

# ASPECTS OF THE POETRY OF ISAAC ROSENBERG

## I. TREATMENT OF WAR EXPERIENCE.

**W**HAT most distinguishes Isaac Rosenberg from other English poets who wrote of the last war is the intense significance he saw in the kind of living effort that the war called out, and the way in which his technique enabled him to present both this and the suffering and the waste as inseparable aspects of life in war. Further, there is in his work, without the least touch of coldness, nevertheless a certain impersonality: he tried to feel in the war a significance for life as such, rather than seeing only its convulsion of the human life he knew.

Occasionally, it is as well to say at once, he seems to simplify his experience too much, letting the suffering be swallowed up, though at his best he knows it never can be, in glory; this happens in 'The Dead Heroes,' and to some extent in 'Soldier' and 'Marching.' By themselves these poems might have implied a lack of sensitiveness; actually they were in him only one side of an effort after a more complete sensitivity. He could at least as easily have written only of loss and suffering:

Here is one not long dead.  
His dark hearing caught our far wheels,  
And the choked soul stretched weak hands  
To reach the living word the far wheels said;  
The blood-dazed intelligence beating for light,  
Crying through the suspense of the far torturing wheels . . .

The significance which the war held for Rosenberg might have been anticipated from his dissatisfaction with the pre-war social order (especially acute, it seems, in South Africa where he was living when the war came). The poem he wrote on first hearing of the war makes evident at once his deep division of feeling: on the one hand,

In all men's hearts it is :  
Some spirit old  
Hath turned with malign kiss  
Our lives to mould.

but also,

O ancient crimson curse!  
Corrode, consume ;  
Give back this universe  
Its pristine bloom.

His dissatisfaction with pre-war life had already shown itself in his work, notably in the revolt against God which appears in several passages, God being taken as someone responsible for the condition of the world and its established order :

Ah, this miasma of a rotting God!

And of the rotting God and his priests he exclaims :

Who has made of the forest a park?  
Who has changed the wolf to a dog?  
And put the horse in harness?  
And man's mind in a groove?

In 'Moses,' from which this passage comes, he was engrossed with the theme of revolt against a corrupting routine ; he presents Moses at the moment of breaking free from the comfort of the usual and politic by killing the overseer. Rosenberg never fully defined his attitude to violence as distinct from strength, though there is a hint in his letters that 'The Unicorn' might have approached this question. In 'Moses' he accepts violence because it seems a necessary aspect of any effort to bring back the power and vigour of purpose which he felt the lack of in civilized life :

I have a trouble in my mind for largeness.

It was because of this attitude to the pre-war world that Rosenberg, hating the war, was yet unable to set against it the possibilities of ordinary civilian life and regret those in the way, for instance, that Wilfred Owen could regret them in 'Strange Meeting.' When Rosenberg wanted to refer to an achieved culture—rather than merely human possibilities—against which to measure the work of war he had to go back to remote and idealized Jewish history,

producing 'The Burning of the Temple' and 'The Destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian Hordes.' More usually he opposed both to war and to the triviality of contemporary civilization only a belief in the possibilities of life and a hope derived from its more primitive aspects:

Here are the springs, primeval elements,  
The roots' hid secrecy, old source of race,  
Unreasoned reason of the savage instinct.

The root is the most important of the symbols which recur throughout his work, and birth, creation, and growth are his common themes.

These and related themes were to have been worked out in the unfinished play, 'The Unicorn.' But there they would have been influenced vitally by the war, and Rosenberg's account in letters of what he intends the play to be helps to reveal the significance of the war to him. The existing fragments point to his plan having changed more than once, but the letters show something of what he aimed at. The play was to have included a kind of Sabine rape by a decaying race who had no women and yearned for continuity:

When aged flesh looks down on tender brood ;  
For he knows between his thin ribs' walls  
The giant universe, the interminable  
Panorama—synods, myths and creeds,  
He knows his dust is fire and seed.

At the same time he wanted the play 'to symbolize the war and all the devastating forces let loose by an ambitious and unscrupulous will' (which might have been essentially the will of Moses seen in a slightly different light). Moreover, 'Saul and Lilith are ordinary folk into whose ordinary lives the Unicorn bursts. It is to be a play of terror—terror of hidden things and the fear of the supernatural.' It would, in fact, have been closely related to 'Daughters of War':

We were satisfied of our lords the moon and the sun  
To take our wage of sleep and bread and warmth—  
These maidens came—these strong everliving Amazons,  
And in an easy might their wrists

Of night's sway and noon's sway the sceptres brake,  
Clouding the wild, the soft lustres of our eyes.

The complexity of feeling here, which would probably have been still more evident in 'The Unicorn,' is typical of the best of Rosenberg's war poetry. His finest passages are not concerned exclusively either with the strength called out by war or with the suffering: they spring more directly from the events and express a stage of consciousness appearing before either simple attitude has become differentiated. They express, that is, what it is tempting to call, inaccurately, a 'blending' of the two attitudes. It can be seen in this:

None saw their spirits' shadow shake the grass,  
Or stood aside for the half used life to pass  
Out of those doomed nostrils and the doomed mouth,  
When the swift iron burning bee  
Drained the wild honey of their youth.

It is noteworthy here that Rosenberg is able and content to present contrasted aspects of the one happening without having to resort to the bitterness or irony which are the easier attitudes to such a contrast. One sign and expression of his peculiar greatness consists in his being able, in spite of his sensitiveness, to do without irony. The last two lines of the passage just quoted come from a keyed-up responsiveness to the vividness of violent death in war, but the passage possesses nothing of nationalist-militarist rapture; it is 'the half used life' that passes; and then

Burnt black by strange decay  
Their sinister faces lie,  
The lid over each eye;  
The grass and coloured clay  
More motion have than they,  
Joined to the great sunk silences.

Rosenberg seems to have been specially impressed by the destruction of men at the moment of a simplified greatness which they could never have reached before, their destruction by the very forces that had made human strength and endurance more vividly impressive than ever. This conception of the war he tried to ex-

press through the fiction of some intention being fulfilled in the destruction :

Earth has waited for them,  
All the time of their growth  
Fretting for their decay :  
Now she has them at last!  
In the strength of their strength  
Suspended—stopped and held.

From this it was a short inevitable step to the suggestion of some vague immortality for these lives :

What fierce imaginings their dark souls lit?  
Earth! Have they gone into you?  
Somewhere they must have gone,  
And flung on your hard back  
Is their souls' sack,  
Emptied of God-ancestralled essences.

' Daughters of War ' develops the same group of ideas. ' Earth ' gives place to the more active symbol of the Blakesque Amazonian spirits who take as lovers those who have been released from Earth,

From the doomed earth, from the doomed glee  
And hankering of hearts.

The Daughters, their voices (as Rosenberg says in a letter) ' spiritual and voluptuous at the same time,' are a symbolic expression of what he felt ought to be a possible plane of living. They are an embodiment of the God-ancestralled essences, but he feels now that they can be reached only through the sacrifice of men's defective humanity, that they bring about ' the severance of all human relationship and the fading away of human love.' This was an idea that he had been feeling towards in ' Girl to Soldier on Leave.' It is only for warriors that the Daughters wait, for the simplification of living effort which Rosenberg saw in the war impressed him as a first step—a step back—towards the primitive sources of life, ' the root side of the tree of life.' Death in itself was not his concern, but only death at the moment when life was simplified and intensified ; this he felt had a significance which he represents by immortality. For him it was no more than the immortality of the possibilities of life.'

This immortality and the value he glimpses in the living effort of war in no way mitigate his suffering at the human pain and waste. The value of what was destroyed seemed to him to have been brought into sight only by the destruction, and he had to respond to both facts without allowing either to neutralize the other. It is this which is most impressive in Rosenberg—the complexity of experience which he was strong enough to permit himself and which his technique was fine enough to reveal. Naturally there were some aspects of the war which he was not able to compass in his response: maiming and lingering death he never treats of—he thinks only in terms of death which comes quickly enough to be regarded as a single living experience. Nevertheless the complexity he did achieve constituted a large part of his importance as a poet.

To say that Rosenberg tried to understand all that the war stood for means probably that he tried to expose the whole of himself to it. In one letter he describes as an intention what he obviously achieved: 'I will not leave a corner of my consciousness covered up, but saturate myself with the strange and extraordinary new conditions of this life . . . ' This willingness—and ability—to let himself be new-born into the new situation, not subduing his experience to his established personality, is a large part, if not the whole secret of the robustness which characterises his best work. ('Robustness' is, as the fragment on Emerson indicates, his own word for something he felt to be an essential of great poetry.) It was due largely, no doubt, to his lack of conviction, of the adequacy of civilian standards. In 'Troopship' and 'Louse Hunting' there is no civilian resentment at the conditions he writes of. Here as in all the war poems his suffering and discomfort are unusually *direct*; there is no secondary distress arising from the sense that these things *ought not* to be. He was given up to realizing fully what *was*. He has expressed his attitude in 'The Unicorn':

Lilith: I think there is more sorrow in the world  
Than man can bear.

Nubian: None can exceed their limit, lady:  
You either bear or break.

It was Rosenberg's exposure of his whole personality that gave his work its quality of impersonality. Even when he imagines his brother's death he brings it into a poem which is equally concerned with the general destruction and the circumstances of life in war, and which ends with a generalization of his personal suffering :

What are the great sceptred dooms  
To us, caught  
In the wild wave?  
We break ourselves on them,  
My brother, our hearts and years.

The same quality is present, most finely, in ' Break of day in the trenches ' :

The darkness crumbles away—  
It is the same old druid time as ever.  
Only a live thing leaps my hand—  
A queer sardonic rat—  
As I pull the parapet's poppy  
To stick behind my ear .  
Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew  
Your cosmopolitan sympathies  
(And God knows what antipathies).

It seems you inwardly grin as you pass  
Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes  
Less chanced than you for life,

Poppies whose roots are in man's veins  
Drop, and are ever dropping ;  
But mine in my ear is safe,  
Just a little white with the dust.

There is here a cool distribution of attention over the rat, the poppy and the men which gives them all their due, is considerate of all their values, and conveys in their precise definition something of the impersonal immensity of a war. For Rosenberg the war was

not an incident of his life, to be seen from without, but, instead, one kind of life, as unquestionable as any life.

## II. HANDLING OF LANGUAGE.

Without attempting a systematic survey of Rosenberg's use of language, it is perhaps useful to discuss briefly one feature of his writing which must seem important even in a first approach to his work, partly because it contributes largely to his obscurity. It is that in much of his most interesting work he was only in a very special sense 'selecting words to express ideas.'

Usually when we speak of finding words to express a thought we seem to mean that we have the thought rather close to formulation and use it to measure the adequacy of any possible phrasing that occurs to us, treating words as servants of the idea. 'Clothing a thought in language,' whatever it means psychologically, seems a fair metaphorical description of most speaking and writing. Of Rosenberg's work it would be misleading. He—like many poets in some degree, one supposes—brought language to bear on the incipient thought at an earlier stage of its development. Instead of the emerging idea being racked slightly so as to fit a more familiar approximation of itself, and words found for *that*, Rosenberg let it manipulate words almost from the beginning, often without insisting on the controls of logic and intelligibility. An example of what happened occurs in the prose fragment on Emerson and the parallel phrase in a letter (published in this issue). In these he tries two ways of describing some quality that he feels in Emerson: at one time he calls it 'light dancing in light,' at another, trying to be more explicit and limit further the possible meanings of the phrase, he writes 'a beaminess, impalpable and elusive only in a circle.' The elements of this idea are apparently 'lightness' and 'elusiveness' and also 'endlessness, continuity within itself' of some kind, and these elements he feels also to be inseparable and necessary to each other.

He would of course have worked further on this before considering it finished. Much of the labour he gave to writing—and he is known to have worked extremely hard—was devoted, as his letters show, to making these complex ideas intelligible without sacrificing their complexity. 'Now, when my things fail to be



clear, I am sure it is because of the luckless choice of a word or the failure to introduce a word that would flash my idea plain, as it is to my own mind.' (*Poems*, p. 36). It is the creation of ideas which he takes to be his task as a poet ; speaking of the cause of the faults in his poems he insists (*Poems*, pp. 37-38) that it is not ' blindness or carelessness ; it is the brain succumbing to the herculean attempt to enrich the world of ideas.' And he is reported to have worked constantly towards concentrating more and more *sense* into his poetry, disturbed at the thought of thinness or emptiness. But how remote this was from implying any respect for mere intellectual exercising in verse is evident not only from his poetry but also from his own description of what he aimed at: poetry ' where an interesting complexity of thought is kept in tone and right value to the dominating idea so that it is understandable and still ungraspable.' (*Poems*, p. 33).

It remains ' ungraspable '—incapable of formulation in slightly different terms—because Rosenberg allowed his words to emerge from the pressure of a very wide context of feeling and only a very general direction of thought. The result is that he seems to leave every idea partly embedded in the undifferentiated mass of related ideas from which it has emerged. One way in which this effect came about was his rapid skimming from one metaphor to another, each of which contributes something of its implications—one can't be sure how much—before the next appears. A clear example—though not his best as poetry—occurs in ' Moses ':

Fine! Fine!  
See, in my brain  
What madmen have rushed through  
And like a tornado  
Torn up the tight roots  
Of some dead universe:  
The old clay is broken  
For a power to soak in and knit  
It all into tougher tissues  
To hold life ;  
Pricking my nerves till the brain might crack  
It boils to my finger-tips,  
Till my hands ache to grip

The hammer—the lone hammer  
 That breaks lives into a road  
 Through which my genius drives.

The compression which Rosenberg's use of language gave him is therefore totally unlike the compression of acute conversation—such for example as some of Siegfried Sassoon's verse offers—in which a highly differentiated idea is presented through the most effective *illustration* that can be found. Rosenberg rarely or never illustrated his ideas by writing ; he reached them through writing.

With this as his attitude to language it is not surprising that he should have had the habit of reworking phrases and images again and again, developing out of them meanings which were not 'the' meaning he had originally wanted to 'express' with them. Emerging, as they seem to have done, from a wide context of feeling, his more interesting images carried with them a richer or subtler meaning than Rosenberg could feel he had exhausted in one poem, and he would therefore use them again in another. This happened with 'Heights of night ringing with unseen larks,' a phrase that first reports an actual incident during the war, and is then used by the Nubian in 'The Unicorn' to contrast the mystery-exploiting femininity of his own girls with the vividness of Lilith :

Our girls have hair  
 Like heights of night ringing with never-seen larks,  
 Or blindness dim with dreams :  
 Here is a yellow tiger gay that blinds your night.

Moreover in the first of these poems he had said that the dropping of the larks' song when death might as easily have dropped was

Like a blind man's dreams on the sand  
 By dangerous tides ;  
 Like a girl's dark hair, for she dreams no ruin lies there . . .

It is this reworking of images—developing first one set of possibilities and then another—which gives one the impression of Rosenberg's having as it were modelled in language.

The idea of a sack for the soul is similarly reworked and developed. It occurs twice in 'Moses': first simply, 'we give you . . . skin sacks for souls,' as a contemptuous description of the Hebrew slaves; then the soul sack becomes the body and the habits of ordinary life to be thrown off in Moses' spiritual development:

Soul-sack fall away  
And show what you hold!

And finally the emptiness and collapsedness of the sack allows it to be used of the bodies of the dead flung on the earth:

And flung on your hard back  
Is their souls' sack,  
Emptied of God-ancestralled essences.

'God-ancestralled essences' in turn reappears in 'The Unicorn' where they are said to be contaminated by

. . . . a crazed shadow from no golden body  
That poisons at the core  
What smiles may stray.

The obscurity of this is relieved if one sees that it comes from an earlier poem beginning,

Crazed shadows, from no golden body  
That I can see . . .

and ending,

And poison at the core  
What smiles may stray.

That poem deals with evil abroad at night—shadows forming without any 'golden body' as source of light—and in 'The Unicorn' the ideas have been remodelled so as to suggest the humdrum middle-aged evil of Saul which is mauling Lilith's love and beauty.

All this may only amount to saying that when Rosenberg got a good phrase he tried to make the most of it, though it equally suggests what an interesting process making the most of a phrase may be. Naturally, too, it need not be supposed that Rosenberg was unique or even—among poets—very unusual in treating language in this way. What is unusual, however, is his willingness

to publish several uses of the same phrase or image (and there are many more instances than I have quoted), so that what may be a fairly common process is, in Rosenberg's work, available for examination. Moreover, although the process may be familiar in the writing of poetry, it is by no means usual in ordinary language, and there can be no doubt that it has special significance as a means of exploring and ordering the affective sources from which we draw our more manageable mental life.

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## MUSICAL HISTORY

BURKE once declared that he did not know how to draw up an indictment against a whole nation. Yet we daily meet people who are less diffident ; and we ourselves must confess that in artistic matters we often fall into the same loose habit. We describe one nation as more musical than another on the slenderest of evidence. One generation is played off against another in the same casual way, the only profit being to those particularly stupid and dangerous conservatives who believe that there is really nothing new under the sun.

The further a period of history recedes the simpler it appears. Our own times we know from direct experience to be complicated and to nourish many conflicting generalizations. But of the past we know only a limited number of facts, and professional historians have had leisure to piece them together into a traditionally accepted picture. Instead of a direct knowledge of a large number of particular cases, the mention of a past age summons up a blurred vision we call a ' musical ' or ' unmusical ' period.

The weighing of evidence that originally produces such a picture is the business of the historian. Too often, however, we cannot help feeling that even the literary or musical historian has too rigid a notion of what constitutes ' fact,' and in consequence neglects much that should properly be regarded as relevant evidence. The historian has no right to leave behind as impedimenta the experiences that make him sensitive to literature or music ; and this might seem too obvious a condition to be stated