Rosenberg's Strengths Compared to Wilfred Owen

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On "Dead Man's Dump" by Isaac Rosenberg
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For every person who has read a poem of Rosenberg's, a few hundred must have read something of Wilfred Owen's. And yet Rosenberg is the greater poet. Both men were rather like unguilty angels who had fallen with the rout into pandemonium, and their verse is an attempt to survey creatively their new midnight universe. Owen may have carried a little more of the old heaven with him, but Rosenberg understood better the brutal anonymity of the war, and the true dimensions of the tragedy. Owen never quite became more than a good Georgian, and while it would be rash to speculate about the course of his literary career had he lived, his work has none of the rampant, impatient eagerness to reach beyond itself which is so frequently startling in the other poet's work. There was something Wordsworthian about the Georgians, but it was a Wordsworth stripped of stature; and it is stature that one never quite discovers in Owen's own poems. His hatred of war is too excessively a hatred of its physical effects on the lives of the young Englishmen under his command.

One cannot help feeling that Owen is caught and held back by the sight of all the suffering—which, after all, is only one anguished corner of the whole intolerable picture. Owen seems little concerned with any reality that is not to be penetrated by pity alone. He seems to converge his perspective lines toward the hospital cot rather than to unfold them from that terminus of pity. The vision he offers is poignant but incomplete, and too regretful to be great. It is a picture made up of many moving accidents—so many that the form of the tragedy is sometimes obscured.

Rosenberg's poetry does not stop short of the pity and tenderness in Owen's, but passes beyond it into something new. He is aware that the suffering of war is too great to be comforted, and he cannot mistake pity for succor; in his poetry, suffering achieves something like classical composure. Details are lost in bold simplicity of form, and his victims have a heroic moral strength, a stoicism which invites the mind not to the frustrating pity of helplessness, but to something like the re-creative pity of the ancient stage.

As an example of this attitude one may look at a short passage from "Dead Man's Dump," one of the greatest poems of World War I. It is directly, even starkly concerned with suffering, and yet its terrible picture of agony never hinders the poise, the freedom of inquiry that is maintained throughout. In this poem, so impersonal and detached in comparison with much of Owen's poetry, there is a hard, almost shocking, concreteness and immediacy of imagery that makes Owen seem vague and general by contrast:

A man's brains splattered on
A stretcher-bearer's face;
His shook shoulders slipped their load,
But when they bent to look again
The drowning soul was sunk too deep for human tenderness.
They left the dead with the older dead,
Stretched at the cross roads.
Burnt black with strange decay
Their sinister faces lie,
The lid over each eye,
The grass and coloured clay
More motion have than they
Joined to the great sunk silences.

One is not so much aware of the single, the private, death here, as one is aware of the
representative and universal quality in the death which is described. All "the older dead" and all who will die seem to participate symbolically in this one soldier's death. The ineffectual resentment we might otherwise feel is guarded against by very carefully handled suggestions of inevitability, and, even as we watch, the action reaches and seems to continue beyond that point where human tenderness can follow, down into an antique, stoic, underworld of "great sunk silences." This soldier is less a private person than a point at which the fate of men in war becomes for a moment visible.

And it is significant that no facile, gratuitous commentary on that fate is offered in the whole eighty-six lines of "Dead Man's Dump." The poem's strength lies in the composure it maintains when faced by human pain, in its refusal to indulge an easy grief or extend an invitation to tears. It shows a sure control of words moving through dangerous emotions at disciplined speeds and leading the reader, by their very restraint and poise, into a fuller understanding of human dignity.

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