

reconnait, moins il s'accepte. La prise de conscience vient à Gaston au moment où il n'ignore plus rien de ce qu'il était. Elle consiste à se rendre compte de deux visages de sa personnalité: l'un c'est son passé que les autres lui présentent, l'autre - l'image qu'il s'en est faite lui-même. Cette image correspond exactement à celle de la „pureté” de l'enfant qu'il croit être son véritable moi. Quand il refusera d'accepter le passé de Jacques Renaud, ce sera pour ne pas devenir autre qu'il ne s'est imaginé.

Dans toutes les pièces noires, la prise de conscience de sa personnalité est pour le héros, à la fois, celle du choix nécessaire entre les deux choses. Ce choix peut être réduit à celui entre le bonheur et la personnalité du héros.

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**Nature and War in the Trench Poems
of Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918)**

In August 1914, still in Cape Town, South Africa, Isaac Rosenberg wrote *On Receiving News of the War*, the first of his poems to enclose his vision of the world turned into a wasteland :

Snow is a strange white word;
No ice or frost
Have asked of bud or bird
For Winter's cost.

Yet ice and frost and snow
From earth to sky
This Summer land doth know,
No man knows why.

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

Red fangs have torn His face,
God's blood is shed.
He mourns from His lone place
His children dead.

O! ancient crimson curse!
Consume, consume,
Give back the universe

Its pristine bloom. (75)¹

Already this response to the Great War shows the significance of nature in the portrayal of the „winter of the world” which would dominate Rosenberg’s works of 1916-1918. War envisioned in the poem, very distant and not yet experienced, its horrors merely intuited, reveals its presence simultaneously as a linguistic fact and a natural phenomenon. Translated into a „strange white word”, war as „snow” violates the cycle of the old order in which both spring and summer are the seasons of bloom and fruition, the time of the triumph of life. Attacking in midsummer, hence unawares, and with a kiss so malign that it turns men’s lives „to a mould”, winter defies God, challenging His Word with its own, the redness of the fangs only too expressive of war’s destructive potential. Transforming life into suffering and death, winter itself becomes metamorphosed — as „ancient crimson curse”, it changes into a new, god-like ruler of the world, brutal and feared, yet one whose corrosive and regenerative powers give hope for another era of the earth’s „pristine bloom”.

Exposing the unnatural aspects of nature, Rosenberg cleverly communicates the complexities of the crisis, defining war whose numerous characteristics serve also to render his own very ambivalent attitude to it. This ambivalence is further emphasized through the paradoxical attributes of winter, no longer perceived as a season of the year obedient to the will of the Creator. Under its crimson banner, completely irreverent of human and divine dignity, this rebel-winter comes to arrest all life, playing for keeps, successful right after its first onslaught. Successful not only due to an element of surprise but also due to its ancient reliance on the instinctive, the primitive and the physical; also because it has managed to secure the interest and fascination of the speaker who, realizing God’s impotence, invokes the crimson curse for help in the positive transformation of the earth.

¹ All quotations of I. Rosenberg’s poems or prose pieces come from *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg: Poetry, Prose, Letters, Paintings and Drawings*, ed. with an Introduction and Notes by I. Parsons, London 1979.

Treating Rosenberg’s trench poems as a representation of the world of war, we shall now try to assess if the winter’s initial success will prove lasting two years later, with the relationship between nature and war depicted not from the point of view of a distant, uninvolved observer but from the standpoint of a soldier involved in active service in France. Which of the characteristics and roles of nature will he portray? Will it continue in its part of victor, or will it be ascribed also the role of victim? Will nature be rendered only vaguely, in generalized terms, or will it perhaps be dealt with greater concreteness, its specificity evident then in the existence of various creatures inhabiting and co-creating No Man’s Land? Finally, will nature remain simply the addressee in Rosenberg’s poems, or, will it find the power to attack the position of the speaker, determined to promote its own view, recorded in its own language?

While addressing these issues, we shall concentrate first and foremost on Rosenberg’s depiction of natural forms lower than man, hence *homo militans* will receive only as much attention as is needed to discuss the most essential variations of relationships between man and nature in the world of the war. Occasionally, E.M. Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* will be referred to, thus creating another dimension from which to appreciate Rosenberg’s works where nature, once man’s paradise, becomes his curse and hell.

In *The Troop Ship*, a poem describing soldiers’ passage to France, nature is represented by the cold, wet wind.

Grotesque, 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,

Wind's fumble or men's feet
Are on your face. (100)

Typically for Rosenberg, he does not concentrate on nature shown in its totality as is the case with landscape, for instance. Rather, he goes for particulars, exposing such a specific aspect of the reality as the wind's cold wetness, the characteristic which seems to be both an emblem and announcement of the trenchworld plight to come. The wind not only intensifies the men's mutual hostility but its brutal attacks may even be regarded as a source of the aggressiveness of the passengers whose violent, harsh movements, bring often unnecessary pain. Under the new circumstances they have all forgotten about even elementary kindness, as if drowned in the unquiet sea which reveals its otherwise masked presence only through the men's „lurching”. Besides, taking advantage of the men's exhaustion, the wind's „fumble” invades their sleep, and when searching for any vulnerable place to attack, it as if invites the men to savour this first experience of the war, the first feel of its „malignant kiss”.

Having reached No Man's Land, Rosenberg's soldier was soon to discover the transforming potential of the „strange word”, this vortex whose whirl would suck him slowly, irresistibly, and inescapably into itself², leaving the world drastically shrunk, suddenly limited to always the same events and scenes repeated ad nauseam. Catalogued by Desmond Graham, they include:

men marching, [...] Spring in the trenches, dawn, marching to camp from the trenches at night, men out of the line hunting for lice, thoughts of home, leave, [...] burying the dead, the presence of the dying, attendance on the wounded and the presence of the unburied. „Through the rat, larks, lice, and the poppy, the lighting and the colouring of the sky, Desmond continues, „we have, what the soldier knew of nature. Through the limbers and material of the wiring party we have the men's work in the trenches; through the sounds and the sights of gunfire, the immediate violence; and, obliquely, through a portrayal

² E.M. Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, trans. from the German by A.W. Wheen, Fawcett Crest, New York, 1984, p. 54. All quotations come from this edition.

of men hunting lice, the nightmare of murderous fighting, the fury of killing.³

Rosenberg's unique, realistic, yet at the same time universalizing approach to nature allows for an effective portrayal of the simplification of the living effort - the characteristic of No Man's Land invariably communicated through the extreme fragmentariness of natural images. Their scarcity often reflects a dramatic reduction of man's world and his perception of this world in which even nature loses the familiarity so precious in the otherwise unfamiliar reality of the Front. Although the trenches are sometimes characterized by the conspicuous absence of nature, whenever present, nature constitutes a crucial element of the landscape of war, a frame as well as a background against which the war is being fought, man's heaven, his hell, yet most of all his earth.

In the „greatest war book that has yet been written” and the one in comparison with which all „other books ... become small and insignificant”⁴, E.M. Remarque wrote:

To no man does the earth mean so much as to the soldier. When he presses himself down upon her long and powerfully, when he buries his face and his limbs deep in her from the fear of death by shell-fire, then she is his only friend, his brother, his mother; he stifles his terror and his cries in her silence and her security; she shelters and releases him for ten seconds to live, to run, ten seconds of life; receives him again and often for ever...

Earth with thy folds, and thy hollows, and holes, into which a man may fling himself and crouch down. In the spasm of terror, under the hailing of annihilation, in the bellowing death of the explosions, O Earth, thou grantest us the great resisting surge of new-won life. Our being, almost utterly carried away by the fury of the storm, streams back through our hands from thee, and we, thy redeemed ones, bury ourselves

³ D. Graham, *The Truth of War: Owen, Blunden and Rosenberg*, Manchester 1984, p. 139.

⁴ See the quotations from the critical book reviews, the excerpts of which appear on the back cover of E.M. Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

in thee, and through the long minutes in a mute agony of hope bite into
thee with our lips.⁵

Recording his experience of the earth, Rosenberg hardly ever seems aware of its friendliness or innate goodness. Rather, perceiving *terra firma* through the eyes of a private, he registers the entrapment the earth represents, the engagement that more often than not transforms the trenches into a huge, silent grave. In this role of the boundary between life and death, the earth, with grass as its specific representative, is depicted in *From France*. In the land of ruin, woe, and desolation, filled mostly with moans and groaning, grass and a singing bird appear to have remained the only forms of life that, still whole and sound, keep watch over „the dead folk under”. In *Break of Day* the „sleeping green between” the allied and the German troops marks the border between safety and danger, the area of peace only for the dug-out rats that can afford to cross it with impunity. Yet, „the haughty athletes” as the soldiers are ironically called, become in the attempt the fragmented, mutilated bodies, „Strong eyes” and „fine limbs” sold to the „whims of murder”.

Luring the soldiers with the promise of shelter and protection, the earth is most amply characterized in Rosenberg’s *Dead Man’s Dump*, exposing the savage, impetuous passion that exists between this seductive mistress and her soldier-lovers.

Maniac earth! howling and flying your bowel
Seared by the jagged fire, the iron love
The impetuous storm of savage love.
Dark Earth! dark heaven, swinging in chemic smoke
What dead are born when you kiss each soundless soul
With lightning and thunder from your mined heart,
Which man’s self dug, and his blind fingers loosed. (112)⁶

⁵ E.M. Remarque, op. cit., pp. 54-5.

⁶ See *CW*, op. cit., p. 112, where this stanza, though not belonging to the text proper of the poem’s printed version, is nevertheless regarded as a section of its final version.

The „coloured clay”, almost discreetly points to the fulfilment of the „iron love”, torturing the men so that they change into the „doomed nostrils” and the „doomed mouth” of the „sinister faces”, which, „Burnt black by strange decay” will for ever remain in her power. After all, as Rosenberg writes, she

has waited for them
All the time of their growth
Freighting for their decay:
Now she has them at last!
In the strength of their strength
Suspended-stopped and held. (110)

Predatory, rapacious and grasping for her fill, monstrous in her obsession, the earth seems to deprive man of his dignity, seeing his only role in becoming her possession. Hellish in her darkness and torturing love, she usurps the place traditionally ascribed to heaven which she successfully manages to strip of importance.

Perhaps this is why the sky becomes hardly visible in Rosenberg’s trench poems, mentioned or described merely in five of them. Not only forced to follow the earth, but robbed even of the capital „H” while the „Dark Earth” retains her capital initials („Dark Earth!, dark heaven, swinging in chemic smoke”), heaven, the upper frame of the universe of war, functions mainly as an extension of the earth’s revenge. Compared to the „accepted dooms”, the sky is usually seen to attack man with all the power that is still left in the sun, wind or snow. Grave-digging soldiers are vexed by the „sun’s heat” (*In War*), while the wind scourges the troops going to France (*The Troop Ship*). However, for the most part heaven is the target of man’s cruelty, and thus evidence of his determination to annihilate whatever the values he has previously associated with the celestial sphere. Hence „the still heavens” (*Break of Day*) or „the red skies” through which the „thundering fires” are blown (*The Burning of the Temple*) together with „the shrieking iron and flame” (*Break of Day*). Hence the „chemic smoke”, poisoning the „dark air” which „spurts with fire”, making heaven „swing”, or changing it into a huge thunder-cloud (*Dead Man’s Dump*).

Like heaven, earth becomes an epitome of war itself, and, simultaneously, a reflection of the devastation of the world that once stood for beauty and life. Though Rosenberg depicts various instances of this victimization of nature, he seems more preoccupied with negative transformations which it undergoes in *No Man's Land*. In *Break of Day* the rat's grin mirrors the „torn fields” of France. However, Rosenberg's soldier is more horrified by the mutilated landscape in *August 1914* where, with no distancing and protective filter, he has to absorb the force of the war's destructiveness all by himself. The horror of what has become of the once ripe field is symbolic of the fate of all life which, brutally deprived of its „honey and gold”, becomes represented exclusively by „the hard and cold”. As a result:

Iron are our lives
Molten right through our youth.
A burnt space through ripe fields,
A fair mouth's broken tooth. (100)

Violated at the peak of their beauty, their potential destroyed and richness wasted, the fields share in the ravishment of man, the silent witnesses to the barbarity with which he executes his death sentence on the ripeness of the seed of life.

Such arrogance towards life, turning the soldier into killer, reveals the moral degradation of man, whose beastliness manifests itself also in his grounding in earth. His loneliness there is measured by the scarcity of contacts either (paradoxically!) with others like him, or with other natural forms. Hence the uniqueness of *In the Trenches*, the poem depicting two soldiers, one of whom spots the poppies on the parapet's ledge. Snatched for their „bright red” beauty, they constitute a gift of one soldier to the other, a precious gesture of friendliness in the midst of the inhuman war. Soon, however, „blood red”, they become an emblem of death:

The sandbags narrowed
And screwed out our jest,
And tore the poppy
You had on your breast...
Down-a shell-O! Christ,

I am choked...safe...dust blind, I
See trench floor poppies
Strewn. Smashed you lie. (103)

Born out of the deadly ground, they seem to attract the death of those who still dare to notice, and what is more, admire that which is either „honey” or „gold”.

The poppy as a reminder of vulnerability of life and imminence of death also appears in *Break of Day*, a rare instance of man's positive attitude towards nature. Standing sentry in the trench, aware of how short-lasting these flowers are, and how easily destroyed, the man seems determined to protect at least one of them, by placing it in his ear. Grateful that he can feel less lonely due to the flower's presence, he is willing to save the tiny ally despite the danger this represents: the poppies whose roots are „in man's veins”, will most certainly be nourished by the soldier's blood. „Ever dropping”, the poppy is already „a little white with the dust”, its pallor suggestive of the forthcoming death of both, the flower and its quixotic, or perhaps simply human, rescuer who through his 'alliance' has tried to contradict the harshness of *No Man's Land*, restoring, if only for himself, his faith in elementary human kindness and tenderness.

Even more unique among the trench companions is the rat, „a live thing” from *Break of Day*, 'honoured' by the soldier's direct address:

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.
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.
What do you see in our eyes
At the shrieking iron and flame

Hurled through still heaven?
What quaver—what heart aghast? (103)

Finding his conscience in the ironical expression of his accidental, silent companion, the soldier recognizes in the rat's cunning and freedom a mockery of his fate, his own, also ideological, entrapment. Looking at himself through the creature's knowing grin the man sees a pitiful destroyer, a bearer of „heart aghast” who deserves no pity for the crimes committed against the world and humankind. Thus the despicable rat becomes the man's judge, accusing without words, the soldier's death sentence communicated by the „leap” over the hand, thus already marked as prey.

Though the break of day greets the man with this bitter truth of his defective humanity, far more cruel is the lesson he is taught by the lice, an enemy far more frightening than the Germans since the latter can at least be killed. The vermin, however, prove to be immortal (The Immortals): the faster they are slain, the more cruel they rise to torture the man who can neither guard nor hide from them. Regardless of how madly the soldier „slaughters” the lice, they attack anew, as if for the sheer fun of it, justifying his conviction of their supernatural power which, perceived in their hellish cunning and indestructibility, seems to determine the victory of the vermin in the fight they endlessly provoke.

Rosenberg offers only one, and therefore absolutely unique, description of an actual fight, the Louse Hunting, which serves to further redefine the notions of war and enemy. Without the typical orchestration of guns and political character, war emerges as a private affair of the hunters who in the course of the struggle become themselves hunted. In revenge they set the lice on fire, rage changing the men into „demons”, „charmed”, like their „pantomime”, by „some wizard vermin”.

See the silhouettes agape,
See the gibbering shadows
Mixed with the battled arms on the wall.
See gargantuan fingers
Pluck in supreme flesh
To smutch supreme littleness. (108)

The longer the hunt goes on, the more this private war of the soldiers begins to resemble a danse macabre, its horror intensified by the frequent changes of the dancers' masks. At first, only „Nudes—stark and glistening, / Yelling in lurid glee”, the soldiers appear later as „the silhouettes agape”, „the gibbering shadows” to finally become as the lice perceive them — „gargantuan hooked fingers”. Unfortunately, the masks cannot hide the monstrosity of the killing which takes place on the barracks' floor and on the walls, where the candle light reflects magnified human shadows; the struggle between dehumanized man and inhuman nature, in which the „supreme littleness” of the lice gets the better of the „supreme flesh” of the hunters.

Yet another representative of vermin that found its way into Rosenberg's trench poems is „him the shadowless”, A Worm Fed On The Heart Of Corinth. Embodying the inhuman force of war inherent in the world's history, the creature is the indestructible worm of decay. Luring people to his „amorphous sleep”, the worm can easily triumph over them, outlasting their kingdoms and empires, the victory also achieved by his „shadowlessness”. For this invisible and formless ruler war is merely one of many campaigns against the modern world, a visible act of the presence with which the worm reminds man of its power over the humankind.

Rosenberg's „vermin” poems tone down the rat's message of man's destructive potential, exposing, above all, his grotesqueness and his colossal impotence. What is more, depicted as man's torturer, nature in fact justifies the drastic measures the soldiers use in their self-defence. Fighting against nature man can never win. Immortal, endowed with almost supernatural powers to regenerate, nature will still prey on man's blood, whereas man, a gargantuan mortal, becomes by these 'vampiric' attacks reduced to a shadow, a helpless giant whose fate it is to be defeated.

Consequently, accustomed so to nature's oppressiveness, the soldier is surprised realizing that it can still be innocent, involved, as in the time of peace, in creating beauty. This kind of amazement is experienced by the men coming back to their camp at night (Returning, We Hear the Larks):

Sombre the night is!
And though we have our lives, we know
What a sinister threat lurks there

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

But hark! joy-joy-strange joy,
Lo! heights of the night ringing with unseen larks.
Music showering our upturned listening faces.

Death could drop from the dark
As easily as song—
But song only dropped... (109)

Mixed with the soldiers' relief as well as their pleasure at listening to the joy of larks' singing is the awareness that, unlike nature, man has already lost his innocence and is no longer capable of interpreting reality in positive terms. Rather, it seems, he exists to watch for danger, creating his landscapes regardless of time, place and civilization. Nature can still reveal itself as a gift for man, yet too crippled by his experience, he is past recognition of the preciousness of the offering. Once more an encounter between man and nature is depicted as an event in a very low key: the happy and beautiful expression of a bird's freedom constitutes only a painful memento of man's own imprisonment — in the trenchworld and wherever his carelessness exposes him to dreaming „on the sand / By dangerous tides“.

In all of Rosenberg's trench poems there grows but one tree, the „tree of life“, joining the world of the earthmen with „the underside of things“. This underworld kingdom is inhabited by the *Daughters of War*, the Amazons who, themselves immortal, are an incarnation of absolute power over life and death. Lustful and destructive, they dance for the soldiers' souls whose possession is possible only through destruction in them of even the smallest symptoms of life. The ritual dance takes place by „the root side of the tree of life“ which they blow „to a live flame“ in order to destroy human existence of earth. However, despite its role as the internal channel of destruction, „the mortal tree of life“ is at the same time

a symbol of the positive transformation of man. His soul, finally „clean of the dust of all days“ can leave the body's „crimson corpse, exchanging it for the new, eternal life - the sisters' gift for their lovers.

The poems discussed above concentrated, each in its own way, on one or a greater number of nature's representatives, only indirectly communicating the transformations it underwent in the world of war. Hence the uniqueness of *Spring 1916*, demonstrating in a straightforward manner what has become of nature.

Slow, rigid, is this masquerade
That passes as through a difficult air,
Heavily — heavily passes.
What has she fed on? Who her table laid
Through the three seasons? What forbidden fare
Ruined her as a mortal lass is?

I played with her two years ago,
Who might be now her own sister in stone,
So altered from her May mien,
When round vague pink a necklace of warm snow
Laughed to her throat where my mouth's touch had gone.
How is this, ruined Queen?

Who lured her vivid beauty so
To be that strained chilled thing that moves
So ghastly midst her young brood
Of pregnant shoots that she for men did grow?
Where are the strong men who made these their loves?
Spring! God pity your mood. (102)

After two years of the war, quite unlike her old self, Spring, „ruined Queen“, looks like a mere „mortal lass“. Crippled, she has lost her sprightly walk, and with it, her young beauty. Robbed even of a „necklace of warm snow“, Spring is so altered that she can easily masquerade as a ghost, phantom-like and haunting in her injured innocence. Men used to love and kiss her while she would grow for them „her young brood of pregnant shoots“. Now, however, turned into „that strained chilled thing“, reified and deprived of her true selfhood, she can be only pitied.

Horrified, the soldier can but register the changes which, due to Spring's symbolism, must have affected all the creatures in the world of the war, the creatures also ruined and robbed of youth, love, and even of life. Unfortunately, he is unable to answer any of his rhetorical questions concerning the blame for, or the sense of this devastation. It may be that he has guessed his involvement in the „killing the thing he loved”, or that he is simply amazed at the price of the masquerade to which he also has been sold a very costly ticket.

Despite her ruined looks, Spring has still preserved some of her regenerative potential: she has come again, pregnant with shoots. However, many of the soldiers for whom these have grown are no longer to be found. In the world of war which, after all, is the men's world, there is hardly anyone left fit to love her, and thus make her really live again.

In view of the poems discussed above, Rosenberg's portrayal of nature in the universe of the war is characterized by extreme fragmentariness. It seems that having been derived from the soldier's drastically limited perspective, this fragmentariness allows for the presence of but very few representatives of nature. Arranged in the order of the frequency of their occurrence, the most important of them include: predatory earth, doomed sky, lice, poppies, birds, rat, and Spring. All of these — indispensable for the realism of the trenchworld — render, also in symbolic terms, numerous characteristics of the war itself. This apart, nature's significance manifests itself also through its status as protagonist who, as the soldier's companion, not only shares in, but to a large extent co-creates the men's experiences at the front.

Though fondly recalled for its love and friendliness, and even if still as innocent as the lark's singing, nature in No Man's Land becomes first and foremost the soldier's enemy. Despite its apparent harmlessness, nature inflicts wounds if not on the men's bodies, then on their consciousness: such, for instance, is the case with the rat whose „inward grin” effectively wrecks the soldier's hopes for survival. Whenever

possible nature does what it can to entrap and hurt the man: lice mock him and make him suffer and even more fragile poppies bring about his death.

In the role of destroyer, performed also by man in war, nature proves superior to the soldier whom it can often and easily outsmart due to its better adaptability and greater regenerative, almost supernatural, powers. In its definitely less prominent role, that of victim, nature functions as reflector of man's dehumanization, thus becoming a crucial component of Rosenberg's complex truth of the war whose transforming potential it simultaneously mirrors and incarnates. No wonder that in comparison with such force man turns out to be but an insignificant form of life, a parody of a hero whose trench existence is divided between the acts of impotent defense and self-destruction.

Yet, even in the world dominated by nature's hostility towards man, the world where all colours are the colours of death and where bullets fly like „swift, iron burning” bees, demonstrating this intimate alliance between nature and war, even in the world so malign Rosenberg was able to see and record goodness. Hence the soldier's caring for the safety of the flower, and the rat teaching the man how to survive; hence also the beauty of the birds' tune.

Perhaps only a soldier can truly appreciate the preciousness of these solitary moments in which nature, never a speaker in Rosenberg's trench poems, can actually be felt to speak. It uses a variety of languages, communicating its message through the rat's inward grin, fragility of the poppy, the lark's joy, or else through the tenderness of man's heart.

It speaks her hope that, after all, no war can truly defeat beauty and the poetry of life.