Isaac Rosenberg

by Ian Brinton



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In the summer of 1914 Isaac Rosenberg, living in Capetown, finished writing his second lecture on art and wrote to Edward Marsh four days before the declaration of war:

> I know my poor innocent essay stands no chance by the side of the bristling legions of war-scented documents on your desk; but know that I despise war and hate war, and hope that the Kaiser William will have his bottom smacked—a naughty aggressive schoolboy who will have all the plum pudding. Are we going to have Tennyson's 'Battle in the air', and the nations deluging the nations with blood from the air? Now is the time to go on an exploring expedition to the North Pole; to come back and find settled order again.

The letter gives us a glimpse of Isaac Rosenberg, the man: ironic, literary, self-concerned and direct. His lecture contained references which echo both the enormous vitality of the Modernist art world of the second decade of the twentieth century as well as prophetic suggestions of this coming war:

> Art is now, as it were, a volcano. Eruptions are continual, and immense cities of culture at its foot are shaken and shivered. The roots of a dead universe are torn up by the hands, feverish and consuming with an exuberant vitality—and amid dynamic threatenings we watch the hastening of the corroding doom.

When Rosenberg was killed by a German raiding party on April 1st 1918 (and one might imagine a sardonic grimace at that timing of both month and year) there was found, amongst his papers, the following words also concerned with the world of Art:

> How small a thing is art. A little pain; disappointment, and any man feels a depth—a boundlessness of emotion, inarticulate thoughts no poet has ever succeeded in imaging.
> Death does not conquer me, I conquer death, I am the master.

The focus of this Bookmark will be upon the astonishingly vital aspects of Isaac Rosenberg's poetry, the visual, the numinous, language which challenges the syntactical orders of the day.

'extraordinary new conditions of this life…'

When Rosenberg suggested in a letter that he believed that 'however hard one's lot is one ought to try and accommodate oneself to the conditions' and 'endeavour to waste nothing' he was committing himself as a poet to recognising the potential for Art even in the most distressing of circumstances. It was a stance that Charles Tomlinson recognised as 'so nutrifying' in the pamphlet he wrote on Rosenberg for the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association.

Rosenberg enlisted in October 1915 and was sent to join the Bantam Battalion of 12 Suffolk Regiment 40th Division. The Bantams were formed by lowering the height required for infantrymen and were a desperate remedy for the acute shortage of men now that the casualty lists were so high. Rosenberg, at just under five foot three, had initially been rejected for the Royal Army Medical Corps and it was only the formation of this new battalion that enabled him to be recruited. In a letter to Marsh he explained his motives:

> I never joined the army from patriotic reasons. Nothing can justify war. I suppose we must all fight to get the trouble over. Anyhow before the war I helped at home when I could and I did other things which helped to keep things going. I thought if I'd join there would be the separation allowance for my mother.

This letter of direct honesty also contained Rosenberg's first army poem, 'Marching—as Seen from the Left File'

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My eyes catch ruddy necks
Sturdily pressed back,—
All a red brick moving glint.
Like flaming pendulums, hands
Swing across the khaki—
Mustard-colored khaki—
To the automatic feet.

We husband the ancient glory
In these bared necks and hands.
Not broke is the forge of Mars;
But a subtler brain beats iron
To shoe the hoofs of death,
(Who paws dynamic air now).
Blind fingers loose an iron cloud
To rain immortal darkness
On strong eyes.

It is not only the urban and machine-like associations in the language here ('red brick', 'automatic') that make this poem seem more like an early piece of T.S. Eliot than the Georgian poetry that Edward Marsh was involved with. What is also striking is the juxtaposition of those details with the wider context of 'ancient' as one would find it in Eliot's 'Preludes' where 'ancient women' gather fuel 'in vacant lots'. The poem has the visual intensity which one might associate with the Vorticist work of Wyndham Lewis as the marching soldiers are caught in a 'moving glint' and the 'flaming pendulums' of hands swing as though literally like clockwork. In the last five lines the move from a world of cavalry warfare to a reference again to Tennyson's prophetic vision of war from the air in 'Locksley Hall' is transfused with the Modernist idea of the 'dynamic'. This visual grotesquerie that combines humanity and machines is caught again by Rosenberg in the short poem he wrote after his channel crossing to Le Havre in early June 1916, 'The Troop Ship':

Grotesque and queerly huddled
Contortionists to twist
The sleepy soul to a sleep,
We lie all sorts of ways
And cannot sleep.
The wet wind is so cold,
And the lurching men so careless,
That, should you drop to a doze,
Winds' fumble or men's feet
Are on your face.

This poem is strikingly different from the one Rosenberg had written in response to the sinking of the British passenger ship of the Cunard Line, the S.S. Lusitania, which was struck by a German submarine on May 7th 1915 with the loss of nearly twelve-hundred lives. The opening line of 'Lusitania' heralds a dramatic piece of patriotism:

Chaos! that coincides with this militant purpose.

The emphatic word 'Chaos!' opens each of the first three lines but there is none of that precise visual quality which haunts Rosenberg's account of the channel crossing which took him to France a year later. There the contorted figures could well be an anticipatory glimpse of life in the trenches and the 'queerly huddled' figures which 'twist' present us with the angularity of the Vorticists. These few lines suggest the preoccupations of some of Rosenberg's later and more famous poems, 'Louse Hunting' and 'Dead Man's Dump', poems which Jean Moorcroft Wilson referred to as dealing with 'the grotesque underbelly of life.' However, it was one of Rosenberg's earliest critics, D.W. Harding, who

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noted in his 1935 essay in *Scrutiny* that this poet tried to see in war 'a significance for life as such, rather than seeing only its convulsion of the human life he knew.'

Involved and detached

In the introduction to her biography of Rosenberg, Jean Moorcroft Wilson accounts for the impact of his poetry by suggesting that he is able to appear 'both involved and detached at the same time.' This is a very acute point and she goes on to relate it in particular to one of Rosenberg's most famous poems, 'Break of Day in the Trenches', in which the poet 'explores one of the central themes of the war, the indifference of Nature to distinctions of nationality'. Written in July 1916 the final version of this poem was published in Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* magazine in December and it is significant that this American magazine also published Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' as well as sections of Ezra Pound's 'Homage to Sextus Propertius' suggesting how Rosenberg's work is different in tone from many other British poets of the First World War.

The poem opens with a dawn that is not limited to one particular morning in the trenches but which suggests a perspective within which the whole catastrophe of warfare is taking place:

> 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.
> Now you have touched this English hand
> You will do the same to a German
> Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure
> To cross the sleeping green between.

When D.W. Harding wrote about Rosenberg's poetry in *Scrutiny* he recognised that '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.' This ironic glimpse at the world of the aubade where the separating lovers are replaced by the only live things in the scene, the poet and the rat, has a visual particularity that is immediately striking. The darkness does not fade into the light of day but 'crumbles away' as though it possesses a solidity which is tangible and is commensurate with a parapet of stone. The perspective here is of centuries and the very use of the word 'parapet', traceable back to the Italian of *parare* and *petto* (to defend the breast), places us in an historical context in which Time's presence hints at a Druidic past. The reference to Druids is not just placing this dawn in the trenches of 1915 in Northern France but hints at primitive rites which still inform the apparently civilized world of the twentieth century. In keeping with this sense of historical continuity, a palimpsest in which the past appears slowly emerging from the present as the dawn 'crumbles away', the rat has his forbears with the worms that eat the body of Polonius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. When the Prince is asked concerning the whereabouts of the murdered counsellor in the play he replies that 'A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him':

> Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes but to one table. That's the end.

Harding places it clearly by suggesting that for Isaac 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.' The rats that feed upon the dead bodies of soldiers make no fine distinction between the colour of a uniform or the ideological positions of nations. Instead they may well 'inwardly grin' as they pass 'Strong eyes,

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fine limbs, haughty athletes' whose life expectancy at the Front will be 'less chanced than you for life.' The soldiers are, instead,

> Bonds to the whims of murder,
> Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
> The torn fields of France.

Rosenberg's awareness of the reality of trench life was made quite clear when, at about the same time as the composition of this poem, he wrote to his friend Miss Seaton about his arrival in France in June 1916:

> We made straight for the trenches, but we've had vile weather, and I've been wet through for four days and nights. I lost all my socks and things before I left England, and hadn't the chance to make it up again, so I've been in trouble, particularly with bad heels; you can't have the slightest conception of what such an apparently trivial thing means. We've had shells bursting two yards off, bullets whizzing all over the show, but all you are aware of is the agony of your heels…

In another letter written in June, to Mrs Cohen, Rosenberg says that he doesn't care for Rupert Brooke's 'begloried sonnets' and has little time for the commonplace poetic outpourings as published in *The Poetry Review* where second hand phrases such as 'lambent fires' take away from poetry 'its reality and strength'. For him poetry 'should be approached in a colder way, more abstract, with less of the million feelings everybody feels'. As he put it in a letter from the same month to Gordon Bottomley

> Simple poetry—that is 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.

'the intelligent understanding of what is essential'

In a letter to Edward Marsh, postmarked 8th May 1917, Rosenberg gave a brief account of his work with the Royal Engineers to whom he had recently been transferred:

> We are camping in the woods now and are living great. My feet are almost healed now and my list of complaints has dwindled down to almost invisibility. I've written some lines suggested by going out wiring, or rather carrying wire up the line on limbers and running over dead bodies lying about.

Some three weeks later he wrote to Gordon Bottomley informing him that he was now with the Royal Engineers wiring up the line at night.

> We took a village & the R.E.s did all the wiring & some digging in front of it. I wrote a poem about some dead Germans lying in a sunken road where we dumped our wire.

The visual opening of 'Dead Man's Dump' with its bristling angularity transforms a scene of macabre desolation into something more than a diary record of mundane horror. As Charles Tomlinson suggested, Rosenberg is aware of waste, just as Wilfred Owen was, 'but unlike Owen, he can go on to contemplate a further possibility than waste in war—the possibility of that living effort called forth by it.'

> The lunging limbers over the shattered track
> Racketed with their rusty freight,
> Stuck out like many crowns of thorns,
> And the rusty stakes like sceptres old
> To stay the flood of brutish men
> Upon our brothers dear.

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The wheels lurched over sprawled dead
But pained them not, though their bones crunched,
Their shut mouths made no moan,
They lie huddled, friend and foeman,
Man born of man, and born of woman,
And shells go crying over them
From night till night and now.

The scene in which the limbers, the detachable forepart of gun carriages used for the transport of barbed wire and metal stakes, plunge over shattered track calls up a medieval scene from Hieronymous Bosch. The stark and sharply outlined quality of this painting in words is emphasised not only by the sounds ('track', 'racketed', 'freight', 'stuck') but also by the accumulation of imagery with its suggestions of faith and torture: a crown of thorns, 'rusty stakes', sceptres. The mythical darkness of the picture is further suggested by the image of the metal stakes being used to hold back a surge of water, 'the flood of brutish men'. In an intricate and coherent way this image of a sea is taken up at the end of the second stanza in which the shells 'go crying over them' in the monotonous repetition of the cries of gulls.

The fourth and fifth stanzas move us to look at this carnage in a more philosophical way:

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.
Who hurled them out? Who hurled?

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.

The picture of Earth swallowing up the souls has a classical background as they disappear into the underground leaving just the empty bodies left above. To register Rosenberg's audacity and disdain, his critical response to carnage, it would be worth comparing this image with George Herbert's 'Death' where 'After the losse of life and sense' the 'shells of fledge souls' are 'left behinde'. In Rosenberg's poem the emptied body is a 'sack' which has been 'flung' onto the earth's 'hard back'. This is 'Dead Man's Dump' with all its connotations of waste material. The soundless movement of life's escape from a shattered body is powerfully conveyed in the lack of response from the natural world; there is no shaking of the grass to register the soul's passing into the underworld and yet the understatement of what is lost in such wasteful ways is caught acutely with the reference to 'half used life'.

The poet then contemplates his luck at being still alive and sees it in these same classical terms by using the idea of 'ichor', the blood of the Gods which constituted their immortality: this is conditional: 'as on ichor fed' or 'Immortal seeming ever?' The seventh and eighth stanzas return us to the brutal reality of the world:

The air is loud with death,
The dark air spurts with fire
The explosions ceaseless are.
Timelessly now, some minutes past,
These dead strode time with vigorous life,
Till the shrapnel called 'an end!'
But not to all. In bleeding pangs

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> Some borne on stretchers dreamed of home,
> Dear things, war-blotted from their hearts.
>
> A man's brains splattered on
> A stretcher-bearer's face;
> His shook shoulders slipped their load,
> But when they bent to look again
> The drowning soul was sunk too deep
> For human tenderness.

The juxtaposition of the seeming timelessness of being alive with the clock's record of 'some minutes past' catches that movement between the subjective and the objective: the inside of feeling and the outside of shrapnel's intrusion. As a man dies on a stretcher the image of the flood returns as the soul sinks to leave more detritus, 'great sunk silences', which the next stanza presents to us. To complete the nightmare of this fantastic scene from Hell the last two stanzas refer to a man whose dying cries can be heard 'as the tide of the world broke over his sight.'

Isaac Rosenberg believed in clarity and as he wrote in the lecture on Art from the summer of 1914

> Can I read it? Is it clear, concise, definite? It cannot be too harsh for me. The lines must cut into my consciousness; the waves of life must be disturbed, sharp, and unhesitating. It is nature's consent, her agreement that what we can wrest from her we keep. Truth, structural veracity, clearness of thought and utterance, the intelligent understanding of what is essential'

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