Isaac Rosenberg: Man, Poet and Soldier

Assist. Lecturer Ra'ad K. Abd-Aun,
College of Education,

AbstractThis paper attempts to examine the poetic career, though short, of Isaac Rosenberg through selected poetic works. It is hoped that the poems selected would reflect the different facets of his poetry as a man, a poet, and a soldier.

I

Isaac Rosenberg was born in Bristol on 25 November 1890. His father was both well-cultured and well-read who left Lithuania to Moscow in search of work. Finding himself liable to be called for military service, he immigrated to England in 1887 or 1888, settling in Yorkshire and then Bristol. Nine years later he moved to East End of London. The Rosenbergs life was mainly a life of poverty which left its mark on Isaac's life, and more especially on his development as a creative artist (Parsons xv).

Rosenberg was, as Robert Graves quickly saw, 'a born revolutionary'. His work was imaginative and occupied with the struggle to give expression to the intangible. However, Rosenberg himself saw that his poetry was difficult to grasp. He wrote to Sydney Schiff in June 1915 saying that 'most people find [my poems] difficult'[1] (ibid. xvi, xvii, 216). But later on in a letter to Gordon Bottomley towards the end of July 1916, he wrote, '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.' (Ibid. xvii, 238) But the difficulties and complexities sprang neither from confusion of thought nor any lack of the means of expression. His poems were the product of 'an extraordinary compression of language … and of his own particular and highly individual vision' (ibid. xviii). Despite all the influences of other poets on him (poets like Swinburne, Hardy, Keats and Rossetti), Rosenberg was finding his own idiom producing poems that are 'essentially *sui generis*' (ibid. xix).

II

Rosenberg is considered a war poet. However, before he enlisted at the end on October 1915 (ibid. xiii) he wrote a number of poems which did not deal with war as a main theme.

In 'The Poet' (1912), Rosenberg discusses the poet and the poet's lot. The poet is a man who has 'The trouble of the universe […] on his wonder travelled eyes.' This poet is troubled and feels that the 'starry quest' and that the 'spirit's wistful sacrifice' are 'vain'. It is interesting how Rosenberg achieves the utmost of language with a simple choice of words: the 'quest' is romanticized and is equated with the medieval chivalrous quests with a single adjective, 'starry'.

[1] All quotations from and references to Rosenberg's poems, prose works, letters and paintings are from Isaac Rosenberg, *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, Ian Parsons (ed.) (London: Chatto and Windus, 1979).

This poet's bliss seems, ironically, to be his curse: 'For though the glory of the heavens celestially in glimpses seen/Illumines his rapt gazing,' although he is endowed with the vision and sensibility to see the 'glory of the heavens', even though in 'glimpses', yet his too sensible faculties 'shut him in'. The poet, despite all his seer-like faculties, turns into an introvert because he is too sensible to put up with the world. 'No fellowship of suffering to meet his tear bewildered ways,/Alone he bears the burden of alienated days.' His introversion, alienation, is intensified by the fact that there is no one to share his sadness. But is it really the absence of sad people to share sadness with, or is it the fact that he shuts himself in? Again, Rosenberg achieves the utmost of language by the unusual modification of 'ways' with 'tear bewildered'. The reader naturally expects to read 'eyes' after ' tear bewildered', but the poet surprises the reader with an unusual use of language projecting the poet's bewilderment onto the way he travels. The same effect is achieved with 'alienated days'. The 'days' are not alienated but the poet is. The poet is too noble a creature for earth because he is 'part of paradise' and what alienates him is that all the weight of 'earth's wrongs' is there to press him.

This poet has betrayed himself because he believes that 'the earth [is] a path of heaven' and 'too late [knows] himself bereaven'. He was lost because 'Himself he has himself betrayed': his vision is a double-edged sword – it secured a clear insight into and made him blind to 'earth's wrongs'. He was 'swiftly sin and suffering and earth-born laughter meshed his ways/And caught him in a cage of earth'. Like a bird, he was caged, and like a bird he can sing despite the bars that enclose him: 'but heaven can hear his dewy lays.' Again, Rosenberg secured the utmost effect of language through the simplest of words by using 'dewy' to modify 'lays': the poet's songs are fresh and full of life like an early morning dew. And like an early morning dew, his songs are short lived. The beauty and transiency of the poet's captive songs are beautifully stressed by the simple, albeit subtle, use of words. This poem is Rosenberg's comment on, perhaps his definition of, the poet.

While this poem analyzes the poet and his dilemma, the other poem, also entitled 'The Poet', focuses on the poet's ability to create the refined from the base and quicken the dead: 'He takes the glory from the gold/For consecration of the mould'. The poet's mentality and words are divine because he 'dips' them 'In amber that the seraphim/ have held for him and hold.'

The world of the common men is dead because those people themselves 'are dead.' However, when the poet speaks,

> The dead world's shed
> Strange winds, new skies and rivers flow
> Illumined from the hill.

His words bring live to the world like Shelley's West Wind, although this poet does not destroy because the world is already dead. Those two poems can be equated with Wordsworth's and Shelley's definitions of the poet.

Lyrical and religious themes are also present in Rosenberg's poetry. 'Wedded' is a short lyric about unfulfilled love. The lovers have left 'their love-lorn haunts' and 'Their sigh-warm floating Eden'. Ironically for the lovers, love has

abandoned their ‘haunts’ and their Eden is warmed with sighs. They are muted with their separation, aware of their mortality, and are chided with the kisses they used to exchange.

Yet those two lovers have experienced love others did not, and have grown mutually as if their spirits were entwined. Heaven and love have grown and fell of their hands and tresses:

But they have kist and known
Clear things we dim by guesses –
Spirit to spirit grown –
Heaven, born in hand caresses -
Love, fall from sheltering tresses.

Those lovers are ‘dumb and strange’ like ‘Bared trees from each other.’ They are lifeless in that they are loveless. They are ‘Dead, strayed, to love-stranged lover.’ In other words, those two are beyond hope of recovering their lost love. The mood of the other poem entitled ‘Wedded’ is a sharp contrast to the gloominess and despair of the first one.

The poem pictures two lovers in a moment of passionate love. They are ‘knotted’ like the ‘moment that untwists/Into the narrow laws of love’. Their fingers ‘stray’ over their ‘blushing’ bodies. However, the poet moves to the spiritual aspect of love having tackled the physical. The lovers are ‘two twin moods’, ‘Two spirits of one engendered thought.’ The unity and likeness of the lovers is emphasized by the use of ‘twin’ and ‘ one engendered thought.’ Their hands released ‘everywhere/Kindness’. Those two poems show Rosenberg as a poet capable of writing love poems of varying moods.

Another subject Rosenberg dealt with in his poems is the Old Testament inheritance. ‘The Burning of the Temple’ and ‘The Destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian Hordes’ deal with two distinct incidents in the Hebrew History.

In ‘The Burning of the Temple’, Rosenberg resorts to the pictorial effect of a language that is elliptical. In the first stanza he invokes the wrath of Solomon who erected the temple. The poet does not go into details to describe the burning temple, but beautifully captures the destructive fire by picturing its reflection in the sky: ‘O look at the red skies.’ In one line the poet evoked both the image of the fire and the intense emotions of the speaker viewing the fire.

The second stanza elaborates on the image of the fire presented in the first stanza: ‘Or hath the sun plunged down’. The destruction of the temple, and the melting of the famous golden pillars is another death for king Solomon: ‘Again the great king dies.’

All the king’s dreams and accomplishments represented by this temple are destroyed ‘as the burnt grass/Gone as his mouth’s last sigh.’ In ‘The Destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian Hordes’, the style is more narrative and straight forward. Babylon is left empty of men and horses and the Babylonians are heading towards Lebanon.

Hebrew girls forget their ‘wiles they used for Solomon’ and the ‘Sweet laughter!’ after captivity. Their laughter is ‘charred in the flame/that clutched the cloud and earth’. The poem celebrates a moment in the Hebrew history in a straight forward style and, along with ‘The Burning of the Temple’ shows Rosenberg’s various interests. Both poems were composed in 1918.

III

Rosenberg’s poetry ‘records … a constant struggle and wrestling with ideas, images, and ideas.’ (Das 89) His affinities are with the Metaphysicals: he carried a book of Donne’s poems with him to the war (ibid. 90). This is very clear in his poem ‘Break of Day in the Trenches’ (1916). He uses the same device Donne employs in ‘The Flea’: Donne tells his lady that the flea sucked blood from both of them and their blood mingled inside the little insect. Thus, their blood is united uniting them not only physically, but also spiritually, because if she, the lady, kills it she will kill both the poet and herself. Rosenberg’s medium of achieving this unity, though the subjects to be united are not lovers, but soldiers, is a rat.

The rat touches the English soldier’s hand and then will cross No Man’s Land to touch a German soldier’s hand. ‘Free from the political and nationalistic ambitions that have put the Englishman and the German at war, the lowly rat, has a better chance of survival than the two athletic, fine-limbed men’ (Glancy 264):

> It seems you inwardly grin as you pass
> Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,
> Less chanced than you for life,
> Bonds to the whims of murder,
> Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
> The torn fields of France.

The stupidity of the conflict is highlighted by the rat’s failure to distinguish between the men in the two camps and the gulf of war that separates them (ibid..) This selfsame rat is not safe: if his ‘cosmopolitan sympathies’ are known by either part, it would be shot: ‘Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew/Your cosmopolitan sympathies.’ The poet uses the pronoun ‘they’ and, glibly, he includes both the English and the German.

The poem then moves to another natural object that has become a symbol for WWI: the poppy.

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

The soldier puts a poppy behind his ear at the beginning of the poem and at the end he thinks he has saved it from destruction. But both poppy and soldier are doomed to die (ibid..): the poppy drinks off dead men’s veins and are dropping dead. The soldier putting one behind his ear is symbolically becoming one that will fall eventually even if he is only a little covered with the dust of the trench and battle. But this is not only

the fate of the Englishman. The rat which touched his hand and crossed to touch a German's has also transferred the doom across the battlefield.

In 'Returning, We Hear the Larks' (1917), Rosenberg uses the lark, a poetic symbol used by poets to emphasize their freedom from the 'bonds of earth and mortality' through song (ibid.). The poem begins with the image of the danger lurking in the night, threatening the lives of the 'anguished' soldiers:

> Somber the night is.
> And though we have our lives, we know
> What sinister threat lurks there.

The soldiers return fatigued to their camp following a death-laden, 'poison-blasted', track only to have 'a little safe sleep':

> Dragging these anguished limbs, we only know
> This poison-blasted track opens on our camp –
> On a little safe sleep.

The brevity of the rest is emphasized by two elements: the hyphen at the end of the second line and the short third line itself which contrasts the length of the previous two.

On their way back, the soldiers hear the rapturous song of the lark breaking the silence of the night:

> But hark! joy – joy – strange joy.
> Lo! heights of night ringing with unseen larks.
> Music showering our upturned list'ning faces.

The soldiers can only hear the larks because they are moving in a trench. The song creates rapture in the soldiers which Rosenberg skillfully delineates with the repetition of 'joy'.

However, the joy does not last long because the 'sinister threat lurks there':

> Death could drop from the dark
> As easily as song –

The song does not herald freedom and inspiration, because, however joyful, death could easily drop on those soldiers from the night sky (ibid.). Two images close the poem and elaborate the close connection between joy and death in the world of the soldiers:

> But song only dropped,
> 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,
> Or her kisses where a serpent hides.

A blind man sleeps unaware of the dangerous tide, and a girl is unaware of the lurking serpent. The similes develop the combination of beauty and menace (Das 95).

This poem is connected to another non-poetical work by Rosenberg, namely, his painting 'Hark, Hark, the Lark' (1912) (see page 12). In his essay 'The

Pre-Raphaelites and Imagination in Paint', Rosenberg notes: 'Poetry and music achieve that end [of beauty] through the intellect and the ear; painting and sculpture through the eye.' (298) His war poem clearly draws on his painting. In the painting, we see a number of seemingly 'primitive' figures—gaunt, elongated—listening with 'upturned . . . faces'. The poem, however, opens with pitch darkness as Rosenberg goes on instead to create one of the most haunting soundscapes in English poetry. The repetitive incantation creates its own strange music, gathering the word, like the lark's song, into the spell of the sensuous. The word 'upturned' showing the poem's residual links with the painting (Das 94-5). This serves to show the prolificacy of Rosenberg.

'Louse Hunting' (1917) sparkles with a shrewd ironic wit — something rare in First World War poetry — creating a certain frisson with the grimness of the subjects, and unsettling any stable response from the reader. Behind the poem, one can detect echoes of Donne's 'The Flea': the killing of the flea gets brilliantly transposed into the ritual of delousing as Donne's conceit of 'self-murder' is invested with an immediate and ominous significance (ibid.. 95).

In 'Louse Hunting', a daily trench activity is turned into a grotesque pageant: 'Nudes—stark and glistening,/Yelling with lurid glee'. These statuesque figures are soon evolved into a phantasmagoria of movement and action, but we see only their projection on the walls of the dug-out (ibid.. 96):

Then we all sprang up and stript
To hunt the verminous brood.
Soon like a demons' pantomime
The place was raging.
See the silhouettes agape,
See the gibbering shadows
Mixed with the battled arms on the wall.
See gargantuan hooked fingers
Dug in supreme flesh
To smutch the supreme littleness.

The exaggerated theatricality of the scene pushes it towards the mock-heroic, infecting the grotesque with humour and endangering our relation to the grimness of the situation. While the poem is predominantly visual, the magnification lends it almost a tactile quality, the bodies evoked by words such as 'flesh', 'fingers', 'hooked', 'pluck', and 'smutch'. Through size and projection, a daily trench ritual becomes an exposure of the murderous impulses of the soldiers (ibid.. 97).

'Dead Man's Dump' (1917) inhabits most fully the geography of the trenches – flames, corpses, explosions – but develops it into a profound questioning of the relation between the living and the dead (Das 97). In a letter to Marsh dated 8 May 1917, Rosenberg writes: '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.' (254) As the poem opens, 'the wheels lurched over the sprawled dead'. The emotional shock produced by what Silkin calls 'the painful, exact word' (282) is, however, evolved into a problem of consciousness: 'But pained them not, though their bones crunched'. Similarly, later, we have the image of a man's brains 'splattered on/A

stretcher bearer's face', the shudder suggested through a single detail – 'His shook shoulders slipped the load' – but almost immediately the realism gets coupled with a sense of spiritual desolation: 'The drowning soul was sunk too deep/For human tenderness.' How can souls 'drown' any more than silences 'sink' or wars 'blot' or hearing 'darken'? What the adjectival and adverbial phrases in 'Dead Man's Dump' do – which is where the power of Rosenberg's verse lies – is to yoke together realism and metaphor, sense and symbol. Consider the penultimate stanza of the poem, where the focus narrows to the perspective of a dying soldier (Das 98):

> 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
> Swift for the end to break,
> Or the wheels to break,
> Cried as the tide of the world broke over his sight.

Here, as in Owen's 'Futility', is a soldier 'full-nerved, still warm', but it is not the moment of pain that attracts Rosenberg; nor does he use a language of desire. Instead, he delves into the perceptual and spiritual world as the soldier struggles between life and death. In narrative terms, the poem comes full circle with the reappearance of the limber, but the 'dark hearing' hints, beyond the distance of the wheels, at lyric closure, at a world fast closing over both sound and sight. The physical and the metaphysical are joined in the image of the 'choked soul' stretching 'weak hands/To reach the living word the far wheels said'. The image of the soul refers back to the previous description of the dead body as 'soul's sack/Emptied of God-ancestralled essences', pointing to the Hebraic sensibility, and with it comes the urgency of the question: 'Who hurled them out? Who hurled?' The sense of being hurled out – of being cast away – is powerful and personal: Rosenberg, the isolated Jewish infantryman, re-enacts the condition of his race in being hurled out as were his ancestors repeatedly in European history (ibid.).

The last two poems I will consider are 'Soldier: Twentieth Century' and 'Girl to Soldier on Leave' (both 1917). Silkin argues that both poems deal with the effect of war on human sexuality. The first poem, he argues, recreates the phenomenon where women suddenly found the soldier desirable, regardless of his personal quality (294). The poem begins:

> I love you, great new Titan!
> Am I not you?
> Napoleon and Caesar
> Out of you grew.

What seems to attract women is the heroic dimensions, Titanic, which the war and the soldier's actions in it provided (ibid.).

What the woman offers him is an emotional reward, touching the soldier's ego with an image of his own 'predatoriness' (sic) which is desirable: 'Cruel men are

made immortal/Out of your pain born'. However, the soldier bears pain heroically permitting a race of immortal cruel men to be born (ibid.). The soldier himself is

> Out of unthinkable torture,
> Eyes kissed by death,
> Won back to the world again,
> Lost and won in a breath.

The greatness of the soldier will make others 'shrink' beside him even when he falls asleep like 'Circe's swine/Or a word in the brain's ways', i.e., when he is dead. Rosenberg qualifies the women's distorted image of the soldiers, an image stimulated by the aura of power they envision is the first stanza, with his awareness of their suffering (ibid. 295).

The second poem, 'Girl to Soldier on Leave', is similar in theme, imagery and language to the first, 'Soldier: Twentieth Century': here the woman measures her love by the suffering the soldier can endure, and again what lures her is his 'predatoriness' (sic):

> I love you – Titan lover,
> My own storm days' Titan.
> Greater than the son of Zeus,
> I know who I would chose.

Before this Titan, Prometheus 'Wanes like a ghost' and 'His pangs were joys to yours.' The greater the woman's Titan suffers, the more she loves him.

When the soldier was not fighting, and in this following (second) stanza Rosenberg draws from his Hebrew heritage, when the Jews were captives in Babylon, he was (the verses continue to the third stanza) 'a word in the brain's ways,/Or the sleep of Circe's swine': not worthy of her love.

But now, as he is held in a last 'gyve', which is the battle of Somme, she will love him. The problem is that if that 'gyve' loosens now, this means she would lose him: he would die because he has 'tempted the grave too much'. She wishes that he were 'bound with the old old gyves' that held Prometheus, unsatisfactory for her as they are ('His pangs were joys to yours). She knows that he will die because his eyes/Have looked through death at mine'. Finally, she is left with sadness only: 'I let you – I repine.'

The similarities in theme, imagery and language emphasize not only the distorted image of the soldier, but also the change that befalls her. She realizes that 'Cruel men' are NOT 'immortal'. The tone of resolution in the first half of the last line in the poem – 'I let you' – is undermined by the sadness expressed by the second half – 'I repine.' The shortness of the line in comparison to the previous ones serves to emphasize the depth and profundity of the woman's genuine realization of her distorted image of the soldier.

IV

From the discussion of the poems above, it is obvious that Rosenberg, despite his short career, is a versatile poet. His mastery of the language he uses,

despite the fact that he did not receive the same formal education the other officer-poets of his generation received – he says, ‘nobody ever told me what to read, or ever put poetry in my way’ (181) – tells of a born poet. And were he destined to outlive the war, he would have become a poet as important as those who heralded the new poetry of the modern age.

Hark, Hark, the Lark. Charcoal and monochrome wash. 1912

Works Cited:

Das, Santanu, 'War Poetry and the Realm of the Senses' in Tin Kendall (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*. Oxford: OUP, 2007, pp.73-99. (eBook)

Glancy, Ruth. *Thematic Guide to British Poetry*. West Port, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002. (eBook)

Silkin, Jon. *Out of Battle: the Poetry of the Great War*. London: OUP, 1972.

Parsons, Ian, 'Introduction' in Isaac Rosenberg. *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*. Ian Parsons (ed.) London: Chatto and Windus, 1979, pp.xv-xxvii.

Rosenberg, Isaac. *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*. Ed. Ian Parsons. London: Chatto and Windus, 1979.