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FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE
UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

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A cura di Elisa Bolchi e Davide Vago

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“EARTH! HAVE THEY GONE INTO YOU?”
 AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
 MAN, NATURE AND WAR IN ISAAC ROSENBERG’S POEMS

ERICA MAGGIONI

This paper considers some of the poems written by the English soldier-poet Isaac Rosenberg during the First World War in order to show his ecological awareness in the depiction of and reflection upon the devastating effects of warfare on the environment and on the man-nature relationship. By adopting an ecocritical perspective, his works will be studied in relation to concepts of space and place, the peculiar features of the war zone, and the elaboration of the pastoral tradition. In conclusion, it will be suggested that the destruction of nature serves as a metaphor for the physical and psychological suffering of men.

Keywords: Isaac Rosenberg, First World War, ecocriticism, nature, earth

One of the leading scholars of ecocriticism, Lawrence Buell, has argued that since “human beings are inescapably biohistorical creatures who construct themselves...through encounter with physical environments they cannot not inhabit, any artifact of imagination may be expected to bear traces of that¹”. The poetry which is born out of the experience of First World War soldiers is imbued with their emotional and intellectual responses to the places they were forced to live in. In the attempt to translate into words the unspeakable reality of life at the front, war poets felt the need to communicate the destabilizing impact of war on human lives, but did not neglect the physical environment, which often emerges in their works as another casualty.

This paper will examine selected poems of one of these soldiers, Isaac Rosenberg, in order to demonstrate his early ecological awareness in the depiction of, and reflection upon, the devastating effects of warfare on the environment and on the man-nature relationship. Ecocriticism, which is intended here in its broad definition of “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment²”, will be referred to as a means to illuminate the texts by providing original insights. In particular, Rosenberg’s treatment of nature will be discussed in relation to the specific characteristics of the war zone during the First World War, and to the elaboration of the pastoral literary tradition. An ecocritical

¹ L. Buell, *The Ecocritical Insurgency*, “New Literary History”, 30, 1999, 3, p. 699.

² C. Glotfelty, *Introduction*, in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, C. Glotfelty – H. Fromm ed., University of Georgia Press, Athens 1996, p. xviii.

reading of his trench poems, shifting attention from the human to the non-human world, can actually offer an interesting perspective both on the works themselves and on the experience of war.

Rosenberg, a second-generation Jewish immigrant brought up in London East End³, inhabited and described the French portion of the Western Front, where he spent approximately twenty-one months, from his arrival at Le Havre in June 1916 to his death near Arras on April 1st 1918. He served as a private, unlike many war poets who were officers, and this meant that, as a soldier of low rank, he spent long periods in the trenches and had to perform a series of menial tasks outdoor, in the most challenging conditions. His exposure to the natural world was therefore particularly significant and it profoundly influenced his response to the experience of war. In a letter from the front in November 1917, he wrote:

Most of the French country I have seen has been devastated by war, torn up-even the woods look ghastly with their shell-shattered trees; our only recollections of warm and comfortable feelings are the rare times amongst human villages, which happened about twice a year⁴.

These words document the alteration of the landscape perpetrated by the first major conflict of the industrial age, with its massive intrusion of new weapons, modern technology and human force. From an ecological perspective, the Great War might be considered an extreme example of man's exploitation of the land, even though, as the historian W.K. Storey has observed, "few changes...were irrevocable" and "the greatest changes associated with the environment...concerned people's experiences and memories"⁵. The first total war meant that battles took place in all types of open spaces, mainly fields in the countryside, but also forests, deserts, mountains and hills, not to mention the sea and the air. The presence of the frightening, desolate No Man's Land further adds to the extraordinary quality of what has been termed the 'warscape'⁶. Enclosed spaces also gained an unprecedented relevance during the war with the dug-out and the trench becoming emblematic examples of what the geographer YiFu Tuan has called "centers of felt value"⁷. According to him, a space becomes place when the subject gets to know it and ascribes meaning and value to it.

³ Rosenberg's parents emigrated from Lithuania in 1885. For a complete biography of the poet, see J. Moorcroft Wilson, *Isaac Rosenberg: The Making of a Great War Poet. A New Life*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 2007.

⁴ I. Rosenberg, *Isaac Rosenberg*, V. Noakes ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008 (21st Century Oxford Authors), p. 354.

⁵ W.K. Storey, *The First World War: A Concise Global History*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, MD 2014, p. 174.

⁶ The term 'war-scape' was first introduced by Carolyn Nordstrom, who developed it from Arjun Appadurai's work on 'ethnoscape' and other types of landscapes. See C. Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1997, p. 37; A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimenions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1996, p. 33.

⁷ Y.-F. Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1977, p. 4.

Despite the negative and deathly connotation of the trenches in modern memory⁸, at the time they were also synonyms of protection and rest to soldiers who formed an intimate bond with the terrain they were living in. Security, stability and pause are exactly the characteristics Tuan attributes to a ‘place’, as opposed to the openness, threat and movement of a ‘space’⁹. A new relationship between man and the environment was born out of these circumstances since “war”, as McLoughlin has argued,

brings into being a unique situation, unclassifiable as either neutral space or significant place, vital and intense yet temporary and arbitrary, as much a product of experience as of geographical factors, transformative, requiring special consciousness from those within it¹⁰.

A heightened responsiveness to the environment is indeed needed when one is living in close contact with nature and must always be alert to the most minute movement or sound happening in the surroundings for fear of being wounded or killed. It is precisely this special consciousness of the war zone that emerges in Isaac Rosenberg’s poems as he focuses on details, on the small constituents and inhabitants that he carefully perceives, from the mud and dust of the trenches to the animals and plants surviving there. To First World War soldiers, mud was actually an obsession, since its ubiquitous presence in the rain-sodden terrains of France and Flanders negatively affected all their activities, and also went on to become a metaphor for the condition of immobility and stagnation of the first war of attrition¹¹. In his letters, Rosenberg recalls how soldiers “spent most of [their] time pulling each other out of the mud”¹² and finds no words to describe the “huge and terrible sensations of sinking in the mud”¹³. In his poems, mud becomes an even stronger, more powerful and multifaceted entity which is personified as Earth and is depicted as if it were a goddess, to be feared and revered. *Dead Man’s Dump* is based on Rosenberg’s experience of working for the Royal Engineers in the early months of 1917: among his tasks, he had to take wire up to the line and the poem describes one of these outings into No Man’s Land. In “the geography of the trenches”¹⁴, an atmosphere of uttermost horror and desolation, soldiers witness unbearable suffering as they run near or over corpses with their carriages. The Earth,

⁸ An identification between trench and grave is suggested by A. Piette in *War zones*, in *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing*, K. McLoughlin ed., Cambridge University Press, New York 2009, p. 40.

⁹ Y.-F. Tuan, *Space and Place*, p. 6.

¹⁰ K. McLoughlin, *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK/New York 2011, p. 83.

¹¹ For a comprehensive discussion of the presence of mud in soldiers’ writings, see S. Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005, pp. 35-72.

¹² I. Rosenberg, *Isaac Rosenberg*, p. 356.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

¹⁴ S. Das, *War Poetry and the Realm of the Senses*, in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, T. Kendall ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford – New York 2007, p. 97.

“predatory, rapacious”¹⁵ and jealous, is waiting beneath their feet to welcome the dead in what seems a human sacrifice.

Earth has waited for them,
 All the time of their growth
 Fretting for their decay:
 Now she has them at last!
 In the strength of their strength
 Suspended – stopped and held.

What fierce imaginings their dark souls lit
 Earth! have they gone into you?
 Somewhere they must have gone,
 And flung on your hard back
 Is their soul's sack¹⁶

The poet seeks an explanation for such a nightmarish scene and therefore apostrophizes the Earth itself, asking the dramatic, unanswerable question “Earth! have they gone into you?” which refers to the souls of men, while their bodies, “the soul's sack[s]”, have been violently thrown on the ground. On the one hand, the imagery recalls the terrible sucking mud described by soldiers in their records¹⁷; the slimy, sticky matter that swallows the dead and gives them a temporary, or definitive, burial. On the other hand, it tells of a more mysterious, metaphysical force of ancient times, a Mother Earth who claims her children back. Earth becomes a metonymy for an evil, violent nature¹⁸; however, the focus on the atrocities of war filling the rest of the poem seems to imply that nature is not hostile in itself, but it has been transformed and made wicked by war. Near the end of the poem, men are compared to the physical environment which surrounds them and the result is a striking reversal of the natural order:

The grass and coloured clay
 More motion have than they¹⁹,

In war, lower elements such as grass and clay have more vitality and a longer life than human beings. This idea, of the vigor and resilience of nature in sharp contrast to the fragility and transience of human condition, permeates many other war poems of Rosenberg. In

¹⁵ A. Kedzierska, *Nature and War in the Trench Poems of Isaac Rosenberg*, “Lubelskie Materiały Neofilologiczne”, 19, 1995, p. 21.

¹⁶ I. Rosenberg, *Isaac Rosenberg*, pp. 114-115. The poem was completed by May 1917.

¹⁷ Wilfred Owen called the mud “an octopus of sucking clay”. W. Owen, *Selected Letters*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1984, p. 214.

¹⁸ On the imagery of earth in war poetry, see also S. Gilbert, “Rats’ Alley”: *The Great War, Modernism, and the (Anti) Pastoral Elegy*, “New Literary History”, 30, 1999, 1, pp. 179-201.

¹⁹ I. Rosenberg, *Isaac Rosenberg*, p. 116.

The Immortals and *Louse Hunting*²⁰, for example, soldiers are described as they engage in an absurd battle with the minuscule, yet restless and invincible lice.

Although nature in war can turn into an enemy, it is not always portrayed as hostile. The fact of being immersed in horror and death also meant that soldier-poets looked for moments of escape and consolation in the few flashes of beauty and harmony they could catch in the environment. This is the case with *Returning, we hear the larks* and *Break of Day in the Trenches*, two of Rosenberg’s poems which elaborate the pastoral tradition and adapt it to the new conditions of life in war. The pastoral trope, present in literature since antiquity, remains “a key concept for ecocritics²¹” because at its root is “the idea of nature as a stable, enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of human societies²²”. An ecocritical reading of the two poems mentioned before can thus enrich our understanding of Rosenberg by focusing on the symbolic use of natural elements as glimpses of positivity and consistency within the chaos of the hell-scape of war. In his seminal study on the First World War, Fussell has argued that

Recourse to the pastoral is an English mode of both fully gauging the calamities of the Great War and imaginatively protecting oneself against them. Pastoral reference whether to literature or to actual rural localities and objects, is a way of invoking a code to hint by antithesis at the indescribable; at the same time, it is a comfort in itself, like rum, a deep dug-out, or a woolly vest²³.

War poets such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Edward Thomas, Edmund Blunden, David Jones and Ivor Gurney all developed the pastoral strategy of encapsulating elements of the Arcadia into the representation of the violated landscape of the war zones so as to provide a remarkable effect of contrast and disparity, which pointed at the absurdity of war and expressed the nostalgic longing for a return to the past and its natural order²⁴. The same technique is applied to *Returning, we hear the larks* and *Break of Day in the Trenches* which seem “modelled on the Romantic nature lyric²⁵”: a perceptive speaker first describes the landscape, then is attracted by a detail of it and moved to reflect and speculate.

Returning, we hear the larks
Sombre the night is.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

²¹ G. Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, Routledge, London 2004, p. 33.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²³ P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford University Press, New York 2000, p. 235. On the topic, see also E. Longley, *War Pastorals in The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, T. Kendall ed., pp. 461-482; T.C. Ware, “*Shepherd in a Soldier’s Coat*”: *The Presence of Arcadia on the Western Front*, “*South Atlantic Review*”, 68, 2003, 1, pp. 64-84.

²⁴ Stallworthy points out that T.S. Eliot’s *Waste Land* also “looks back to a vanishing Eden, a world of pastoral all but passed”. Stallworthy, *Survivors’ Songs. From Maldon to the Somme*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008, p. 112.

²⁵ N. Claussou, *Perpetuating the Language: Romantic Tradition, the Genre Function, and the Origins of the Trench Lyric*, “*Journal of Modern Literature*”, 30, 2006, 1, p. 120.

And though we have our lives, we know
 What sinister threat lurks there.
 Dragging these anguished limbs, we only know
 This poison-blasted track opens on our camp –
 On a little safe sleep.
 But hark! joy – joy – strange joy.
 Lo! heights of night ringing with unseen larks.
 Music showering our upturned list'ning faces.²⁶

The adjective “sombre”, which typically refers to “inanimate natural objects”²⁷, creates an obscure and depressing atmosphere, reinforced by a “sinister threat lurk[ing]” in the dark, undoubtedly a human enemy. The brutal weapons of men have already proved their disastrous effects and the neologism “poison-blasted” conveys the artificial damage inflicted on the earth. To weary soldiers heading back to camp, the appearance of the larks, or rather, their invisible but musical arrival, is welcomed as a sudden moment of relief and inspiration. The biblical exclamations give voice to an ancient emotion, visceral and powerful, and the repetition of the word “joy” is indicative of the intensity of the reaction. The contrast between the danger represented by men and the solace brought by the song of larks is striking; the intrusion of the pastoral in the war scene thus fulfills its function of exposing the flaws of modern human societies while underlining the never-changing, healing role of nature. Moreover, the lark is not only a beloved bird with particularly melodious sounds, it is the “bird icon of Romantic transcendence”²⁸, as Longley reminds us, and a recurrent presence and symbol in English literature. The poet is negotiating his relation with the tradition while at the same time communicating the new, unexpected significance given to the bird by war. The song of larks indicates that it is dawn, which in turn implies having survived another night.

The importance of dawn at wartime is reaffirmed in *Break of Day in the Trenches*, which has been defined by Fussell “the greatest poem of the war”, as well as a “great traditional poem”²⁹. Just like his Romantic predecessors, Rosenberg first sets the scene, time and place, here already in the title. The early morning, generally associated with ideas of light and renewal, should suggest a positive environment but is disturbed by the prevalently negative connotation of the word “trenches”. Indeed, sunrise was a dangerous time in the trenches as it meant that soldiers could be seen by enemies and had to be vigilant in anticipation of attacks. As Simpson has found, the title “prepares us for the ambivalences that activate the poem”³⁰.

The darkness crumbles away.
 It is the same old druid Time as ever.
 Only a live thing leaps my hand,

²⁶ I. Rosenberg, *Isaac Rosenberg*, p. 113. The poem was written in France in 1917.

²⁷ “sombre, adj. and n.”, *OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com>, last accessed September 30, 2016.

²⁸ E. Longley, *Yeats and Modern Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2013, p. 139.

²⁹ P. Fussell, *The Great War*, p. 250.

³⁰ M. Simpson, *Only a Living Thing – some Notes Towards a Reading of Isaac Rosenberg’s “Break of Day in the Trenches”*, “Critical Survey”, 2, 1990, 2, p. 129.

A queer sardonic rat,
As I pull the parapet's poppy
To stick behind my ear.³¹

In the opening verse, the verb “crumble”, which “makes the darkness seem almost palpable”³², hints at the materiality of the world in which the soldiers are living, at the earth out of which the trench is made. “The same old druid Time” transforms a dynamic situation, the passage from darkness to light, into a static one. A sense of resignation is perceivable in the condition of the soldier, unable to escape his situation and trapped in a waste land in which the only “live thing” is a rat. Unlike the rat, the poppy, which the soldier is picking from the parapet, does not seem to belong to the land of the living anymore. The death of the flower is implied in the act of plucking and with it, an intimate understanding of the alteration that man inflicts on the environment even with a single minimal action. Still, the gesture of the soldier tells of his pastoral admiration for the world's most simple gifts and of a strong desire for beauty and solace amid death and sterility.

The adjectives used to refer to the rat, “queer” and “sardonic”, seem out of place not just because they clash with the typical image of the trench rat that readers expect – an irritating, filthy creature which infested the shelters of soldiers³³ – but also because they attribute exclusively human attitudes to the animal. The grin of the rat is that of those who disdainfully recognize how low their counterparts have fallen, and here lies the brilliant intuition of Rosenberg who understands that, in the upside down world of war, animals have become superior to men, more “human”, not guilty of murders or devastation. The surreal scene which follows, the informal conversation between soldier and rat, functions as a declaration of what the experience of war really was, an absurdity.

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.

³¹ I. Rosenberg, *Isaac Rosenberg*, p. 106. The poet wrote it in June 1916, just a short time after his arrival in the trenches.

³² R.C. Evans, *Perspectives on World War I Poetry*, Bloomsbury Academy, London – New York 2014, p. 122.

³³ An enormous amount of rats populated the war zone. See M. Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, Macmillan, London 2000, pp. 149-151.

If we adopt Garrard's typology of representations of animals, as reported in his *Ecocriticism*³⁴, it is possible to recognize in this poem both anthropomorphism, which likens animals to humans and allows the rat to give a sardonic smile, and allomorphy, that is when animals are presented as different and superior to humans. In this case, the rodent surpasses the man in dignity and in several other aspects as it seems to enjoy more wisdom, greater freedom and, apparently, a longer life expectancy. A profound respect towards the whole natural world is evident in the words of Rosenberg, who acknowledges the damages that war has brought. What we might call today his 'ecological awareness' is expressed first in the dramatic metaphor of earth being eviscerated like a soldier by the ferocious shells, its bowels now exposed; second, in the past participle "torn" which suggests something thin and fragile being violently stripped apart by human hands. As in *Dead Man's Dump*, the Earth is again tacitly compared to a mother, inside whose womb her children return, in a disturbing image which fuses birth and death. The poem ends with a symbolic and touching conclusion which recuperates the opening scene of the poppy in a circular form evocative of the cyclical life of nature.

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

The particularly powerful imagery here presented is not original but belongs to a "common fantasy"³⁵ which associated poppies with soldiers as they were the only flowers that grew on the barren battlefields around the combatants' corpses, and their scarlet hue obviously recalled the colour of blood³⁶. The verse "drop, and are ever dropping" embodies both the tragedy of the destruction of nature and that of the heavy human loss; poppies, like soldiers, continue to die. Yet the speaker and the flower that he affectionately calls "mine" are "safe". But how safe can they be in the war zone? The final verse puts forward some doubts, with the dust possibly indicating the beginning of the decay, a premonition of death for both of them³⁷. Silkin has even recognized a hidden pun in the expression "just a little white", which sounds much like "just a little while"³⁸, an allusion to the precariousness of life in war. The colour of the dust is also enigmatic; it is white as if symbolizing innocence,

³⁴ G. Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, p. 154.

³⁵ Silkin, *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War*, Oxford University Press, London 1972, p. 280.

³⁶ The poppy became a symbol of the First World War casually after a poem by John MacCrae, which gained widespread success in 1915. It read: "In Flanders fields the poppies grow / Between the crosses, row on row". The poppy was later used by the American and the British Legion as a symbol of remembrance and commemoration. For more on the history of the poppy, see N. Saunders, *The Poppy: A History of Conflict, Loss, Remembrance, and Redemption*, Oneworld Publications, London 2013.

³⁷ Hureye Reis finds that the parapet "ultimately becomes the graveyard for the poppies and the soldiers alike". H. Reis, "I Pull the Parapet's Poppy / To Stick Behind My Ear": Nature in the Poetry of World War I in *The Future of Ecocriticism: New Horizons*, S. Oppermann ed., Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle Upon Tyne 2011, p. 332.

³⁸ J. Silkin, *Out of Battle*, p. 280.

and perhaps hope, albeit deceitful. The light tone that closes the poem is in contrast with the darkness of the opening, but in this poem of reversals of roles we have learnt that dark might mean safety and light danger. The last stanza best documents the close relationship between men and nature as perceived by Rosenberg; the poppy and the soldier, emblems of the two worlds, are physically connected through the roots. They are equated as subjects to the same fate, victims of the war, in a correspondence which highlights the common impotence and vulnerability before such a destructive force.

Break of Day in the Trenches lends itself to an ecocritical reading because it strives, as the ecological perspective does, to “see how all things are interdependent”³⁹. The poem presents a “panoramic view of life – which includes the human, the animal, and the natural worlds”⁴⁰ interrelated in an organic whole responding to the ongoing crisis. Buell has stated that in an “environmentally oriented work [...] the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history”⁴¹. The above analysis of three poems by Isaac Rosenberg has revealed how strong the relationship between man, nature and the First World War is. The poet displays an appreciation of the many living things around him, but the human interest is still central, however concealed. To a poet like Rosenberg who, unlike other war poets, tended to avoid the graphic representation of suffering and death⁴², depicting the devastating effects of war on the environment indeed serves as a powerful metaphor for its tragic impact on human lives. The ravaged landscape of war, with its natural potential for beauty and growth tragically wasted, can therefore be read as a mirror to the mutilated bodies and shell-shocked consciences of an equally wasted youth whom, in his poem *August 1914*, Rosenberg defined “a burnt space through ripe fields”⁴³.

³⁹ R. Kerridge, *Introduction*, in *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*, R. Kerridge – N. Samuels ed., Zed Books, New York 1998, p. 7.

⁴⁰ A. Banerjee, *Isaac Rosenberg the War Poet*, “Sewanee Review”, 122, 2014, p. 315.

⁴¹ L. Buell, *The Environmental Imagination. Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1995, pp. 7-8.

⁴² In a letter to Mrs Cohen in summer 1916, Rosenberg writes, “[The war] should be approached in a colder way, more abstract, with less of the million feelings everybody feels; or all should be concentrated in one distinguished emotion.” I. Rosenberg, *Isaac Rosenberg*, p. 304.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 108. The poem, written in 1916, is a bitter reflection on the outbreak of the war and its consequences on Rosenberg’s generation.



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