in the battle and the horror
When all her prayers are laid away in sleep. (Tynan 1917b: 27)

The power of the poem, as the other poems quoted above, owes much to the simplicity of style and diction, and the common language Tynan employs, familiar and accessible to the average reader.

This is also the case in “The Mother of Three” in which this poetic tangibility is achieved by introducing ‘...qualities traditionally associated with motherhood: comfort, safety, and unconditional acceptance’ (Potts 85):

Oh, to have a little farm,
A little hearth so warm and bright,
And three little boys all safe from harm
In from the winter night! (Tynan 1916: 54-55)

Suffused with typical tokens of warmth and safety, such as the image of a hearth, and written in a diminutive tone, the poem reinforces the sense of a cosy and snug atmosphere, a safe haven from the anxiety of war.

Tynan’s credibility as a poet also stems from the fact that, being a mother of combatants, she could only be genuine in her understanding of their pain and anguish:

Her message to the grieving was all the more powerful because her own sons were fighting in the war, perhaps side by side with the sons of the people who read her poetry. She, too, was a part of that great sisterhood who waited at home, anxious and worried. Fortunately, her sons survived the war, but, at the time of the writing and publishing of those poems, Tynan shared in the suffering and anxiety of those for whom she wrote. (Fallon 93)

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Tynan's sons returned from the war, but as a mother who actually lived through the war experience, she can feel genuine empathy with all those mothers whose sons never returned from the front. This comprehension is very simply expressed in "His Footsteps":

The boy will come no more
Although I listen and long;
The sound of his foot on the floor
Was like an old song. (Tynan 1916: 51)

The fact that her sons returned from the war broadens her comprehension of war, for she can also convey the psychological aftermath that she detects as a mother. She does so in a terse, but telling manner in "Quiet Eyes":

The boys come home, come home from war,
With quiet eyes for quiet things- (Tynan 1918: 16)

The boys do come home, but they bring with them the unspeakable burden which a mother can discern: 'quiet eyes for quiet things' epitomises all the horror of war that in Tynan's poetry is not presented directly. Additionally, her comprehension comes not from direct exposure, but from her experience as a mother. The way in which Tynan authenticates, as it were, the truth of war as seen from a non-combatant position is the simplicity of expression, and the plain diction of her poetry, but even more so, the genuineness of her expression. As Rose rightly notices, having two of her beloved sons in action 'she can only be sincere' (55). This very sincerity results in poetry which is so much true-to-life in presenting various aspects of motherhood in wartime from the anguish of a mother exposed to the send-off in which her own sons are involved, through the shadow of war, lurking to claim the lives of the beloved ones.

Undoubtedly, Tynan stands out from many other women poets of the period in terms of her approach to war, as she reminds the reader that war is not solely about fighting, but equally about parting, missing, and losing. Particularly so in the maternal dimension she touches upon in her poems. Consequently, it does not seem too far-fetched to label Tynan, as Rose does, a 'poetess of motherhood' (64). It is exactly this focus on motherhood in wartime that makes her war poems universal and timeless, so unlike many clichéd war poems, often pervaded with the obvious and the expected, namely the detailed descriptions of life in the trenches, as well as the rendering of the brutality of war. As has been said, the heartrending images of mothers who have to part with their sons are the more convincing and genuine because Tynan's two sons were on active service and, though both wounded, managed to survive. This fact, as it were, certifies her credibility as a poet who speaks from the heart of a mother for whom war has a distinctly personal dimension.

And lastly, although Tynan is not an established figure of mainstream war poetry, her poetic legacy of the war years would greatly contribute to any anthology concerning the 1914-18 period.

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