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LUBLSKIE MATERIAŁY NEOFILOLOGICZNE — 1982

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Isaac Rosenberg's "Dead Man's Dump"
Attempt at Interpretation

Isaac Rosenberg — one of the most outstanding poets of the Great War — was born in Bristol on the 25th of November in 1890. He was distinguished from other war poets not only by his Jewish origin and his working class background but above all, by the nature of his poetic talent. Although extreme poverty precluded Rosenberg from obtaining a good and thorough education it seems evident that it contributed richly to his deep understanding of human misery.

As early as 1912 Rosenberg published, at his own expense, "a small pamphlet of poems" entitled Night and Day. Ian Parsons described them marking that "written in a variety of meters and rhyme schemes, they have in common a peculiar freshness of outlook, and originality of conception and imagery and a command of metaphor that would be remarkable in a much older man".¹

When in 1915 Rosenberg embarked on his most ambitious work, his verse play Moses he was at the same time engrossed in preparation of his second small collection of poems — Youth privately printed that year. Only a year later Moses appeared in print. By that time, however, Rosenberg was already in the Army which he joined against his religion merely to improve the financial situation of his family. Himself a Jew — he hated war and was wholeheartedly against it. In a letter of December 1915 he wrote "I never joined the Army from patriotic reasons. Nothing can justify war. I suppose we must all fight now to get the trouble over."²

According to Siegfried Sassoon Rosenberg was not consciously a "war poet", yet precisely in the years 1916-17 he wrote his best works — among them Break of Day in the Trenches, Returning, We

Hear the larks, and the superlative Dead Man's Dump - which increasingly reflect his changed circumstances and surroundings. Thus he created a unique document of his trench and camp experiences, only to be published posthumously as Trench Poems - in which, to quote Prof. Harding's words "he tried to feel in the war a significance of life as such, rather than seeing only its convulsion of the human life he knew".³ It seems that Rosenberg's only peer is Wilfred Owen. "Like Owen Rosenberg saw very clearly the horrific nature of the war in which they were both caught up, and the extent of the sacrifice that was to be incurred. But the bitter indignation that chastened and restrained by pity, is a dominant characteristic of Owen's war poems, has no place in Rosenberg's. In some extraordinary way, he managed to detach himself emotionally from the terrible things going on all round him, to expose himself to them, and to record them minutely and objectively, and then to transmute them into poetry of the highest imaginative quality, set in a much broader context than his own personal plight."⁴

According to Bernard Bergonzi - "Rosenberg's death in action almost at the end of First World War /1.04.1918/ deprived English poetry of one of this century's most talented and gifted artists".⁵ It has already been mentioned that Dead Man's Dump is Rosenberg's finest poem and "his most complete crystallization of his war experience."⁶ A. Alvarez described by as "the greatest poem by an Englishman to have been produced by the war."⁷ It has as its theme an exploration of death "which comes quickly enough to be regarded as a single living experience."⁸

Superlative as the poem is, it is at the same time a very complex and difficult one so that even after several readings the reader is left with a sense of vagueness, confusion and obscurity. Therefore it is my intention to present what I consider a key to a better understanding of this poem, namely an analysis of the continuous shifts in perspective of the speaker in respect to the world of experiences he creates.

The poem opens with a panoramic view of the battle-field after the battle - hence the track is shattered, raked with the "rusty freight" of the limbers - carriages for ammunition and equipment. But already line 3 takes the reader beyond the reality of the track, and with the biblical allusion to Christ's martyrdom multiplied / many crowns of thorns/ it creates a wider, almost diachronic context of suffering which described in terms of

of such images as "rusty stakes", "recepter old" and "the flood" turn out to be fruitless and futile.

It is obvious that the speaker, although an inseparable part of the created world, presents it from a certain distance. He seems to be close enough to depict the essential elements of the view he displays, and at the same time, owing to his use of symbols and metaphors, he shifts his perspective both in space and time. The universalization thus produced appears to influence the change of his emotional response to the tragedy of war which is understood not only as the bloodshed of his comrades from the battle-field but also as the sacrifice of others involved in "the flood". These shifts in the axes of emotion, distance and time, superimposed on one another result in the heterogeneity of the speaker, whom they change accordingly from a participant in into a mere observer of the reality, and who, although involved, firmly withholds any direct comment concerning his experiences.

Stanza 2 delimits the frame of perception of the speaker to the wheels shown in the process of crushing human bodies. Here the distance to the presented world manifests itself in the speaker's attitude towards the dead. He sees them, unlike the wheels, as if from far away - which to some extent explains why he waits to hear their scream of pain. However, he soon realizes that "their shut mouths made no moan" /CP, p. 109/ - which shows that now he must be very close to them otherwise he would not be able to see their mouths. And only in this moment, taking the ominous silence as a proof of their death, he seems to recognize in those people merely dead bodies which can no longer be harmed.

The treatment of death in this stanza is very specific. The speaker, as if not wanting to accept death as a fact, escapes from it only to experience it more fully a moment later. Yet, this moment, this instance of time, is enough for him to negate death, to change the dead bodies into the living ones. However, since death is irreversible, and one cannot escape it, the rushing wheels destroy his illusion of the momentarily prolonged human existence.

The vision of the bodies dying as if for the second time fades away to give place to another panoramic view of the landscape of destruction presented again from a different perspective. The use of present tense marks the speaker's shift from his illusions / which now belong to the past/ to the reality of war which he returns to very conscious of death. No wonder that he sees earth as a grave of both "friend and foe" who "lie there huddled

And shells go crying over them
From night till night and now." /CP,p.109/
The battle is over and yet the dynamism of explosions seems to
make it continue all the time, demanding more and more lives. Once
more a sense of repetitiveness and simultaneity of death is
achieved, this time by the image of shells whose "crying" is the
ironical farewell/or maybe welcome/ of the dead.

After the gradual downward shift of the speaker's perception on
the axis top-bottom, having focused his attention first on the
limbers, then on the wheels, the speaker finally reaches earth,
-the realm of death. This physical shift towards the world of the
dead generates the mental change noticeable in the speaker's
personality. No longer is he heterogeneous. His whole mind seems to
be preoccupied with the problems he tries to solve: why did so
many people have to die, what did they feel while dying, and finally,
what will happen to them now that they are dead?

As if entering the consciousness of earth itself he presents its
greediness. "Dr Young lives, its anxiety in waiting for them" all
the time of their growth" /CP,p.110/, its fastidiousness in choosing
the strongest ones and its finality since they have to stay in it
"Suspended -stopped and held" /CP,p.110/.

The attitude taken up in these stanzas 3-4 seems to be the first
full and direct characterization of the speaker as a man. They point
to the depth of his insight and express bitterness of his perception
of the sacrifice of human life. This perception leads up to
visualisation in the 4th stanza of the actual drama of people in the
moment of losing their souls and culminates in the dramatic protest:
"Who hurled them out? Who hurled?" /CP,p.110/

However, this rare moment of real emotional involvement stops
abruptly as if the speaker, suddenly ashamed or afraid that he has
said too much, wanted to escape into the impersonal again. Therefore
ophs return to the problem of death and the life after death, he
refers to the experiences and the knowledge of others, as well as
to the trench myths about the spirits of the dead visiting and
talking to the living. This mythic bias constitutes the imaginary
distance from which he sees death as "the swift iron burning bee"
/CP,p.110/. Even the pseudo-romantic context of death evoked by
the bee's swiftness and lightness cannot outweigh its
determination to kill. Thus the myth expressed in too realistic
terms turns out to be false and as such loses its consolatory

Influence on the speaker who cannot forget about the reality of
the suffering. Just as the image of death presented as
the dynamic independent force are the people, who seen through the
mythical form, and struck by the change of perspective become
merely fragments "the doomed nostrils and the doomed mouth" /CP,
p.110/.

In stanza 6 the speaker shifts his attention from the dead to
those who survived, in order to present his conception of trench
immortality. He knows from others' and his own experiences / the use
of personal pronouns in plural -"we", "us" / that luck sometimes
creates the illusion of being protected from danger. Yet, he
proceeds to offer his theory which proves that immortality is
possible even without "luck". This conception is rooted in the
very realistic context of the battle-field, where the two main
features of man are blood and fear. Nevertheless, the claim is
made that a moment occurs when because of his fear man suddenly
becomes indifferent to everything around him. Yet, his fear is
still in him and since it is blocked /it gets choked/ it
startles the blood so that it cannot circulate. Thus the
evanescent sensation of internal immobility is achieved - a
paradoxical short-lived immortality caused by ...fear.

The gradual dynamization of the presented world / "the plunging
limbers..... stuck out", "shells go crying....from night till
night and now", "the swift iron burning bee drained" /
serves to illustrate the abrupt stop of some movement. Similarly
the speaker's perception is often shifted from a certain process
to some specific moment of this process - usually a moment of
dying, which, at the same time generates the shift from death as a
collective experience to an individual one. Considering this axis
of changes stanza 7 seems to be the transitional one due to its
focus on the wounded and those still alive who happen to be in the
middle of the battle-field, at the moment when the battle is still
being fought. This brief retrospective view of the epicentre of
death is possible due to the continual recurrence of explosions
which creates the illusion of timelessness. On its example we can
once more examine the speaker's shifts of perspective.

The sentence "timelessly now, some minutes past" /CP,p.110/
immediately projects the existence in the speaker's consciousness
of two different, though coexistent rather than contradictory,
points of view. One- of somebody who is alive - and for whom time
drags like eternity, and the other- of somebody dying- for whom
time is merely a matter of seconds. This specific relativism of

time at the moment of crisis can be seen as even more complex when one realises that timelessness may be a characteristic of the consciousness of those who are already dead, and the transitoriness of time may be ascribed to the living who suddenly become aware of time passing realising that the dead were also alive only some minutes, their whole lives ago. These points of view superimposed on one another evoke the impression of the simultaneity of the experience presented and they also illustrate the complexity of the speaker's approach to the reality represented by two levels of consciousness / of the dead and of the living / at the same time.

For a brief moment only the speaker pauses to describe the wounded who seem to be most human in this landscape of death. Not only do they feel pain but feel it strong enough to forget the horror of the battle-field, and their attention / together with the speaker's one / can be reverted to timelessness - to their homes and dreams.

Then another shift is marked - the theme of the wounded becomes transformed into the theme of the dead with particular emphasis on the instance of dying and the human response to it. The physicality, brutality and the momentariness of death is expressed in only one sentence, as if purposefully broken into two parts.

"A man's brain splattered on

A stretcher-bearer's face" / CP, p. 110 /

A man dies, and for another man it is impossible to guess when it happened, therefore his feeling of sympathy, if he is able to express it. At all, always comes too late. Concentrating so intensely on the stretcher-bearer's every single move the speaker tries to translate the imperceptible into the language of perceptibility, to catch the moment of dying and illustrate its rapidity and swiftness in respect to someone else's actions. At the same time, with the example of the stretcher-bearer who is nothing but shoulders we are presented with an incomplete man, lacking in the quality which seems to be essential for the dying - human tenderness.

Although this exceptional scene takes place in the middle of the battle-field it is, at the same time as if off the beaten track, and constitutes the speaker's last focus on the world of the living. The shift in his perception makes the reader follow the dead man on his last journey to the "cross roads", to the intersection of the human lots. However, although removed from the epicentre of death / the track / the speaker is still within the area of "dead

man's dump". By limiting his field of observation to this cemetery of people who seem to have lost their human identity / their "strange decay", immobility / the speaker also broadens it indicating that death exists everywhere and affects both man and nature / coloured clay /.

Then averting his eyes from this common grave he turns round to the battle-field where human bodies also lie. Repeating the distance trick / discussed in stanza 2 / he perceives them as not completely dead and focuses his attention on the individual. Entering the consciousness of somebody who is "not long dead" he creates a specific vision of events as seen from this man's point of view. Yet, the speaker is also the destroyer / as are those in stanza 5 who did not stand aside for the half used life to pass... / CP, p. 110 / . Identifying himself with the "far torturing wheels" / CP, p. 111 / he manages to penetrate the vision of the dead man, not only to show his feelings and expectations but also to demonstrate how and to that extent they are influenced by the implacable wheels moving on. Thus he registers the man's ability to hear the sounds of the wheels, his craving for life / which is also the speaker's craving for survival /, his realization that the wheels mean also people coming nearer to him, his hope that maybe they will be able to help him, and most dramatically his ignorance of the fact that they do not know that he is not yet dead / otherwise they would stop / . Apart from the physical pain the dying man also experiences the torture of uncertainty and guessing "Will they come? Will they ever come?" / CP, p. 111 /, and at this very moment the rushing wheels destroy him, and with him the speaker's vision of prolonged existence. The hoofs of mules mixed with the dead's "tortured upturned sight" / CP, p. 111 / create a clash of the two previously separated, and now conjoined points of view. For an instant of time the consciousness of the dead is fully transformed into the consciousness of the living, therefore the same experience is shared by both the victim and the destroyer - who can thus hear the dying man's very last symptom of his imaginary life.

The last line of the poem abruptly ends Rosenberg's study of death - finally shown as full and irreversible. It also constitutes the final shift in the speaker's perception of dead man's dump in its various aspects. Produced by the speaker at the very moment when his vision becomes reality, it sounds like a death certificate, yet, pronounced by a man aware of his guilt and his joint responsibility for what he was trying in such a complex way to

describe.

I am fully aware of the fact the analysis presented is far from being complete. It merely touches the problems most characteristic of the whole of Rosenberg's poetry. It briefly signals the alinear treatment of time as well as the complexity and multifunctionality of movement. It only sketches the specific portrait of man - the antihero rather than the courageous soldier, implying therefore that heroism somehow did not fit Rosenberg's conception of the reality. Moreover, it points out to the lack of the real boundaries in the spacious model of that reality. And finally, it has only been mentioned that the constant interaction of symbol and fact results in the dialectic treatment of the created world which shows how little this poem has in common with many didactic or propaganda-like poems so typical of the period of the war. Therefore, since this analysis is only one aspect and fragmentary it would be premature to draw satisfactory conclusions at this stage, some, however, suggest themselves.

1. It seems that the shifts of perspective of the speaker's perception of the created world can be said to be the organizing principle of the poem.

2. They function as a verisimilitude device generating - since the change of the speaker's perception seems to reflect rapid shifts on the battle-field. The realistic context thus produced makes it possible that the almost irrational experience of death rebelling against itself which is therefore very unnatural, becomes not only possible but acquires probability and credibility.

3. These shifts also constitute a means of achieving objectivity and impersonality. The multiplicity and simultaneity of the points of view involved in the presentation of the created world contributes to its complexity and to the universalization of the experience ascribed to this world. The changes of perspective allow the speaker to stay as if behind the images, symbols, myth, or events. As a result the reader, left without any direct comment or judgment expressing the speaker's attitude towards the reality he depicts, has to really study the poem to discover its meaning.

4. Apart from determining every single category of the poem the changes of perspective also emphasize the complexity and the depth of insight of the speaker himself, who is a combination of constantly changing points of view, and who, entering at the same

time various levels of consciousness, becomes as if omnipresent. However, his withheld judgments, implications and allusions seem to point out to the fact that maybe the specificity of his experience could be communicated only in this way, his real thoughts too bitter and too frightening to be presented unveiled.

NOTES

1. The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg /CP/, Chatto and Windus, London 1979, p. xlx
2. Ibid., p. 227
3. Bernard Bergonzi, Heroes 'Twilight, London 1965, p. 112
4. op. cit., p. xxvii
5. Bernard Bergonzi, Heroes 'Twilight, London 1965, p. 109
6. Ibid., p. 116
7. Ibid., p. 117
8. Ibid., p. 117

Streszczenie

Artykuł niniejszy jest próbą analizy wiersza Dead Man's Dump autorstwa I. Rosenberga pod kątem zmian dystansu, jaki przyjmuje podmiot liryczny w stosunku do kreowanego przez siebie świata.

Szczególne omówienie utworu wykazuje, iż ewolucje percepcji podmiotu lirycznego, które najogólniej określa zasada przechodzenia od generalizacji do konkretności, funkcjonują zarówno na osi czasu jak i przestrzeni. Ciągła interakcja symbolu i faktu, niwelująca granice konkretnej wojennej rzeczywistości, przetwarzana ją w uniwersalny kontekst ludzkiego cierpienia. Zmiany dystansu pojawiające się w opisie przedstawionego świata, widoczne są także w momentach "przekształcania" się podmiotu lirycznego na różne poziomy świadomości, kiedy to identyfikuje się on z umierającymi, martwymi, a nawet z elementami krajobrazu - ziemią- zachłannie czekającą na swe ofiary, czy też kołami wozów, które traktują ciała martwych. Inną jeszcze formą manipulowania dystansem jest przesuwanie uwagi podmiotu lirycznego z jakiegoś procesu na pewien jego wybrany moment, najczęściej moment uderzenia. Mieszanie niemożony czasem i przestrzenią, mogące przebiegać w wielu miejscach naraz, podmiot liryczny przekazuje swoje doświadczenie relacyjnie, mając je w wielu różnych punktów widzenia. On sam jest w tym obiektywnie i wieloaspektowo konstruowanym świecie jedynie. przedmiotem, który oprowadzając czytelnika po ziemi dotkniętej wojną, zmusza go nie tylko do zastanowienia, ale i do ostatecznej oceny wartości przeżyć, które opisał.

LUBLSKIE MATERIALY NEOFILOLOGICZNE — 1982

Jochen Klaus

Polenbezüge in der deutschen publikumswirksamen Literatur zu Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts

Seit den achtziger und beginnenden neunziger Jahren des 18. Jahrhunderts hätte sich die massenhafte Unterhaltungs- und Trivialliteratur als eigenständiger, fester Bestandteil im Ensemble der deutschen Literatur etabliert¹, damit eine Entwicklung beim Theater- und Lesepublikum einleitend, die sich in den ersten Jahrzehnten des 19. Jahrhunderts verstärkt fortsetzte. Veröffentlichungen aus diesem, bislang zu wenig beachteten Teilbereich der Literatur sollen im folgenden herangezogen werden, um die Kontinuität polnischer Motive und Bezüge in diesem Umfeld des deutschen Schrifttums zu belegen.

Die Untersuchung der Widerspiegelung polnischer Geschichte, Stoffe und Bezüge in der deutschen Literatur dieser Zeit wendet sich dabei einem Desiderat in der Literaturgeschichtsschreibung zu, denn seit der umtassenden, z. T. aber revisionsbedürftigen Arbeit des Wiener Bibliothekars R. F. Arnold, "Geschichte der deutschen Polenliteratur von den Anfängen bis 1800"², sind keine nennenswerten zusammenhängenden Darstellungen mehr erschienen.³ Erst in jüngster Zeit sind drei umfangreichere Untersuchungen zu diesem Komplex in der DDR vorgelegt worden.⁴

Nachfolgende Ausführungen wollen und können keine ausführlichen Kommentare und Analysen zu den genannten Autoren und Werken liefern; es geht vielmehr darum, die beachtliche Präsenz polnischer Bezüge⁵ bei einer spezifischen Literatur aufzuzeigen, die von einer vergleichsweise großen Leserschaft rezipiert worden ist und die damit objektiv - umgachtet ihrer ästhetischen Qualität - geeignet war, öffentliches Bewusstsein und Interesse an den Vorgängen im polnischen Nachbarland wachzuhalten.