

WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

Isaac Rosenberg, 1890–1918

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ISAAC ROSENBERG IS A JEWISH POET who works within the textures and through the medium of the English language. He is indeed, fully and integrally, a British poet, though I read some significance into the fact that, on one occasion at least, he sought reassurance on the question of his nationality. ‘Thanks for the information about my being a British subject’ he remarked in a letter to Ernest Lesser.¹ Rosenberg, at that time aged 23, was a student at the Slade School of Art. His citizenship, thus affirmed or reaffirmed, entitled him to compete for the newly-established Rome Prize of 1913.

The basic facts behind his inquiry can be briefly stated. He was the child of a young Lithuanian Jew who had arrived in Britain in 1887 or 1888 and of the young wife who had followed him a short time later. Isaac was born in Bristol in 1890, the Rosenbergs’ second surviving child (there were to be five more who reached adulthood). When he was seven the family moved to London, to a succession of small dwellings in the East End.

One of the earliest and still—after more than sixty years—one of the best advocates of Rosenberg’s work, the late D. W. Harding, was an academic psychologist; and the emphasis given by his formal training is evident, but not obtrusive, throughout his critical analysis of Rosenberg’s poetry and poetics. Harding’s emphasis is placed—I think

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¹ *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg: Poetry, Prose, Letters, Paintings and Drawings*. ed. Ian Parsons (1979), p. 197. Ernest Lesser was Honorary Secretary of the Jewish Education Aid Society [*ibid.*, p. 195 n. 4]. In the event, Rosenberg was unsuccessful [*ibid.*, p. 198].

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rightly—on aspects and qualities of Rosenberg's intuitively profound grasp of the English language; and he is to be trusted at points where academic hypothesis has an opportunity (provided it has the ability, as Harding certainly had) to check itself against the nature and structure of what is actually upon the page. Harding writes, in his *Scrutiny* essay of 1935, that

[Rosenberg's] finest passages are not concerned exclusively either with the strength called out by war or with the suffering: they spring more directly from the events and express a stage of consciousness appearing before either simple attitude has become differentiated.²

I am sufficiently persuaded that experience moves into and through language much as Harding suggests. One cannot come to an equitable valuation of Rosenberg's work without acknowledging his own recognition of the psychology of circumstance, of the interrelatedness of experience and language, or without perceiving the cogency with which he engages his own inwardness and 'outer semblance'.³

As critics we have the uncritical habit of referring, ponderously yet airily, to an author's 'individual voice', as if this were a simple and uncontested birthright. And yet, in literature, few things are more difficult to achieve or to describe. One strong indication of the quality of Rosenberg's creative imagination is that it perceives this to be so, within the given nature of things. It is the true nature of the free will to know itself circumscribed, of the abrasive intellect to know itself abraded; of clear-sightedness to recognise its occlusions and self-occlusions, of integrity to have to live with the knowledge of collusion and compromise. In the definitive 'brute' confrontations, the individual voice is that speaking self-realising speech which can in some way be freed from, or even denied to, the general undifferentiating clamour of things: things material and things of the mind—the alienating power that seventeenth-century moral writers epitomised by the word 'opinion'.

Among the numerous locations and dislocations in which I sense Rosenberg's own acknowledgement of such conditions, we may note the following examples, taken from various letters in chronological sequence: 'the very fibres are torn apart, and application deadened by the fiendish persistence of the coil of circumstance' (1911); 'one

² D. W. Harding, *Experience Into Words* (1963), p. 94.

³ Rosenberg, *Collected Works*, p. xxv. The words 'Isaac Rosenberg his outer semblance?' are scribbled on a fine self-portrait—a rapid pencil-sketch—done in the trenches.

conceives one's lot (I suppose it's the same with all people, no matter what the condition) to be terribly tragic' (1911); 'Create our own experience! We can, but we don't' (1911); 'I have thrown over my patrons they were so unbearable, and as I can't do commercial work, and I have no other kind of work to show, it puts me in a fix' (n.d. 1912?); ". . . when one's only choice is between horrible things you can choose the least horrible' (1915); 'I[,] feeling myself in the prime and vigour of my powers . . . seeing with helpless clear eyes the utter destruction of the railways and avenues of approaches to outer communication cut off' (n.d. October 1915); 'I send you here my two latest poems, which I have managed to write, though in the utmost distress of mind, or perhaps because of it' (March 11, 1916); 'I am determined that this war, with all its powers for devastation, shall not master my poeting . . . I will not leave a corner of my consciousness covered up, but saturate myself with the strange and extraordinary conditions of this life, and it will all refine itself into poetry later on' (n.d. Autumn 1916); 'Sometimes I give way and am appalled at the devastation this life seems to have made in my nature . . . I seem to be powerless to compel my will to any direction, and all I do is without energy and interest' (14 Feb. 1918); 'I want it [the "Unicorn"] to symbolize the war and all the devastating forces let loose by an ambitious and unscrupulous will' (8 March, 1918).⁴

Reading through these quotations in chronological order, spanning a period from sometime prior to 1911 until a few weeks before his death in action in the Spring of 1918, I am struck by a weight of coherence embedded within the long run of disadvantage and ill luck, yet detached from it. I have, further, the strong impression that all these happenings, in one sense random, in a profounder sense purposeful, are mediated for us through an overall and distinct vision of circumstance and conduct, a strength of purpose that is not diminished by its being at the same time an acknowledgement of enforced weakness, bafflement and failure.

I would add that a pattern and substance of mind, displayed chronologically here, is also to be recognised as the pattern and substance of Rosenberg's poetry at its characteristic best. The accomplishment, the finished work, the book, the poem as it stands, the particular self-containment, or aloofness, of the work of art is nonetheless always vulnerable to the mass and weight of 'opinion', a form of inertia for

⁴ *Collected Works*, pp. 181 (twice), 182, 197, 215, 218, 230, 248, 268, 270.

which the phrase 'general reading public' seems not merely inadequate but also unjust. In considerations of British and American poetry in the second half of this century, the quotidian has been, with significant exceptions, overvalued as the authenticating factor in works of the imagination. The poem itself, assessed in this way, becomes the author's promise to pay on demand, to provide real and substantial evidence of a suffering life for which the poem itself is merely a kind of tictac or flyer.

Although it is a stultifying error to suppose the poem's link with actuality exists only in such simple cause and effect relationships: *I feel, therefore the poem has life*, it needs to be said that, from first to last, Rosenberg is a poet of feeling; and this notwithstanding the fact that a recurrent word, a keyword even, when he talks about his own writing, is 'idea'.⁵ I do not mean that he feels strongly about ideas, or that he is a theorist of the emotions, but rather that he feels the ideas and thinks his feelings:

Expression

Call—call—and bruise the air:
Shatter dumb space!
Yea! We will fling this passion everywhere;
Leaving no place

For the superb and grave
Magnificent throng,
The pregnant queens of quietness that brave
And edge our song

Of wonder at the light,
(Our life-leased home),
Of greeting to our housemates. And in might
Our song shall roam,

Life's heart, a blossoming fire
Blown bright by thought,
While gleams and fades the infinite desire,
Phantasmed naught.

Can this be caught and caged?
Wings can be clipt
Of eagles, the sun's gaudy measure gauged,
But no sense dipt

⁵ *Collected Works*, pp. 183, 184, 190, 191, 198, 199, 201, 203, 210 (twice), 238, 239 (twice), 242, 255 (twice), 257, 262 (twice), 265 (three occurrences), 266, 268, 287, 289, 290, 291 (twice), 292 (twice), 293, 295, 298, 303, I have omitted a few colloquial uses.

In the mystery of sense:
 The troubled throng
 Of words break out like smother'd fire through dense
 And smouldering wrong.⁶

'Expression' was included in Rosenberg's second pamphlet, *Youth*, which places it no later than March or early April 1915. The first thing to be said is that it is all idea and all feeling; in this respect it is already at one with Rosenberg's later and somewhat better-known poems of 1916–18, 'Break of Day in the Trenches', 'Returning, We Hear the Larks', 'Dead Man's Dump', 'Daughters of War'.⁷

What, one is asked, is 'Expression' about? It is about itself; its syntax, especially in the enjambments of the first three stanzas, is as Donne, in his 'Third Satire', seems to hear and envisage someone striving to attain Truth: 'and hee that will / Reach her, about must, and about must goe;' though the vision of itself that Rosenberg's poem enacts is not at all like Donne.⁸ The thinking—of which 'Expression' is an active record—is that of a creative imagination certainly influenced by reading Emerson and probably influenced also by reading Nietzsche.⁹

'Expression' is a poem of energy endeavouring to work outwards, struggling not to be turned back upon itself. What it arrives at, in the final three lines, the most nearly paraphrasable lines of the poem, is essentially the nexus of circumstance from which the desire to write it has sprung:

The troubled throng
 Of words break out like smother'd fire through dense
 And smouldering wrong.

The nature of the 'dense and smouldering wrong' is, I believe, sufficiently documented in the brief extracts from letters which I gave earlier; one of these in particular calls for repetition here:

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 92–3.

⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 103–4, 109–14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 180–1, 183, 198, 221, 223, 265, 288 (for IR's knowledge of and appreciation of, Donne); 208, 266, 288–9 (for Emerson).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 301: the only reference to Nietzsche in CW. IR could have read Nietzsche in English translation from 1909 on, in a four volume selection published by Unwin in 1909 and in 'the first complete and authorized English translation,' ed. Oscar Levy, 18 vols. (Edinburgh and London, 1909–13). A. R. Orage, *Friedrich Nietzsche: the Dionysian Spirit of the Age*, was published by Foulis (London and Edinburgh) in 1906, Joseph Cohen, *Journey to the Trenches: the Life of Isaac Rosenberg* (1975), p. 84, states that IR 'read widely, ranging outside literature to Darwin and Nietzsche . . .'

I[,] feeling myself in the prime and vigour of my powers . . . seeing with helpless clear eyes the utter destruction of the railways and avenues of approaches to outer communication cut off.

In a sentence which I have not previously quoted Rosenberg adds: 'It is true I have not been killed or crippled, been a loser in the stocks, or had to forswear my fatherland, but I have not quite gone free and have a right to say something.'¹⁰ A few days after writing this, in October 1915, he went to the recruiting office, was passed fit (despite being in poor health and below regulation height) and was posted to the 12th (Bantam) Battalion of the Suffolk Regiment at Bury St Edmunds. In the first of the surviving letters written after enlistment ('on YMCA notepaper, headed "HM Forces on Active Service"') he remarks: 'Besides[,] my being a Jew makes it bad amongst these wretches. I am looking forward to having a bad time altogether.'¹¹ Those four abrupt words 'my being a Jew' focus his attention, and ours, on a new phase of his imaginative concentration—from now until his death his writing, particularly in the verse play *Moses* and in the final lyrics, will identify itself with increasing insistence as Jewish – but the 'dense / And smouldering wrong' confirmed and contested in the three closing lines of 'Expression' engages the racial issues with questions and conditions common to Jew and Gentile alike in the first decade and a half of our century: how to exist with decency on the line between respectable poverty and abject penury; how to claim one's entitlement to speak, and beyond that, even to be heard when one is so circumscribed.

Wilfred Owen, whose family circumstances were fairly modest and who would not have been considered suitable officer material in the peacetime regular army, took his status as a 'gentleman' for granted as he took also for granted his moral obligation to speak out as a witness on behalf of the inarticulate common soldier.¹² Yet three of the most remarkable British poets of the Great War were members of that mute stratum. One of these was, and indeed is, 22311 Pte. I. Rosenberg, 8 Platoon B Coy 1st KORL, BEF.¹³

The doctrine of personal responsibility can be taken too far or not far enough. There is little danger at the present time of the majority

¹⁰ *Collected Works*, p. 218.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

¹² Wilfred Owen, *Collected Letters*, ed. Harold Owen and John Bell (1967), e.g. pp. 422, 521, 562, 580.

¹³ *Collected Works*, p. 271, Army address as of 7 March, 1918. There were several changes of address during IR's two years at the Front.

opinion taking it too far. Granted that caveat, I do not hold Wilfred Owen personally responsible for his blankness respecting articulacy among the other ranks. Each phase of culture is characterised, if only in part, by such patches of blankness. Owen, the sincere Shelleyan among his pre-war occupations and preoccupations, was eager in his concern for social welfare and lyrical in his appreciation of beauty found in unlikely places:

On Sat[urday] being now tired of the West End, I thought a little ugliness would be refreshing; and striking east from the P[ost] O[ffice] walked down Fenchurch St. and so into the Whitechapel High Street, & the Whitechapel Road. Ugliness! I never saw such beauty, in two hours, before that Saturday Night. The Jews are a delightful people, at home, & that night I re-read some Old Testament with a marvellous great sympathy & cordiality!¹⁴

This Daedalean epiphany occurred on the evening of Saturday, 12 June, 1915. Owen's perambulations would have taken him close to Dempsey Street, in which the Rosenbergs lived at number 87. Whitechapel High Street and Whitechapel Road, together with the adjacent Library and Art Gallery, were the meeting-places for Isaac and a circle of friends and acquaintances, a group at once closely- and loosely-knit, which included David Bomberg and Mark Gertler, John Rodker and Joseph Leftwich, Sonia Cohen whose portrait Rosenberg painted, whom Bomberg courted, and who married Rodker: a magnificently unmute throng, notwithstanding Leftwich's memories of their 'mooch[ing] around the streets of Whitechapel completely wrapped up in our own misery'.¹⁵

A surviving letter from Rosenberg to the businessman and novelist Sydney Schiff [Stephen Hudson] dated (or postmarked) 8 June, 1915, four days before Owen took that epiphanic stroll, shows him occupied in mailing, to various men-of-letters whom he hoped to interest in his work, copies of a privately printed pamphlet of poems, *Youth*, one hundred copies of which had been run off—presumably after hours—by his friend Reuben Cohen, using the printing press of his employer Israel Narodiczky.¹⁶

This letter to Schiff, though short, is, to use a word of Rosenberg's conjuring, pregnant: pregnant with statement and implication. It has three paragraphs. In the first he states that '[w]hat people call technique

¹⁴ Owen, *Collected Letters*, pp. 341, 338. Cohen, *Journey to the Trenches*, p. 119 makes the connection.

¹⁵ Richard Cork, *David Bomberg* (New Haven and London, 1987), p. 20.

¹⁶ *Collected Works*, pp. 216 (letter to Schiff), xiii (editorial note on printing-date of *Youth*); 231 (editorial note on Reuben Cohen); 212 (editorial note on Israel Narodiczky).

is a very real thing, it corresponds to construction and command of form in painting;’ then he adds ‘[m]y technique in poetry is very clumsy I know’. The tone of magisterial diffidence is entirely characteristic. The second paragraph wonders ‘whether Mr. Clutton Brock could get me some Art writing to do for any journals he is connected with’. The final paragraph is one sentence, at once abrupt and distracted (*distract*):

I am thinking of enlisting if they will have me, though it is against all my principles of justice—though I would be doing the most criminal thing a man can do—I am so sure my mother would not stand the shock that I don’t know what to do.

In fact and in practice Rosenberg’s technique proves more than equal to the forces of distraction—a word by which I mean to invoke: agitated incertitude, not knowing what to do for the best; also chronic absent-mindedness (‘My memory, always weak, has become worse since I’ve been out here’),¹⁷ a form of forgetfulness which is not actually a sign of weakness but of strength—the immense strength of other priorities, such as working on massive and complex poems in your head amid the manifold terrors and routine hard labour of life in the trenches.¹⁸

Poets during the greater part of the nineteenth century were conventionally expected, and repeatedly enjoined, to teach. Wordsworth’s original conception of this role was that the poet’s privilege and burden is to teach radically new doctrines of relationship: both to the self and to society, and to the self in its relation and disrelation to society. Owen is perhaps the last true representative of this form of Romantic *paideia*, a continuity unbroken from 1798 to 1918. I risk the word ‘true’ as being perilously appropriate to the increasingly laboured, increasingly exhausted, line of moral succession. It was at once Owen’s strength and weakness that he half-recognised how a radical doctrine of poetic teaching had become diffused, while it had also hardened, into a standing convention of ideals. Owen, in 1917–18, began to teach the

¹⁷ *Collected Works*, p. 258.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*; also pp. 222–3, 224, 226, 230, 232, 237, 238, 249, 252, 268–9, 272; see especially p. 231 (‘I have been working on “Moses”—in my mind, I mean—and it was through my absent-mindedness while full of that that I forgot certain orders, and am now undergoing a rotten and unjust punishment’); p. 235 (‘I know my faults are legion; a good many must be put down to the rotten conditions I wrote it [*Moses*] in—the whole thing was written in barracks, and I suppose you know what an ordinary soldier’s life is like’); p. 257 (‘We are more busy now than when I last wrote, but I generally manage to knock something up if my brain means to, and I am sketching out a little play [“The Unicorn”]. My great fear is that I may lose what I’ve written, which can happen here so easily. I send home any bit I write, for safety, but that can easily get lost in transmission’).

hollowness, the rigid carapace, of the ideal, but he did so in forms of eloquence impossible to disengage fully from those of the discredited patrimony. 'All a poet can do to-day is warn. That is why the true poets must be truthful.'¹⁹ the message of Owen's statement is the necessary eradication of the 'old lie';²⁰ the oratory of his voice is still much like that of Tennyson—although, by 1918, Owen clearly regarded Tennyson as a great liar²¹—lamenting the failure of *Idylls of the King* to 'teach men those things,' i.e., the modern world's lack of, need for, 'reverence and chivalrous feeling.'²²

Far more than Owen, Rosenberg was a poet made and re-made by exposure. I allude here first to Owen's poem of that title—'Exposure'—a late work begun in December 1917 and finished in September 1918, a lament for soldiers as men excluded, shut out of their own homes, deprived, sufferers of unremitting privation;²³ and secondly to Rosenberg's letter, written in the Autumn of 1916 to Laurence Binyon:

I am determined that this war, with all its powers for devastation, shall not master my poeting; that is, if I am lucky enough to come through all right. I will not leave a corner of my consciousness covered up, but saturate myself with the strange and extraordinary new conditions of this life, and it will all refine itself into poetry later on.²⁴

It is one thing to 'determine' a course of action; quite another to fulfil it. Victory in this field can be achieved only through technique (I do not say that technique guarantees success). Rosenberg's technique is in part instinctive, i.e. reading 'exposure' correctly: not as deprivation but as openness to saturation. In part it is associative. I refer here to the close association, at a period crucial to them both, of the young Rosenberg and the young David Bomberg. It was a sparring friendship, begun around 1908 on the pavements of Whitechapel and Stepney and continued at the Whitechapel Library, subsequently, though not regularly, in the homes of one or other of their group.

The next step in my discussion takes us from Rosenberg's and Bomberg's well-documented association towards much more debatable ground. I claim to associate Rosenberg's discovery of technique in

¹⁹ *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (1985), p. 192.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

²¹ *Collected Letters*, e.g. p. 482.

²² *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by his Son*, new edition [two volumes in one] (New York, 1911) ii, 337.

²³ *Poems*, ed. Stallworthy, pp. 162–3.

²⁴ *Collected Works*, p. 248.

writing with Bomberg's discovery of technique in painting. There is no documentation that I know of to confirm my claim as anything more than speculation. At several points in his monumental study *David Bomberg* (1987), Richard Cork refers to the artist's definition of, sense of, 'mass', a definition which Bomberg did not formally articulate until many years after Rosenberg's death but which Cork finds entirely applicable to work done as early as 1914.²⁵ I am somewhat puzzled by Cork's own inclination to treat the term 'mass' as if it were interchangeable with the words 'bulk' and 'weight'. I can understand the phrase 'sense of mass' only in terms of relationship, totality even; and certainly my suggestion that we carry over 'sense of mass' to Rosenberg's grasp of word-relations would be meaningless in any other interpretation. You cannot rightly speak of the 'bulk' or 'solidity' of a word in isolation, whereas it makes perfectly good sense so to describe one figure, or one figuration, in a painting.

Siegfried Sassoon described Rosenberg acutely and memorably as having 'modelled words with fierce energy and aspiration',²⁶ and if my suggestion extends the metaphor it cannot change its dimension. To possess a 'sense of mass' in language would require a sense of contexture, an appreciation of, and an ability to initiate, the changes that single words and phrases undergo when moved from one context to another. As a form of technical experiment this can be traced back at least to Chaucer, but I cannot think of another modern poet writing in English who conducts the experiment more intensively than does Rosenberg. One finds a particular phrase repeated in various places: not so much re-used as re-forged: a re-forging of feeling, with idea, into language. 'Like breath rekindling a smouldering fire' from a poem of 1911²⁷ becomes the magnificent last stanza of 'Expression': 'The troubled throng / Of words break out like smother'd fire through dense / And smouldering wrong.' The line 'With fierce energy I aspire' in a poem of 1912²⁸ finds a new concentration in the Young Hebrew's words in *Moses* (1916): 'Into that fierce unmanageable blood'²⁹ and again in 'What fierce imaginings their dark souls lit' ('Dead Man's Dump', 1917).³⁰ Two lines

²⁵ Richard Cork, *David Bomberg*, (New Haven and London, 1987) pp. 75, 83.

²⁶ Rosenberg, *Collected Works*, ed. cit., p. ix. This reprints Sassoon's 'Foreword' from the original *Collected Works*, edited by Gordon Bottomley and Denys Harding (1937), pp. ix-x.

²⁷ *Collected Works*, ed. Parsons, 1979, p. 10: 'My Days', line 12.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18: 'Peace', line 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 146, line 317.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 110, line 20.

from a poem of 1914, 'Pale horses ride before the morning / The secret roots of the sun to tread'³¹ are subsequently re-energised in 'Chagrin,' one of his finest poems: 'We ride, we ride, before the morning / The secret roots of the sun to tread.'³² I propose to call this method: thinking through the phrase or image. In so doing I endeavour to conjure up Rosenberg's gift of verbal interpenetration by means of my own impacted sense. 'Thinking through the phrase or image' signifies: phrase or image as mediator of the idea. I attempt the further sense of 'think through': to resolve by process of thought. These senses are to be understood as working simultaneously not consecutively.

In the *textus receptus* of 'Midsummer Frost' (*Collected Works*, 1979, also prints an earlier version of the poem) Rosenberg adds three lines:

He heareth the Maytime dances;
Frees from their airy prison, bright voices,
To loosen them in his dark imagination.³³

Although the intrinsic quality of these lines is not high, they present their own paraphrase of what, in Rosenberg's finest work, can only with the greatest difficulty be paraphrased (and rightly so). Asked to find the most succinct description of Rosenberg's 'desire' I would say: *the desire to free his voice*. To free his voice from what? From the condition of being merely a poetical tyro. From the condition of being regarded, or disregarded, as an expendable 'young Hebrew,' a slave in the vast pool of London labour; subsequently, by simple extension, as an unidentifiable waste item in Field Marshal Haig's ever increasing expenditure of blood and treasure.

In this desire, this practice, I would claim, the technical, the psychological and the ethical are entirely at one. Each is authenticated in the other; and the earliest master-statement of such threefold validation is the poem 'Expression'. And 'Expression' itself vindicates the comparative failure of earlier attempts to free the voice: 'My Days'; 'The Present'; 'The Key of the Gates of Heaven' ('A word was the key thereof'); 'Peace' ('With fierce energy I aspire'); 'You and I' ('All our life before was but embryo / Shaping for this birth—this living moment').³⁴ I say 'vindicate' rather than 'validate': the phrases I have just now quoted have little intrinsic value. It is the necessity of such

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 61: 'At Night', lines 13–14.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 95, lines 21–2.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 85, lines 21–3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 14, 15, 18, 22.

failures, inseparable from his way of thinking through, that is vindicated by the weight and power of the works written in the last two years of Rosenberg's life.

If the freeing of the voice entails for Rosenberg a virtually incessant reworking of ideas through a remaking of the word-relations, it is equally evident that the integrity of the word requires a process of unmaking. In one of his most beautifully articulated short poems 'A Worm Fed on the Heart of Corinth', 1916, (the source for which is undoubtedly Blake's 'The Sick Rose',) the 'worm' is said to have 'lured her [Helen's] vivid beauty / To his amorphous sleep'.³⁵ The 'amorphous sleep' I understand to be England's self-hypnosis of wealth and power, the sick romanticism of imperial duty and sacrifice, the poems of Henley and Newbolt, for instance, a code of conduct for professional men-of-letters as much as for professional men of war: all that is summed up in Wilfred Owen's contemptuous 'Tennyson, it seems, was always a great child. So should I have been but for Beaumont Hamel.'³⁶ In Rosenberg's poem I find what Bomberg would term 'a sense of mass'. The single phrase on which I have concentrated, 'amorphous sleep', is only part of the total weight of the poem. The sense of 'amorphous' is not fulfilled until the final line 'More amorous than Solomon.' That I can so address the interdependence of these lines—and especially these words, 'amorphous', 'amorous'—is a justification of the entirety of the poet's imaginative grasp, and of the applicability to language of the painterly term 'mass'. The early poems have occasional striking lines, but do not reveal working interdependence of lines; that is to say, they are deficient in, even devoid of, the sense of mass.

Having achieved so much, so strikingly, in so small a compass, in 'A Worm Fed on the Heart of Corinth', what is Rosenberg's direction, where is his mixed sense of potentiality and of restriction, of a potentiality within the restriction, to take him? It is not easy to chart the forwards, or sideways, movement of the work mainly because so much of it survives as major or minor fragments; but also because (even in the splendid *Collected Works* of 1979) so much of the dating remains tentative.³⁷ It is known that, from the completion and publication of

³⁵ *Collected Works*, p. 105.

³⁶ *Collected Letters*, p. 482.

³⁷ The question of the dating of Rosenberg's work, as given in *The Collected Works*, 1979, has recently been reexamined by Vivien Noakes in an unpublished Oxford D.Phil. thesis supervised by Professor Jon Stallworthy. I have not seen a copy of the thesis; but I understand that Dr Noakes differs from Parsons on a number of important details.

the verse-play *Moses* in 1916, Rosenberg's attention had been increasingly devoted to plays in verse, of which two, *The Amulet* (1917) and *The Unicorn* (1918), have come down to us as a loose sequence of substantial fragments.³⁸ In the *Collected Works*, editorial decision places immediately after twenty pages of these fragmentary drafts and variants, a single page bearing thirty one lines of verse and the title 'Adam', together with a note describing this page as a fragment of yet another play, to have been called 'Adam', or 'Adam and Lilith', which was 'abandoned in favour of "The Unicorn"'. Chronologically it came just before the latter play, . . .' Included in the thirty-one lines of the fragment are these two:

As my thoughts, my pulses, pass
Hungry to you, to roam your vivid beauty.³⁹

If Rosenberg was working on *The Unicorn* 'for nearly a year before his death' we may date its inception circa late April to early May 1917. If the projected 'Adam', as Rosenberg's editor states, came 'just before' 'The Unicorn', the surviving brief fragment could possibly have been drafted in the first three months of 1917. 'A Worm Fed on the Heart of Corinth' is dated 1916.

As we have noted, 'to roam your vivid beauty' in 'Adam' is a variant of 'Who lured her vivid beauty' in 'A Worm Fed on the Heart of Corinth'. '[T]o roam your vivid beauty' is either a vague adumbration of the intense realisation still to be achieved by 'Who lured her vivid beauty . . .' or—and this seems likely—it is a subsequent intentional diffusion, a surrender of the kind of power achieved in the brief, concentrated lyric of 1916.

If I am right in my conjecture, Rosenberg stands as an example—certainly rare if not unique—of a poet who, having attained that which, in our fallibility, we recognise as perfection, takes the elements of that intense achievement and rethinks his way through them, even at the cost of diffusing and dissipating the grasped power. That he would have done so with pain is indicated by his correspondence: 'Now when my things fail to be clear I am sure it is because of the luckless choice of a word or the failure to introduce a word that would flash my idea plain, as it is to my own mind.'⁴⁰ That he could, at the same time, be capable of

³⁸ *Collected Works*, 1979, pp. 156–76, 177.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

disrupting his own coherences is indicated just as forcefully in his letters. Defending Emerson, and especially Emerson's poetry, he writes:

Everybody has agreed . . . about the faults and the reason is obvious; the faults are so glaring that nobody can fail to see them. But how many have seen the beauties? . . . And I absolutely disagree that it is blindness or carelessness; it is the brain succumbing to the herculean attempt to enrich the world of ideas.⁴¹

There is one characteristic and essential term common to both these letters: the word 'idea'. The poet who strives for the 'word that would flash my idea plain, as it is to my own mind' and who knows very well when he has failed to find that word, is nonetheless pre-eminently the celebrant of the idea. I believe that, for the sake of advancing the idea, Rosenberg would be prepared, though not gladly, to sacrifice finality of phrase. In this respect he is the most significant English heir of Emerson as D. H. Lawrence and Ivor Gurney are the most significant English heirs of Whitman.

It is particularly in their engagement with—which is also a disengagement from—the expectations of a postulated readership that Gurney and Rosenberg, brought up in very different social circumstances, are nonetheless much alike. When I say 'postulated readership' I mean critically, or entrepreneurially, postulated. The 'common readership', like the 'common standard of taste' is more often than not a confection of literary middlemen. The true common reader is a natural aristocrat of the spirit, and is far more necessary, far more valuable, to a culture such as ours than are the majority of its writers. In the opening line of Gurney's 'War Books' I take 'they' to be the entrepreneurial 'they':

What did they expect of our toil and extreme
Hunger—the perfect drawing of a heart's dream?
Did they look for a book of wrought art's perfection,
Who promised no reading, no praise, no publication?⁴²

Here Gurney indicates 'perfection', not in the sense of a working ideal for true labourers in the craft, but rather as an imposed limitation, set by an artificial consensus of tastes. In the introduction to the American edition of his (so-called) *New Poems*, D. H. Lawrence argues that a new protean sense of language and form must now be the poet's medium of

⁴¹ *Collected Works*, p. 266. It is as if Rosenberg realises his own struggle in the process of describing Emerson's.

⁴² *Collected Poems of Ivor Gurney*, ed. P. J. Kavanagh (Oxford, 1982), p. 196.

endeavour, he must not seek to match the ‘treasured gem-like lyrics of Shelley and Keats’.⁴³ This may be a gross misreading of Keats, but it does not misread the demands of the taste-makers of Lawrence’s own time, which was also Gurney’s and Rosenberg’s time. ‘Gem-like lyrics’ fails to distance Lawrence’s opinion sufficiently from, for example, ex-Prime Minister Asquith’s presidential address to the English Association in 1919: such locutions as ‘the magic of art’, ‘among the most lovely of English lyrics’,⁴⁴ though it cannot be confused with the table-talk of Edward Marsh, who had, as he once told Rupert Brooke, ‘a decided preference for poetry he could read at meals’.⁴⁵ For Rosenberg, as for Lawrence and Gurney, the ‘perfect’ was composed too often of the inessential.

Not every public pronouncement was a simple projection of personal taste and opinion. A. C. Bradley, who in 1911 preceded Asquith as President of the English Association, spoke in his own presidential address of the undue influence exerted by ‘the frequent incompetence of readers,’ ‘the partially incompetent lover of poetry’. ‘There are readers’, Bradley says, ‘who tend to pervert all pathos into sentimentality.’⁴⁶ G. K. Chesterton, whom Rosenberg thought ‘sly and certainly anti-Jewish’,⁴⁷ established a context in which to assess the hegemony of ‘taste’. In his book on Robert Browning, published in 1903 as part of the popular *English Men of Letters* series, Chesterton observed that Browning belonged by birth:

to the solid and educated middle class—the class which is interested in letters, but not ambitious in them, the class to which poetry is a luxury, but not a necessity.⁴⁸

As it is Chesterton’s case that we begin to understand the quality of Browning’s individual voice by comprehending the cost to him of establishing a resistance to that culture of ‘interest’, his kinds of defeat and failure as well as the characteristics of his success, so my own discussion has attempted to take account of the causes and consequences of Rosenberg’s battle with circumstance. ‘Circumstance’ is

⁴³ *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence* (1936), p. 218.

⁴⁴ The Rt Hon. H. H. Asquith, *Sir Henry Wotton, with some General Reflections on Style in English Poetry* (1919), The English Association, Pamphlets, No. 44.

⁴⁵ *The Prose of Rupert Brooke*, ed. Christopher Hassall (1956), p. xxv.

⁴⁶ *The Uses of Poetry*, By A. C. Bradley, President, 1911 (1912), The English Association Leaflet No. 20, pp. 11, 9.

⁴⁷ *Collected Works*, 1979, p. 244.

⁴⁸ G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning* (1903), p. 3.

the material poverty of his life; it is also the cajoling and demanding 'interest' of those whose literary bent is at home with their worldly pull and substance.

Like Browning, Rosenberg was ambitious. Like Browning's his ambition was to release his own voice from the constraints of the conventionally approved voices of poetry. Rosenberg spoke incisively of poetics in terms of the 'expressive line' in painting.⁴⁹ The term, which perhaps originates in Blake's 'bounding line',⁵⁰ is also very like a capacity which Richard Cork attributes to Bomberg's paintings in 1913–14: the ability to make visible the 'highly energized moment'.⁵¹ For Rosenberg, I believe, that which he calls the 'idea' is the 'highly energized moment'. Such a moment either will, or will not, be made 'visible' in the texture of words as it will, or will not, become visible in the painting's texture of pigment. When this is achieved, Rosenberg claims, '[I]t is nature's consent, her agreement that what we wrest from her we keep'.⁵² In similar terms he had written in a letter (undated, but probably July 1916): 'It [the subject of war] should be approached in a colder way [than in Brooke's "begloried sonnets"], more abstract, with less of the million feelings everybody feels; or all these should be concentrated in one distinguished emotion.'⁵³

It was perhaps the major weakness of Browning's poetry that it lent itself too easily to a cultic yearning for esoteric interpretation: the proliferation of Browning Societies. A taste for the 'exotic' is not unusual among those for whom art, in Chesterton's phrase, is a luxury, not a necessity. The gifted artist emerging from obscure poverty is especially vulnerable to such a misreading; the gifted Jewish artist emerging from such circumstances into Gentile culture is, if not the most, then among the most vulnerable: it goes with being a 'rootless cosmopolitan'. To be dubbed an exotic is to be at once acknowledged from the centre and retained at the periphery, as one of the licenced

⁴⁹ *Collected Works*, p. 295.

⁵⁰ *The Prophetic Writings of William Blake*, ed. D. J. Sloss and J. P. R. Wallis, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1926), II, p. 326: 'How do we distinguish one face or countenance from another, but by the bounding line and its infinite inflexions and movements?' (from *A Descriptive Catalogue* . . . , 1809, p. 64).

⁵¹ Cork, *David Bomberg*, p. 67.

⁵² *Collected Works*, p. 296: from Rosenberg's major statement on the nature of expression-making, the lecture, 'Art' printed in *South African Women in Council*, December 1914 and January 1915.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

‘eccentrics’ whom Mill advocated, in the essay *On Liberty*, as a necessary counterforce to democracy’s levelling powers.⁵⁴

When, in 1922, due largely to the untiring efforts of his sister Annie, the first posthumous collection of Rosenberg’s poems appeared in print, it carried an ‘Introductory Memoir’ by Laurence Binyon.⁵⁵ Binyon, the civilian author of perhaps the most widely known and widely quoted poem of the Great War, ‘For the Fallen’, was one of the several men-of-letters to whom Rosenberg, before the outbreak of war, had submitted examples of his early work, hoping for a favourable reception. Binyon indeed responded generously to the ‘letter in an untidy hand from an address in Whitechapel’, and a meeting took place at Binyon’s invitation.⁵⁶ The very fact that ten years after that meeting and four years after Rosenberg’s death, Binyon, a busy professional man and a perhaps even busier amateur of poetry and the arts, took the trouble to put together a fifty page tribute,⁵⁷ and to lend the publication his considerable name, speaks well for his gifts of human sympathy. When Binyon turns critic, which he does in only one paragraph of the memoir, his emphasis is placed heavily on the ‘obscurities, the straining and tormenting of language in the effort to find right expression, the immaturities of style and taste’ which, he suggests, do not adequately represent ‘the ardent toil, and the continual self-criticism which underlay’ the young poet’s work.⁵⁸

Considered as criticism of Rosenberg’s writing as it existed in 1912, Binyon’s emphasis is neither inaccurate nor uncalled-for. But in 1922, with the bulk of the poet’s surviving work, including *Moses* (1916), ‘Louse Hunting’ (1917), ‘Dead Man’s Dump’ (1917), available for assessment, the limitation of Binyon’s engagement is all too evident. What we do find, however, is the assurance that ‘even as a young boy, Rosenberg cherished the traditions of his race and aspired to become a representative poet of his own nation’.⁵⁹ It is of course easily

⁵⁴ *On Liberty*, 1859. *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (Toronto, 1963) vol. xviii, p. 269: ‘Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through the tyranny, that people should be eccentric.’

⁵⁵ *Poems by Isaac Rosenberg*, Selected and Edited by Gordon Bottomley, with an Introductory Memoir by Laurence Binyon (1922).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 1–3.

⁵⁷ The fact that pp. 12–50 of the Memoir consist of extracts from Rosenberg’s correspondence, with a minimal linking commentary, does not detract from one’s sense of the considerable burden of compilation which Binyon willingly undertook.

⁵⁸ *Poems by Isaac Rosenberg*, 1922, p. 11.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

demonstrable that, in the last two years of his life, Rosenberg focused his imagination increasingly upon Jewish themes, Jewish history, the warrior heroes of Israel. He wrote to Sidney Schiff in August 1916: 'Heine, our own Heine, we must say nothing of. I admire him more for always being a Jew at heart than anything else.'⁶⁰ Nonetheless, Rosenberg 'aspired to become a representative poet of his own nation' as Donne, Blake, and Keats are representative poets of Rosenberg's own nation—i.e. England (or if you prefer Great Britain). If he had aspired to become a representative poet of his own nation, in Binyon's sense, he would have immersed himself in the study of Hebrew, a language which he did not bother to learn.⁶¹ Both parents were Yiddish speakers, and his Whitechapel friend Joseph Leftwich was a poet and prose-writer in both Yiddish and English;⁶² there was still, at that time, a Yiddish theatre in Whitechapel; in 1913 Bomberg made chalk and crayon studies of an audience emotionally involved in a performance;⁶³ but from these aspects of local culture also, Rosenberg seems to have kept mostly aloof.⁶⁴ He would, it is reasonable to think, have wished his work to be recognised as profoundly Jewish, as the testament of a 'young Hebrew' who was also a Levite.⁶⁵ He would, I believe, have rejected with anger and scorn any suggestion that his poems, prose-writings, letters, paintings, and drawings could be most appropriately catalogued and shelved under the heading *Judaica*.

My sense that Binyon's critical imagination is a poorer thing than his sympathy is compounded by my further sense that sympathy itself is less percipient, less effectively sympathetic, where critical imagination is lacking, as I believe it to be lacking in Binyon's pietas, his dutiful

⁶⁰ *Collected Works*, 1979, p. 242.

⁶¹ Cohen, *Journey to the Trenches*, pp. 18, 27.

⁶² *The Golden Peacock: An Anthology of Yiddish Poetry*, ed. Joseph Leftwich (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1939), p. lv. Foreword, 'Rosenberg did not know much Yiddish, certainly he could not write it and he did not easily express himself in it, though his parents were Yiddish-speaking. And if he showed any interest in Yiddish, it was only to ask me to translate one or two of his poems into Yiddish (as I did) so that he could show them to his father who might in that way grasp better what he was trying to do. His father also wrote poetry in Hebrew and Yiddish, . . .'

⁶³ Cork, *David Bomberg*, pp. 43 (plates 48, 49), 44–45. Seven years later he produced an oil painting, *Ghetto Theatre*, in a significantly different spirit: pp. 135–6 and plate 177.

⁶⁴ Cohen, *Journey to the Trenches*, p. 96, states that in late 1913 Rosenberg and Mark Gertler took Edward Marsh to see 'a Yiddish play . . . in the crowded theatre in Whitechapel'.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 174, quotes from 'a prose poem' by the poet's father mourning the death of 'my dear son, Isaac, the Levite'. Leftwich, *op. cit.* p. 719, prints his own English translation of another poem, 'To the Memory of my son Isaac'.

endorsement of the 1922 volume *Poems by Isaac Rosenberg*. The key to my belief is an important collection of verse that appeared two years after the Rosenberg volume, in 1924. This was the *Golden Treasury of Modern Lyrics*, designed as a definitive volume in direct line of succession to Palgrave's original *Golden Treasury* of 1861. Its editor was Laurence Binyon. Among Rosenberg's army contemporaries represented in the new treasury one finds the names of Edmund Blunden, Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Gibson, Robert Graves, Robert Nichols, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Charles Hamilton Sorley, and Edward Thomas. Rosenberg is neither represented nor referred to. It is as if misfortune can be attended to in its place, provided it keeps its place, which, so far as Rosenberg's work is concerned, it becomes painfully clear, is among the exotica, not within the canon. Binyon enters the usual caveat, a disclaimer of a kind, which editors have in any case by rote: 'Some pieces which should have found a place may have been overlooked; the right things may have been read in the wrong mood; mistakes of judgement are probably inevitable.'⁶⁶

The indicator here is 'mood'. In the judging of works of art the reader's, spectator's, auditor's 'mood' is at best irrelevant, at worst a gross intrusion. The greatest tribute one can pay to a fine work of art—a tribute that one ought to be able to take for granted—is that its qualities reveal one's own 'mood' to be redundant.

It is necessary to state, finally, that during Rosenberg's formative years, there was an exotic genre in vogue. Verse plays were 'in'. Lascelles Abercrombie and Gordon Bottomley, both of whom Rosenberg greatly admired and who took a kindly interest in him, wrote them. Edward Marsh devoted forty-four pages of *Georgian Poetry 1913–1915* to Bottomley's 'King Lear's Wife'. A further forty-four pages of the same volume were taken up by Abercrombie's 'The End of the World'. Wilfred Gibson's *Borderlands and Thoroughfares*, published in 1914, contained three short verse plays. Compared to the *bizarrerie* of such works, the tenor of Rosenberg's *Moses*, *The Unicorn* and *The Amulet* is markedly classical.

There is little to be gained in arguing questions of eligibility for, or exclusion from, the century's canon. The fact that the idea of such a canon is prevalent, however, requires acknowledgement, because prescription and proscription are agents and effects of power. Moreover,

⁶⁶ *The Golden Treasury of Modern Lyrics*, selected and arranged by Laurence Binyon (New York, 1925), p. vi.

Rosenberg's creative intelligence is one that concerns itself particularly closely with matters of power, both in terms of finding one's voice and in the recognition of those forces of status and circumstance which facilitate the transmission of some voices and threaten others with enforced silence. Rosenberg wrote, in March 1918,

If I am lucky, and come off undamaged, I mean to put all my innermost experiences into the 'Unicorn'. I want it to symbolize the war and all the devastating forces let loose by an ambitious and unscrupulous will.⁶⁷

There must surely be more than one canon at any given time: a canon of general acceptance and a canon of intrinsic value. General acceptance presupposes general acceptability. Intrinsic value need not be generally acceptable. I see no reason in theory, however, to prevent a work from taking its rightful place in both canons.

Even after seventy years Rosenberg does not have the kind of acceptance that comes with various forms of recognised accessibility; but the intrinsic value of his work was recognised immediately it became known and has been so recognised ever since:

Living in a wide landscape are the flowers —
Rosenberg, I only repeat what you were saying —

These words, by one of the two outstanding British poets of the Second World War, Keith Douglas, serve as a fitting conclusion.⁶⁸ Douglas, of course, does not *only* repeat what Rosenberg was saying: the words of his tribute are those of an indebtedness in which there is no mere repetition, no transiency; nothing redundant.

⁶⁷ *Collected Works*, 1979, p. 270.

⁶⁸ Keith Douglas, *Alamein to Zem Zem* (1946), [appendix], vii. The other outstanding poet, in my estimation, is Sidney Keyes.