

ROBERT MAGELLA

Rupert Brooke and Isaac Rosenberg Myth, Modernity, and the Destabilization of “Georgian War Poetry”

Modernism is the dominant literary category by which English literature of the early twentieth century has come to be defined. This critical trend, initiated by the Modernists themselves, has perpetuated the marginalization of non-Modernist literatures of the time. One of these literatures considered outside the span of “Modernism” was Georgian War Poetry of the First World War. The Modernists considered these poets too old-fashioned in style and subject to be “modern,” claiming that truly modern literature would not appear until the conventions in which these Georgians worked were shed by post-war poets like T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats. The dominance of English Modernism in the contemporary literary historical perspective means that, like the Modernists, most literary critics today would argue that Georgian War Poetry was more conventional, and therefore not as good or meaningful as the Modernists’.

Yeats, for that matter, expressed overwhelming dismissal of almost all First World War poetry when compiling the 1936 *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. In his introduction he professes “a distaste for certain poems written in the midst of the great war,” for he sees these poems merely as manifestations of “passive suffering” (xxxiv). Pointing out that these poems are already “in all anthologies,” Yeats contends that their time of “considerable fame” should come to a close for “If war is necessary...it is best to forget its suffering as we do the discomfort of a fever, remembering our comfort at midnight when our temperature fell” (xxxiv-xxxv). It is not surprising, then, that Rupert Brooke’s “War Sonnets” are not included in the

anthology, his only contribution being one short poem written just before the war, and furthermore that perhaps the most prominent recorder of suffering, Wilfred Owen, is utterly absent. The subject of the war, however, cannot be Yeats' only grievance with war poetry, for many poems *about* the war but written afterwards find inclusion in his book, like Herbert Read's "End of a War" and the four selections of Sassoon's work written during the '20s. Having disparaged the war poets, Yeats moves on to suggest another contention about their poetry, writing: "Ten years after the war certain poets combined the modern vocabulary...learnt from Eliot, with the sense of suffering of the war poets, that sense of suffering no longer passive" (xxxv-xxxvi). The war poets' most egregious flaw, then, according to Yeats, was that they lacked a "modern vocabulary" to give their suffering activity and purpose, their language was outmoded and their suffering could only be channeled into meaningful poetry after the advent of Modernist form by the likes of Eliot. Yeats' anthology is exemplary of a hierarchical value judgment that, I would contend, extends beyond the Modernist critics who introduced it to our popular critical conception of twentieth century literary history. Philippa Lyon may hesitate about the hierarchical nature of Yeats' claims, writing that "In excluding Owen and others from his anthology, Yeats constructs and, indeed, cordons off war poetry as a distinct, unique (but perhaps subordinate) category of literature" (78), but to me there seems little doubt that Yeats argues for the subordination of Georgian War Poetry to Modernism as genuine modern verse on the basis of outmoded language and conventional form.

With this project I reclaim the reputations of the poets Rupert Brooke and Isaac Rosenberg by situating the stigma of archaic convention and patriotic fervor in the "war" poetry of Rupert Brooke, and simultaneously locating the innovation in the "Georgian" poetry of Isaac Rosenberg. Based on my reevaluations of these poets, I claim that the unity of Georgian War Poetry, a group of poets consistently identified with Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, and Rosenberg, falls apart upon closer inspection. The distinctions between Brooke and Rosenberg are infinitely more important to our literary historical conception of the first two decades of the twentieth century than their sometimes-shared subject of The Great War, and these distinctions should be clarified through the consistent qualification of the appellation "Georgian" or "War Poet" as applied to either. This destabilization of Georgian War Poetry as a cohesive literary group opens the door for new evaluations of the poets involved with that group, specifically Isaac Rosenberg, in whom I see potential for a new valuation as a transitional figure for

Modernism between the pre-war Imagist movement and the post-war advances of Eliot, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and others.

Since I propose to destabilize this category of Georgian War Poetry, it is worth taking the time, at this point, to more fully understand just what is meant by “Georgian” poetry. In its broadest sense, Georgian poetry is any poetry written during the reign of George V in England, roughly from 1910 to 1936. More specifically the term refers to the “Georgian renaissance,” a poetic repudiation of both the didactic imperialism and the overly introspective beautified verses of the Aesthetes at the turn of the century. The Georgian renaissance was more of a trend than a single, unified movement, a trend among younger poets, emerging by 1911, wanting to cleanse themselves of the Edwardian period—it was an attempted revival of the importance of poetry in society whereby “the nature of poetry itself was undergoing drastic changes; a new, twentieth century poetic was being created” (Ross 13). Insofar as they reacted to “the Romantic-Victorian tradition” and attempted to reassert the importance of poetry among the public, “the young Georgian rebels of whatever coterie—realists or Vorticists, Futurists or Imagists... Ezra Pound or Rupert Brooke” (22) participated in the Georgian *revival*.

Robert Ross’ term “Georgian *revolt*” more nearly reflects what I mean when I say “Georgian poetry,” because “beyond such common ground” as I have already described, “the movement toward modernism took two divergent paths” (22). The Georgian revival was equally the business of the “Georgian” poets as it was of the avant-garde Georgians, who “sought novelty in both matter and manner,” innovation in both content and form, while the self-titled “Georgians” of Edward Marsh’s anthologies like Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, and Robert Graves, “tolerated the old matter...saw some value, aesthetic or personal, in retaining certain of the traditional poetic techniques” (23). Both avant-garde and Georgian poetry sprang forth from the same Georgian revival, and though they became rather distinct responses to a common impulse, their shared origin suggests that the Georgian revolt and the poets of Marsh’s anthologies might be considered “precursors” (Stead 81) to the post-war Modernism. However, within the auspices of this paper, the confluence between poetries of the Georgian revival is only ancillary: primarily by this digression I mean to establish that when I refer to “Georgian poets” or “Georgian poetry,” I mean only those poets of the Georgian revolt, those most closely associated with the Marsh/Brooke crowd, whose poetry sought freshness and modernity in tone but remained fairly conservative in its loyalty to traditional poetic form.

Rupert Brooke is one of the most visible and well known of the Georgian poets, and to a great extent he was the most conventional in his war poetry. Rupert Brooke's premature death fundamentally separates his poetry from that of later Georgian soldier-poets, as he was denied access to the war experience that so altered the poetry of the latter. Reading Brooke's poetry outside of this "war poetry" classification, though, allows it to be recognized for all its merit as a fundamentally pre-war poetry. Placing the category of war poetry more squarely on the shoulders of combatant poets like Rosenberg more correctly identifies the combatant poets' innovative poetries with modern war experience. In contrast to Brooke, Isaac Rosenberg is one of the lesser-known Georgian War Poets, and in his poetry I find a neglected but innovative talent. Nominally a Georgian poet, Rosenberg adapted and rejected Georgian convention in various ways that not only place him closer to the Modernists of the 20s, but in ways which show that even poetry not as radically unconventional as the Modernists' was just as capable of accurately and poetically expressing modern experience.

Demythologizing Rupert Brooke as man and poet allows me to encourage greater distinction between pre-war Georgian Poetry and Georgian War Poetry, lack of which has long led to flawed interpretations of both categories. Loosening the ironclad solidity of the Georgian War Poet label likewise prepares Rosenberg to be integrated into a broadening, revisionary conception of Modernism, which frees itself from the elitism of its most luminary stewards. Looking back across the century that now separates us from the beginning of the world's first "modern" war, the significance of the war and the poetry written during it, much as Yeats would prefer to deny it, in its relation to conceptions of modernity in the twentieth century, become apparent.

"If I should die, think only this of me:"

Reflections on Rupert Brooke as Man, not Myth

The death of Rupert Brooke in early 1915 could arguably be considered the first literary milestone of the First World War. Thus, at the outset of the unimaginably violent debut of emerging twentieth-century modernity, Rupert Brooke had already exited, stage right. Such a death as he suffered, already a favorite literary son of Georgian England, was ripe for sentimental and patriotic memorializing so that right up until the curtain fell in 1918, Brooke was never far off in the wings of the theatre of war. His spectral presence still remains there even as the production of that war is re-staged by literary historians, his role rewritten, beatified as a naïve

jingoist. This mythologized version of Brooke, remembered for how he died rather than for how he lived, persists then as a fallacy.

The bulk of Rupert Brooke's works were written well before the world, and Brooke himself, even began to think of world war. His poetry was crafted in the Edwardian and Georgian eras, a time when England and her people harbored hopes for a bright future, and a time when more than ever before, socialist and feminist concerns were coming to the fore among the privileged middle-class into which Rupert was born. In spite of these hopes for societal change, the strictness of the Victorian social structure remained a powerful force in Edwardian life, and "the struggle between orthodoxy and emancipation that was played out in Edwardian Britain" (Delaney 4) would culminate for Brooke in his circle of friends at Cambridge, which Virginia Woolf, herself a member of the sympathetic but distinct Bloomsbury Group, would later dub the "Neo-pagans." Justin Brooke, Jacques and Gwen Raverat, Frances Cornford, Katharine Cox, and the Olivier sisters (Margery, Brynhild, Daphne, and Noel)—these would be the British youths, all born and bred of wealth and education, who would come together in 1909 to indulge in love without sex, to hope for a future without aging, and in short to worship youth and vitality without social purpose, living simply in the countryside.

Neo-Paganism was an attempt by these young Britons for compromise between the two avenues of non-conventional politics and intellectualism available in Cambridge society in 1909; it was "Fabian hope—without...asceticism...and Apostolic intimacy—without the claustrophobic intellectualism and hypochondria" (Delaney 51). It was simultaneously repudiation of pompous, overly cerebral academia and of reactionary anti-Victorian debauchery and abandon as carried out by H.G. Wells in his numerous, licentious trysts. Brooke and his friends hoped to be chaste rebels, educated but unambitious, celebrating youth, friendship, and the simple life of the British countryside. Youth, Chastity, and Hope; these were the qualities that Neo-Paganism revered most, and the passage of time could but erode the first two of these. Marriage, among the Neo-Pagans considered a prerequisite for heterosexual activity, was also the most tangible threat to their youth as it represented an end to one's bachelor days and entrance into adulthood, and was therefore to be avoided. But, as "the Neo-Pagan ideal of comradeship was bound to clash with the realities of desire and possessiveness in young men and women alike" (42-43), their armor of chastity would crack and over time their carefree youth would grow more distant, so that three years after the group's formation, Rupert Brooke had an emotional breakdown as his intellectual and spiritual comrades, and the hope which had so possessed them, dissolved.

Rupert Brooke's involvement with his "Neo-Pagan" friends also points to another formative characteristic of his life—that he spent most of it among a very narrow group of people. Indeed, most of the members of the other groups with which Brooke would associate, Bloomsbury, the Fabians, and the Apostles, were either well-off middle class public school and university boys or their sympathetic and equally affluent female relations. What is more is that in nearly all social circles, Brooke's good looks and winning personality made him the center of attention, so much so that his admirers range from fellow Rugby alum and Georgian poet Geoffrey Keynes, who called Brooke "by far the most wonderful person I have ever known" (xiv), to W.B. Yeats who suggested he was the "handsomest man in England;" from fellow Georgian and future war poet Siegfried Sassoon who, meeting Brooke for breakfast in 1914, recalled his "assured perception that I was in the presence of one on whom had been conferred all the invisible attributes of a poet. To this his radiant good looks seemed subsidiary" (Lehmann 116), to Leonard Woolf who, upon first meeting Brooke, wrote: "That is exactly what Adonis must have looked like in the eyes of Aphrodite" (Hale 13).

Living in this small and privileged world of wealthy, liberal ennui—a world of which Brooke was frequently the center—Brooke could easily have become self-centered, egotistical, and disenchanted with the world, insofar as *the* world was *his* world of friendships and colleagues, the most important of which were associated with the "Neo-pagans." After the collapse of this group, a collapse that precipitated Brooke's nervous breakdown in the winter of 1912, one begins to understand why Brooke enthusiastically enlisted for service when war came, for, as he wrote to his one-time paramour Noel Olivier in October of 1914, he believed that the war would provide "a solution to their troubles...not the end of their hopes, but a chance to renew them" (Delaney xvii). Here, as in most cases I would argue, Brooke speaks from a distinctly personal perspective, as an egotist rather than a patriot. The hopes he wishes to renew are not those of England (indeed industrializing imperial England's hopes were mostly antithetical and frustrating to a Fabian who worshipped the pastoral and scorned public employment), but a rediscovery of the *hope* of Neo-Paganism. No matter how different the goal of his hope as a soldier might be from the hopes he had in 1909, he would regain the feeling of hope itself from participation in the war, and thus seems to have conceived of the war as a solution to a distinctly personal crisis.

We cannot know what purpose Brooke may have found for himself and his poetry in the following years of war, nor do we know what kind of *war* poetry Brooke would have gone on to write. All we have is the *pre-war* poetry of a bright

young man who would look upon a battlefield but once at Antwerp (and even then not participate in combat), an incomplete *œuvre* or, as G.E. Woodberry put it, “not so much a work of art as an artist in his birth trying the wings of genius” (vi). Siegfried Sassoon, who until 1915 had followed a similarly privileged path and written poetry strikingly similar to Brooke’s, went on to write some of the conflict’s most cynical anti-war poems. Might we have expected a similar development in Brooke? Whatever the possibilities in answer to this question, it is precisely the fact that such a development was not realized that must draw a clear distinction for critics between Brooke and the later Georgian War Poets.

It has been the construction of Brooke’s fame after death, the miscarriage of Brooke’s posthumous reputation, a sentimental memorializing of his “innocent” death through his potent use as a tool of propaganda in the years following his death, which has so obscured the divide between singular poet and larger poetic category, bringing Brooke to the fore to be lauded or scorned in equal proportion. While Edward Marsh, in the preface to his 1916 edition of *Georgian Poetry*, simply wrote that “Rupert Brooke, who seemed to have everything that is worth having, died last April in the service of his country” (v), much more typical of the tone that would also be taken up by the likes of G.E. Woodberry and Geoffrey Keynes, Brooke’s literary stewards in the post-war years, are the words of Winston Churchill in writing Brooke’s obituary for *The Times* three days after his death:

Rupert Brooke is dead... the poet-soldier told with all the simple force of genius the sorrow of youth about to die, and the sure triumphant consolations of a sincere and valiant spirit...he was all that one would wish England’s noblest sons to be in the days when no sacrifice but the most precious is acceptable, and the most precious is that which is most freely proffered. (5)

This same sentimental memorializing has long confused or over-simplified our reading of Brooke’s “War Sonnets” by encouraging us to view them through a very narrow biographical lens, bounded by the years 1914 and 1915. As Delaney begins his work, Brooke’s “true fate [was] to die young; posterity added a false one, that he died innocent” (ix). This innocence has been agreed upon by both critics and acclaimers of Brooke, and it is this piece of the Rupert Brooke myth which is the most problematic.

Rupert Brooke has always been remembered for the cameo role he played at the beginning of the war, and never for the larger role he played in pre-war Georgian

and Edwardian literature. I assert that we might be better served in re-staging our literary-historical productions of both literary periods. Over these some one hundred intervening years the “propagandistic” poetry of Brooke has fallen out of vogue, except on occasions where its naïveté is scoffed at, and so too has the reputation of that group of poets to which Brooke’s name has always been bound, the Georgian War Poets. By better understanding the man and poet Rupert Brooke was before the First World War, we can better appreciate his “War Sonnets” as a representation of pre- and early war literary trends and societal conflicts. This recognition also allows us to become less fixated on the traditionalism and nostalgia of early Georgian War poetry, of which the “War Sonnets” are so typical, thereby allowing us to acknowledge the innovation approaching modernity of later war poets working in the Georgian style.

Having thus tried to remove the obscuring veil of myth from Rupert Brooke, we can now re-read his “War Sonnets” in a new light. It is worth noting, to begin with, that though these poems are called sonnets, only one of them, “Safety,” follows a standard Shakespearean rhyme scheme. That of the others varies greatly, some beginning with a Shakespearean octet and ending with a Petrarchan volta like “The Soldier,” and others like “The Dead (III),” beginning with a Petrarchan octet and ending with an unorthodox sestet of *efegfg*. Further, only “Safety” and “The Dead (III)” textually adhere to a coupling of one eight and one six-line stanza. In the three other sonnets, words that complete the rhyme are often displaced onto a new, shorter, subsidiary line. This can be immediately observed in the irregularity of indentation in these poems. Obviously the poet, while given to the premise of working within the sonnet form, is not afraid to alter this form to his purposes as he sees fit. This semi-innovation of form, a reordering of rhyming couplets and rearrangement of inherited forms, not quite dogmatic but far from revolutionary, is typically Georgian. What is not so typical, at least in relation to pre-war Georgian poetry, is the conservative patriotism of these poems, for which they have become infamous. This tone I attribute mainly to Brooke’s egocentricity which, along with the Georgian penchant for abandoning objectivity in trying to record a realistic depiction of life as lived by the individual poet, allowed and endorsed Brooke’s expression of his post-Neo-pagan fatalism and naïve excitement at the prospect of war as a respite from the ennui of civilian life, two emotions which combined into a highly personal, quasi-religious, patriotism.

The first of these sonnets, entitled “Peace” poignantly illustrates the kind of relation between peacetime and wartime that might have inspired Brooke to

wholeheartedly endorse the cause of war. The poet begins his sonnet by thanking “God...Who has matched us with His / hour, / And caught our youth, and wakened us from / sleeping,” (1-4). Before the war the youth of which this poet was a part were asleep, and now that war has begun they leave behind idleness in a manner he likens to “swimmers into cleanness leaping” (6). This “cleanness” also stands in contrast to the ambiguity which the poet has observed in peace, the “half-men... And all the little emptiness of love” and “shame” (9-11). In 1914 these youth have “found release there, / Where there’s no ill, no grief,” that is, death comes swiftly and the dead cannot be cried over in sadness, which he finds appropriate considering that death through “sleep has / mending, / Naught broken save [the dead’s] body, lost but breath” (12-15). Death, for the poet, cleanses the soul that lives past “body” and “breath” of life’s impurities, and finds solace in the end which death brings. Through dying, he asserts, one journeys to a place where remains “Nothing to shake the laughing heart’s long peace / there / But only agony, and that has ending” (16-18). For this youth, so overcome by the pointlessness of peacetime and the pure finality of dying, this glorification of death is based upon the self-serving benefits of the soul’s repose after death, only obliquely acknowledging the “agony” of dying, so that to him “the worst friend and enemy is but Death” (19).

This somewhat self-centered perspective on dying in war is reiterated in Brooke’s next sonnet, “Safety.” Again the poet revels in the exposure of his and his comrades’ “hid security” of old “in the dark tides of the world that rest”; the loss of that restful and ingenuous past which, erroneously, those within it considered safe, rhetorically asking “Who is so safe as we?” (2-4). This safety has been overshadowed by coming closer to “all things undying,” natural things of vitality and nature like “The winds, and morning, tears of men and mirth...birds singing, and clouds flying, / And sleep, and freedom, and the autumnal earth” (5-8). In leaving the old security and embracing these new, living, natural ornaments of eternal safety, the poet and his cohorts “have built a house that is not for Time’s throwing...a peace unshaken by pain for ever” and in so doing have built themselves a world in which “War knows no power” (9-11). The closing lines of the poem accentuate the seeming contradiction that the poet considers himself “Safe...Secretly armed against all death’s endeavour...And if these poor limbs die, safest of all” (11-12, 14). In binding his soul to “undying” nature though, and living his life thus in vitality and action, he arms his soul to go beyond death to the safety of perpetuity beyond “these poor limbs,” when his essence will become “safest of all.”

The first of two “War Sonnets” entitled “The Dead,” Brooke’s third piece makes explicit the things that he believes the dead have sacrificed, and the reason those

sacrifices are meaningful. Though through dying the dead have become “rich,” no longer “so lonely and poor of old,” the poet recognizes that they have had to relinquish much too, have had to lay “the world away; [pour] out the red / Sweet wine of youth; [give] up the years to be / Of work and joy” (1-2, 4-6). Theirs is a sacrifice justified, though, by the promise of a revival of a better world from the past. In dying the dead have “brought us...Holiness, lacked so long...Honour has come back, as a king, to earth, / And paid his subjects with a royal wage” (9-12). By sacrificing their sensory and sensuous youths, the dead have gained the richer prize for the world, one that has not been seen since the days of kings and “royal wage.” The present age is one of “dearth” devoid of such things as “Holiness” and “Honour,” but by the willingness to sacrifice themselves, the dead reintroduce “Nobleness” to the world, and as the poet sees himself and his fellow “subjects” as heir to the riches brought by death, the dead have allowed them to “come into [their] heritage” (13-14).

As odious as all this talk of holiness and sacrifice may seem to the post-war consciousness, it is important to remind ourselves that in his war sonnets “Brooke departed from the manner most characteristic of the Georgians” because he was compelled to write about something with which he had little to no personal experience. His Georgian adeptness at taking personal experience and expressing it poetically was of little use to him and “it was left to other members of [the Georgians] to bring what might be called their ‘technique of honesty’ to fulfillment in poems which faced the reality of that horror” (Stead 84). Considering the poems as war poems necessitates the foregrounding of their inexperienced patriotism, for “Brooke’s sonnets are ‘war poems’” only “in the sense that they are vehicles for imperialist attitudes” (Silkin 67). As Dante Gabriel Rossetti once wrote, “A sonnet is a moment’s monument,” and beyond providing in hindsight an opposing portrait of naïveté to the cynicism of later war poets, Brooke’s sonnets depict a moment at the dawn of the twentieth century in which a young, liberally-minded poet of professed “modernity” could still appropriate these types of sentiments to his poetry; Brooke could, in depicting “Death in an aura of public sympathy” find “an ennobling quality that was privately satisfying” (67). As Jon Silkin further accurately surmises, our emotional response to these poems cannot be allowed to influence our intellectual estimation of them, “however much one detests the chauvinistic angelicizing of the soldier killed in battle” for “His mission may have been to make such a death seem more noble, but not to bring about wholesale slaughter” (68). We cannot allow a lack of foresight on Brooke’s part to weigh too heavily on our retrospective analyses of these works, but rather should recognize

the poems as contemporary reactions with a certain amount of immediate and introspective insight.

In his next sonnet, also entitled "The Dead," we see Brooke, the neo-Romantic, continuing his poetic preoccupation with the nature of death, likening man's life and death to the changing seasons. In the first stanza, the poet illustrates the vitality of the lives of those now dead, their sensuous lives in which they had "seen movement, and heard music...loved...Felt the quick stir of wonder; sat alone; / Touched flowers and furs and cheeks" (5-8). Though diverse and multifaceted have their lives been, the poet kills them simply and concisely as he merely writes: "All this is / ended" (8-9). This opposing complexity and simplicity is a phenomenon which the poet also observes in nature, for while once there have been "waters blown by changing winds to laughter / And lit by the rich skies all day," eventually "Frost, with a gesture, stays the ways...And wandering loveliness" (10-13). The beauty of the lively waters is but replaced by another beauty, "a white / Unbroken glory," a wintry serenity of "shining peace" (13-15). A parallel is thus drawn, wherein the rich, happy, and violent spring of a man's life must eventually be quieted by his coming death, as winter's frost, to supplant that beauty with an equally beautiful serenity.

The final sonnet in the series, "The Soldier," is undoubtedly the most unabashedly patriotic, the only poem in which death serves a greater purpose to England than the cleansing it offers the dead man himself. Interestingly, "When Brooke sent [Wilfrid] Gibson a copy of the poem it was titled 'The Recruit.'" However, "Gibson thought that 'The Soldier' would be better, and that is how it has always appeared. There is no published evidence as to whether this was discussed with Brooke" (Hart). The distinction between the two titles greatly influences how the poem is read, for a *recruit* has typically never been in battle, while the title *soldier* usually means that an individual has. The fact that Brooke originally had given this poem the former title could perhaps be interpreted as a subconscious admission to his inexperience in the realm of war, and is a tempting conclusion to make, but one that could not be made with any degree of certainty due to the lack of published evidence on the editorial process for the poem. What we do have, though, is a poem that certainly struck a chord with many recruits, and many more patriotic civilians, throughout the duration of the war. However, too often has the poem been read by itself, I believe, for when this poem is placed alongside the reverence for a "heritage" of the past, a heritage of "Nobleness," in a time of kings, the patriotism of the poem in 1914 is called into question. Is it England, the turn of the century empire, the England of "dearth" in the present which the poet hopes his corpse will forever embody, or isn't it rather more likely a more personal, apolitical England, which

“gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam” (6). The England the poet is glad to memorialize in death is not the grand empire, the England of 1914, but instead an England of time immemorial, a private England of the countryside. The poet is indebted to England for having been “Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home” (8). The “thoughts by England / given” which he so fondly gives back, are of “sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day; / And laughter, learnt of friends” (11-14), in essence, an England known particularly to him, *his* England. The poet’s entire nation has narrowed down to the role of a childhood friend, whose kindness he repays—his death becomes a *personal* favor, not the more general jolly patriotism that readers have often been led to believe was either Brooke’s most glorious purpose, or his most damning fault.

Rupert Brooke’s last poem, chronologically, is an unfinished work written less than a month before his death in April 1915, simply titled “Fragment.” Here, as he is rapidly approaching the prospect of real battle and real death in the Gallipoli campaign, we see the hopeful assuredness of his war poetry give way to ambiguity and spectral eeriness. The world in which the poet moves and which he observes is indeed ghastly, as he can watch “at the windows...my friends at table, / Or standing in the doorway, / Or coming out into the darkness,” and yet, like ghosts “No one could see me” (3-6). Moonlight, so dear a friend from nature to the poet, is not present and the sky is only “cloudy” and “moonless,” illumination only possible “against the lamplight” (2, 14). He can think of his friends only “in pity...Heedless, within a week of battle...Pride in their strength and in the weight and firmness / And link’d beauty of bodies,” and this pity is multiplied by the premonition that “This gay machine of splendour’d soon be broken, / Thought little of, pashed, scattered...” (8-12). The scene gets truly phantasmal in the final stanza, as the poet recalls how he “could but see them...pass like coloured shadows, thinner than filmy glass,” and assured, as though also remembering, he sees the death of all his comrades, as their peaceful apparitions “fainter than the wave’s faint light,” break “to phosphorous out in the night, / Perishing things and strange ghosts—soon to die / To other ghosts—this one, or that, or I” (14-19). Gone are the riches which the dead will inherit, gone is the cleanness and conclusiveness of death, supplanted by impending spectral confusion where “pashed” human machinery is neither wholly dead nor alive—a terrible fate towards which the poet inevitably feels himself moving as well.

The sentiments of Rupert Brooke’s “War Sonnets,” are very difficult to empathize with across the chasm of the First World War, but at the very least in reading these poems we must make a conscious effort to *sympathize* with them by recognizing

the character of the man who wrote them. For, as George Woodberry writes, albeit in praise of Brooke's "literary control...How should it be otherwise for a youth well-born, well-bred, in college air?" (vi). By identifying Rupert Brooke—the egotistical, self-centered youth, the neo-Romantic who worshipped nature, the young man whose narrow world had come crumbling down in 1912, for whom youth was a thing more precious than gold and for whom death before old age not an altogether unsettling prospect in the abstract—we begin to see that Rupert Brooke could scarcely have written his poetry in 1914 much differently, and realize how typical the feelings he expressed then might have been among others of his class. The canonization, and subsequent condemnation, of his literary reputation has been built upon the willingness of reactionary critics to believe the sanctifying lie that Brooke was born, lily-white and pure in 1914 already a perfect English public schoolboy in his twenties, and that by 1915 this angel, this Apollo of Albion had sacrificed himself for England, parliament, the prime minister, and the Union Jack. If Rupert Brooke could only be stripped of the fallacy, made to be no longer an angel to pray to or shoot down, but be seen simply as a man, condemnation might be tempered to criticism, and exultation moderated to sober and due recognition, as I have tried to do here.

Per Ardua ad Alienatio:

Isaac Rosenberg "Through Adversity to Estrangement"

On the first of April 1918 Isaac Rosenberg died aged twenty-seven, the same age as Rupert Brooke when he died. Besides this, Brooke and Rosenberg share little else. Rupert Brooke had died eight months after the war had begun, while Rosenberg's death came just seven months before the Armistice. Brooke had died from blood poisoning after being bitten by a mosquito aboard a battleship in the Ægean Sea—Rosenberg died in close combat with an enemy soldier on the battlefield. Brooke had been born into privilege and class—Rosenberg was born three years later into impoverished obscurity. Brooke spent his time in the English countryside, well cultivated by public schooling—Rosenberg spent most of his life in urban London's East End, and attended State school only for seven years until age 14. While Brooke was making prominent literary friendships at Cambridge in 1905, Rosenberg was standing over vats of acid working as an apprentice to an engraver, "chained" to a "fiendish mangling machine" (Cohen 28), as he would describe it, using the money he earned to pay his family's expenses. Rupert Brooke was charming, good-looking, a happy and hopeful young man who won friends immediately upon meeting

people—Isaac Rosenberg was diminutive, awkward, serious, and “deficient” in both classical good looks and “in the social graces” (36).

If Rupert Brooke can be said to have been a poet of competing passions, at times staunchly liberal and at others a model conservative, at home with both the Rugby and Bedales crowd, alternately hopeful Fabian and patriotic fatalist, then Isaac Rosenberg could conversely be described as a man of competing estrangements. As a poor Jew who spent his early years on Whitechapel Road, he sought a place beside the Anglo elite of literary and artistic London. Among the British authors, editors, and artists he came to know, Rosenberg would consistently be regarded as an outsider, talented and sometimes brilliant, but an outsider nonetheless. At the same time Rosenberg was unwilling to accept the menial labor and religious study toward which his poverty, his heritage, and his parents compelled him. He aspired to serve the muses of both art *and* poetry—a British-Jewish Poet-Painter, who in his works attempted to straddle the gap between traditional and avant-garde. While at the Slade School of art, which Rosenberg attended only through the generous philanthropy of sympathetic donors like Mrs. Herbert Cohen and the Jewish Educational Aid Society, the order of the day was for experimental styles of Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Fauvism, and Vorticism. Rosenberg was not satisfied to wholly take up any of these styles. Nor was he willing to follow the staunch traditionalism being practiced by painters at the Royal Academy of Art. So, too, did he refuse to commit himself to any of the multitude of literary responses to the Victorians emerging in the first two decades of the twentieth century, simultaneously estranged from each of these poetic coteries. While at first he attempted to circumvent contemporary poetic styles by turning to adept but imitative verse, confirming his great admiration for William Blake, John Keats, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Rosenberg would later adapt his use of traditional literary influence to move beyond imitation as both he and his poetry matured. Likewise, although Rosenberg was acquainted with and somewhat influenced by the Imagist school of poetry identified by Ezra Pound and T.E. Hulme, which would come to be seen as a precursor to post-war Modernist poetry, Rosenberg would never fully commit to the precision of imagery and clear, unadorned language called for under the movement. In contrast to the Imagists stood the poets whose work Edward Marsh, frequent patron and purchaser of Rosenberg’s artworks and critic of his poetry, collected in the *Georgian Poetry* anthologies.

Between these many influences amidst the “Georgian renaissance” one finds Isaac Rosenberg, stubbornly independent, a poet able to appreciate and admire the modes and theories of poetry he observed in others’ work both past and present,

but one equally unwilling to compromise his aspirations for his own work by adopting these modes and theories as his own. This determined “in between-ness,” this estrangement in kind from both the Georgian “Left-wing” of avant-garde and “Center” of Georgian anthologies, as Ross terms them (23), is observable in the ways in which Rosenberg’s work was published and disseminated. The majority of his works published in his lifetime were self-published, typeset by a friend in the print shop of a friend of a friend in small pamphlets like *Night and Day* in 1912, *Youth* in 1915, and his verse play *Moses* in 1916. Outside of these private printings, he would have a few poems included in 1914 in the art magazine *Colour*, a publication that “was not held in the highest repute by many painters or poets...certainly not by those who considered themselves avant-garde” and whose editor T.M. Wood preferred “a safe middle-ground,” of conservatism, “publishing the work of popular Edwardian artists” (Cohen 114). By 1915 Rosenberg’s pamphlet *Youth* had found its way into the hands of Ezra Pound, most likely through his art school friend, the Vorticist painter David Bomberg. Pound sent it along to Harriet Monroe in Chicago, followed by a letter which off-handedly remarked: “Don’t bother about Rosenberg, send the stuff back to him direct unless it amuses you.” A month later, after Monroe had prompted him for advice on what to do with Rosenberg’s poems, Pound was inclined to give the apathetic appraisal that she “may as well give this poor devil a show...He has something in him, horribly rough” (120-21). Monroe would give Rosenberg a show, over a year later in December 1916, when she included two poems, “Marching (As Seen From the Left File)” and “Break of Day in the Trenches,” in *Poetry Magazine*. Still later, in the 1918 edition of Edward Marsh’s *Georgian Poetry*, Rosenberg would merit one inclusion with “Ah, Koelue,” a speech from his play *Moses*. His singular contribution is not considered to be among his best works, though Marsh obviously saw it as the one most appropriate among the work of other Georgians in the volume like Siegfried Sassoon, W.W. Gibson, and Robert Graves. Despite the circumstances which frequently inhibited Rosenberg’s poetic output—his poverty which sustained his poetry’s consistent subordination to his more expedient and financially remunerative artwork, for he “wanted only a living from painting, nothing more” (100), and his frequent ill-health which had prompted his 1914 journey to South Africa—this nonetheless widespread but lukewarm patronage in publications during Rosenberg’s lifetime must attest to both his talent as a poet and his resistance to easy posthumous classification.

Isaac Rosenberg had been utterly estranged by pre-war England, a seeming refugee among the class-privileged and thoroughly English (i.e. Christian Anglo-Saxon) world of arts and literature in London. This status as constant stranger was

one upon which he stubbornly insisted and from which he inevitably suffered. It is somewhat fitting, then, that at the time of the onset of the First World War he was literally physically removed from England, nursing his ailing lungs in South Africa. His trip had brought him back to health, and after a period of anxious deliberation he returned to England and enlisted, largely for financial reasons. His pay as a soldier lifted the financial burden he felt himself imposing on his mother, and during his stay in the army he would give up painting and be able to focus all his artistic energy into his poetry. Isaac Rosenberg wrote to Edward Marsh in 1915 that he “never joined the army from patriotic reasons,” as “Nothing can justify war” (*Collected Works* 227). Nonetheless his joining the army had lifted the financial constraints that had pulled his attention from his poetry before, and again put him in a peculiar dual position, that of Private-Pacifist. It is then in the army that one finds Rosenberg truly coming into his own poetically, crafting poetry distinct from those of officer poets often commended for gallantry like Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. Rosenberg never rose in rank above private, spent most of his time in the army being punished for his absent-mindedness, and unlike Owen, Sassoon, or even Brooke, began his military service much less attached to the cause of the war than any of these others. In a life no longer than Rupert Brooke’s, Isaac Rosenberg had experienced hardship and estrangement and thus was able to develop earlier into a mature and disillusioned poet, and, I would argue, one more adept than Brooke at recording modern experience in poetic form. He is therefore more useful as an illustration of the kinds of poetic innovation occurring both outside and alongside the formation of literary Modernism.

It is, perhaps, unfortunate that Isaac Rosenberg’s most accomplished works date from his time in the army, for this has forever invited his reputation to be based on his status as a “war poet,” and reinforces the notion that his war experiences *made* him into a better poet. While this is more true for Rosenberg’s contemporaries Sassoon and Owen, Isaac Rosenberg’s pre-war works demonstrate not only abundant technical skill as a poet, but a drive to move beyond adeptness toward a more complex, more ingenious poetry. Nevertheless, it is true that from 1914 on Rosenberg achieved more with his poetry than he already had, and this period of time corresponds almost directly with the time he joined the army. The correlation, in this case, does not insure causality. Rather than the experiences of strife, horror, and hardship encountered on the battlefield, the more drastic change which accounts for Rosenberg’s development at this time is probably, as I’ve said, that he had given up the pretext of painting for an income and further that this income was now assured by the army. Rosenberg does improve as a poet during the course of the

war, but by no means does he do so *because* of the war. I will then be forgiven, I hope, if I fail to address any of Rosenberg's pre-war work. This examination of his poetry is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather to illuminate representative aspects of his work which distinguish him from the Georgians and which demonstrate the complexity and unorthodoxy which I believe better suits him to be a poet of modern experience, if still not fully a Modernist.

Analysis of the work of Isaac Rosenberg is not as widespread as that of other more prominent war poets like Siegfried Sassoon or Wilfred Owen, but there still exists a healthy amount of critical investigation into his poetry. The vast majority of this criticism, however, only focuses on what have been deemed Rosenberg's "masterworks": "Break of Day in the Trenches", "Dead Man's Dump", or "Returning, We Hear the Larks." Since Rosenberg has always been recognized most readily as a war poet, this should come as no surprise, as in these poems he deals most directly with war experience, and in reference to other war poets he's always garnered at least some small recognition, if only in that "his obscurities provided an effective contrast to Owen's easily-perceived ironies" (Cohen 179). Paul Fussell is absolutely fixated by "Break of Day," calling it "the most sophisticated poem of the war" (55), partly because in it he sees "everything [being] done through indirection and the quiet, subtle exploitation of English pastoral poetry" (250). This interpretation not only serves Fussell's greater overall purpose to trace "the filaments reaching back to precedent poetry" (251) for all English poetry of the war, but in doing so foregrounds the "Georgian-ness" of the poem, its blunt realism advanced by vestiges of tradition. The peripheral blindness that this focus can produce is perhaps nowhere better on display than in A. Banerjee's *Spirit Above Wars*. In twenty pages of writing on Rosenberg, Banerjee touches upon, not even obliquely, precisely none of the poems that I propose to observe in this study. Though the reasoning behind this might simply be to focus on Rosenberg's "better" work, its effect is unmistakable, as in Robert H. Ross' book length study of Georgian poetry the poems of Rosenberg's which merit study are, as usual, "Break of Day in the Trenches" and "Returning, We Hear the Larks."

However, in his introduction to *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, Ian Parsons points out that "splendid and deservedly famous though they are, I do not think [his most anthologized works] should be allowed to detract from the merits of the very large number of other memorable poems which Rosenberg wrote" (xxv). Parsons writes this in reference to the large body of Rosenberg's pre-war work, but it seems to me equally applicable to his less-frequently read and often shorter war poems as well. Valid though the analyses of critics preoccupied with

Rosenberg's "finest" works may be in reference to those specific poems, the value of their collective voice is misdirected by their repeated disregard for the portion of Rosenberg's poetry with which I intend to deal, and by neglecting the formal aspects of this poetry that I find so compelling.

There is, however, one point of broad critical agreement to which I would like to call attention, and this is Rosenberg's reputation as a "detached" poet. Ian Parsons makes the observation, writing that "in some extraordinary way, [Rosenberg] managed to detach himself emotionally from the terrible things that were going on all around him" (xxvi), and F. R. Leavis, one of Rosenberg's earliest champions, wrote that "we must credit him...with an extraordinarily mature kind of detachment. The spiritual strength manifested in the detachment of his poetry was needed in an almost incredible degree for the writing of it" (qtd. in Bellamy 60). Marius Bewley calls him "impersonal and detached" in order to comment on the "hard, almost shocking concreteness and immediacy" of his poetry (qtd. in Crawford 198). This allegation of detachment, though consistently made in praise of his work, is never made in conjunction with Rosenberg's relation, or the dislocation of that relation, with Georgian poetry. For the Georgians in their realism attempted "to come to terms with immediate experience, sensuous or imaginative" and "a poet like Wilfred Owen proceeds naturally out of the Georgian method" because their poetry recorded "the protest of *individual* men" (Stead 88-89, emphasis mine). Rosenberg's detached objectivity, then, places him further out of step with his individually attached Georgian peers. Rosenberg himself commented on this distinction, while criticizing "Rupert Brooke's begloried sonnets" whose viewpoint he felt was "commonplace." Poetry, he felt, "should be approached in a colder way, more abstract, with less of the million feelings everybody feels" (qtd. in Banerjee 64). This viewpoint on art somewhat "anticipated the practices of poets like Eliot and Yeats" as Rosenberg elaborates that "We must not look at nature with the self-conscious mannered eye of a stylist, whose vision is limited by his own personal outlook, but assimilate the multifarious and widened vision, which simply means a total sinking of all conscious personality" (63).

Another critical stumbling block over which many observers of Rosenberg seem to stumble is to view his work, in light of his untimely death at war, as the pitiable loss of a poet who died before fully maturing, whose poems invite us to imagine as Siegfried Sassoon did "the poems he might have written after the war" and see the poems "reflect his immaturity" as well as "his achievement" (vii). This point of view insinuates "That Rosenberg did not have the time or the opportunity to develop to the fullest extent his imaginative and technical resources," holding "the

obscurity and even incoherence of so many of his poems” as evidence (Banerjee 79), and encourages readers to agree with Fred Crawford’s estimation that “The unfinished state of many of his poems results from his inability to rework them after the war. In that sense, many of his poems were ‘notes’” (193).

In the first postwar publication of Rosenberg’s work in 1923, editors Gordon Bottomley and Lawrence Binyon “introduced him ‘merely as a poet of promise killed in defence of his country’”, a remark that induced partisan speculation upon just what that promise was to be, such as the Georgian Robert Graves’ claim that “He was one of the few poets who might have served as a fair challenge to sham modernism” (Cohen 178), and David Daiches’ assertion that “Had he lived to develop further along the lines on which he had already moved, [Rosenberg] might have changed the course of modern English poetry, producing side by side with the poetry of Eliot...a richer and more monumental kind of verse, opposing a new romantic poetry to the new metaphysical brand” (Cohen 185). This last comment is not only highly unlikely, notwithstanding the validity of Rosenberg’s comparison to Eliot, as Rosenberg’s poetry can hardly be said to have been “romantic” in nature, but Daiches follows a line of logic which inevitably falls short of pleading Rosenberg’s case. That the poems are “obscure” and sometimes “incoherent” cannot be taken as evidence of their incompleteness. We must be careful not to become caught up in this type of conjecture and instead treat his works as poetic artifacts, complete as they are, rather than relegate his *œuvre* to mere juvenilia in which to search for the uncongealed characteristics of an unwritten later body of work. In reference to Rosenberg’s estrangement from both Georgianism and the avant-garde, we must refrain from idle supposition as to with which group he ultimately would have aligned—given the resources at hand his extant work should instead be read as a conclusive dissatisfaction with both modes.

As I have already said, the Georgian poets and the pre-war avant-garde sprang from very much the same spirit in their inspiration to write poetry—the Georgians wished just as much as Pound to, as he put it, “Make it new.” The great divide between the two was largely in the degree to which they were willing to rebut inherited poetic forms. What, then, were the characteristics of Georgian form? The formal aspects of Georgian poetry can best be typified by the preferences of Edward Marsh, the discerning editor whose approval was nearly required in order for a poet to be published in a Georgian anthology. This man, whom D.H. Lawrence would understatedly call “a bit of a policeman in poetry,” would define the poetry that pleased him, and therefore the poetry that made it into the anthologies and gained

recognition among the Georgian group, as possessing “intelligibility, music, and raciness” (Ross 87). By intelligibility, he meant not only “the opposite of obscurity” in meaning, but in addition that “it was written on some formal principle that [he] could discern,” i.e. intelligible in form. By “music” he meant, generally, any vestige of rhyme, and he held that “poetry which renounces the singing quality plucks its own wings.” The temperance shown in Marsh’s third quality is indicative of his willingness “to be thought modern—but not too modern” (Ross 86), for the poetry he liked was not revolutionary, but racy, scandalous enough to raise an eyebrow or two, but nothing that would end up being censored. A maxim of Marsh’s sums up his poetic predilections, and those of the better part of the Georgians, well: “nineteenths of the Tradition might be rubbish, but the remaining tenth was priceless, and no one who tried to dispense with it could achieve anything at all” (Ross 88)

Marsh was not alone in valuing this type of aesthetic, as Rupert Brooke’s review of Ezra Pound’s *Personae* reveals, in which Brooke writes: “When Mr. Pound writes notes...it is exceedingly tiresome. But when inspiration cleans him a little of that, and when he writes in metre, the result is quite good...he has fallen, it appears, under the dangerous influence of Whitman, and writes many poems in unmetrical sprawling lengths that, in his hands, have nothing to commend them” (111-112). Brooke further specifies that although at times Pound “uses a poetical variety of prose which is metrical insofar as it is composed entirely of iambic feet,” his poetry lacks form “insofar as it pays no attention to lines. The lengths are chopped off anyhow,” (113) a criticism that I believe Brooke might have just as plausibly leveled against Isaac Rosenberg. Brooke’s predictions about Pound’s future as a poet are not only ironic in how remarkably they deviate from Pound’s actual poetic development and reception, but also illuminate the poetic values of Rupert Brooke, and further of his Georgian cohorts:

Mr. Pound has great talents. When he has passed through stammering to speech, and when he has more clearly recognized the nature of poetry, he may be a great poet. It is important to remember his name; and we shall be made to recognize it when he turns from prose, admirable prose as it sometimes is, to confine himself to [metrical] form. (113)

These qualities, then, are those which most clearly delineate the war poetry of Isaac Rosenberg from Georgian poetry: fluidity and irregularity of form in regard to rhythm and line length, frequent absence or dissimulation of rhyme, and obscurity of communicated “meaning.” Obscurity of meaning is of particular interest

because not only does it represent a departure from Georgian poetry, but it also represents a middle ground, one which Rosenberg undoubtedly occupied, between Imagism and Great War poetry more generally, for while Ezra Pound claimed that Imagist poetry must be “wholly precise in representing a vagueness” (qtd. in Gage 93), Janis Stout observes that the kind of war poetry borne from the end of the First World War was characterized by both “Bluntness of visual details” and “Ambiguity and disorder” in meaning (40-41).

An important departure from the critical trend of preoccupation with the “best” of Rosenberg’s poems can be found in the work of Fred Crawford. At the expense of lengthy elaboration on each poem, Crawford is willing to touch on nearly every war poem Rosenberg wrote from “On Receiving News of the War” to “Returning We Hear the Larks,” and so I begin, as well, by looking at Rosenberg’s first war poem. Though Rosenberg had not enlisted at the time he wrote “On Receiving News of War,” it may be considered his first “war poem,” as it stands in direct response to that event, and also serves as a valuable foil against which to read Rupert Brooke’s poetic responses to the war. In this respect, the poem is leagues apart from Brooke, though Rosenberg is just as inexperienced in the realm of combat when writing. Using what might strike readers as seasonal imagery recalling Brooke’s in “The Dead (IV),” Rosenberg conveys a much more nuanced message than Brooke with these similar images, setting up an antagonism between the ripe, lively, “bud or bird” of a “Summer land” against the “ice and frost and snow,” the reapers of “Winter’s cost” (3-5). Rosenberg gives his seasons knowledge and reason, and illustrates a phenomena of knowledge without direct experience, for though Winter has not affected the Summer land, the latter “doth know” (7) Winter’s agents all the same. It knows this “from earth to sky” (6)—the direction of its knowledge is precisely the opposite of the direction in which snow falls, using the physical image to convey the intangible movement of thought and knowledge, suggesting that Summer’s knowledge comes from reductive anticipation rather than deductive reasoning, which would need the evidence of “Winter’s cost” before it in order to postulate the cause of Summer’s end. These reductive abilities, the speaker goes on, are common “In all men’s hearts” (9).

Rosenberg in this way reconciles the biographical reality of his inexperience with war through this unorthodox use of seasonal interrelationships. So grounded, he proceeds to predict “Winter’s cost” on the Summer of mankind, as he observes a change imminent after “some spirit old” has seduced man “with malign kiss” (10-11), presumably given the title, into war. This “spirit old,” is evoked immediately after the poet describes the ubiquity of the Summer’s reductive reasoning, so

that by nature of the contiguity of the two terms, the spirit is also suggested to be common to all men. This same spirit that deals so tenderly to persuade men does not show the same gentleness to God, and its truly violent nature is revealed as “Red fangs have torn His face” (13) to shed the very blood of God. His wounds He shares alike with “His children,”(16) though they, being weaker, have been killed by the malignant spirit. Thus wounded by the spirit, implied to have sprung from men’s hearts, God nonetheless still “mourns from His lone place”(15) his self-immolating children. The redness of the spirit’s violence is reiterated as the “ancient...curse” colored “crimson,” and the speaker beckons this spirit to “Corrode, consume” in order to “Give back this universe / Its pristine bloom” (17-20). The speaker sees beyond the red violence a purity and rebirth, as beyond the red deaths of leaves in Autumn comes the “white” purity of “Snow” (1) and beyond that the regeneration of Spring. Thus, while in this poem we see hints of Brooke in the postulation of the war’s purifying effects, it is at the same time much more honest and mature, “Unlike many early efforts...remarkable for its absence of patriotic sentiment and its refusal to exaggerate the need for an English victory” (Crawford 194), in recognizing that the war will bring violence, and death sufficient to wound even the body and heart of God himself.

In “Marching (As Seen from the Left File),” one sees Rosenberg now speaking from a position of greater experience, having been in the army for several months. Rosenberg here “described his view from the ranks as it would appear to a painter. His descriptive imagery in the opening lines reveals a discriminating eye” (Crawford 195), as his speaker paints the scene for us with various colors, with “ruddy necks / Sturdily pressed back” forming “a red brick moving glint” and hands, red too, swing “Like flaming pendulums...across the khaki,” and even “khaki” proves insufficient as color, so the speaker-painter adds some green to make “Mustard-coloured khaki” (1-6). The richness of this multi-colored scene is juxtaposed, abruptly, by the unity of the men’s “automatic feet” (7).

His observation complete, the speaker joins in solidarity with the marchers and, no longer aloof, he remarks that “We husband the ancient glory” of warriors past, but only minimally insofar as they battle unclothed as those ancients did, only “In these bared necks and hands” (8-9). They attempt to identify themselves with the old heroes whose weapons were made in “the forge of Mars” (10). The speaker, though, loses his solidarity with his men and sees the fallacy in this, for though the forge is “Not broke,” someone else is doing the forging: “a subtler brain beats” grey “iron / To shoe the hoofs of death” (10-12). The speaker’s reflection sucks the former color from his language; though his eyes see color, his mind sees an apocalyptic

horse shod with grey, who “paws dynamic air,” and so the “subtler brain” by crafting the colorless iron shoes with his “blind fingers [lets] loose an” equally colorless “iron cloud / To rain immortal darkness” (13-15). Thus, justified as the soldiers are for feeling faint solidarity with the colorful warriors of the past upon seeing their own color and strength, through more abstract thought and images the speaker comes to see their predicament in a more complex way. For all its vivid imagery, the poem is imprecise in its final meaning—the speaker is among those husbanding “the ancient glory,” but does he endorse this view? If not, does he then condemn it? He does neither, but rather maintains a detached standpoint of scrupulous visual reportage, and the poem’s “message” becomes relatively less important than its potent images.

“The Troop Ship,” is another poem remarkable for its imagery, as Crawford claims that it “seems deliberately Imagistic in its attention to vivid depiction” (195). Like “Marching” and indeed nearly every other of Rosenberg’s war poems, it does not incorporate a regular rhyme scheme. Rosenberg’s shedding of this convention not only signifies an attempt to separate from the long English poetic lineage which has ascribed to rhyme as a key feature of poetic form, but more specifically and more importantly under the auspices of this project, a clear break with contemporary Georgian poetry, which as I have said, more often than not preferred the use of rhyme. In addition, Rosenberg uses irregular line length to guide the development of his poem, the economy of language and shortness of the lines emphasizing its nonchalant, detached quality of almost prose, using variably longer phrases to set up the terse “punch” of the short lines that end his two sentences, 5 and 10, which on paper materializes as:

Grotesque and 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 dose,
Winds’ fumble or men’s feet
Are on your face.

With this structure and economical diction Rosenberg, in ten lines, paints a lurid picture of the cramped and wretched conditions of being bivouacked aboard a vessel among soldiers.

Or does he? For, nowhere in the poem is there mention of ships or soldiers—these terms are only in the title. Read without reference to the title, this poem equally might be considered a depiction of sleepless, crowded, urban life. Could not also a reader easily imagine city-dwellers compelled by their man-made compactness “to twist” like “Contortionists” only to nourish their “sleepy soul” with the natural rest of “sleep” (2-3)? Not only does the city compel them to “lie all sorts of ways” (4) to try and sleep to no avail, but perhaps the double meaning of “lie”, viz. to tell what is untrue, is intended, so that sleeplessness does not only persist in spite of lying “all sorts of ways,” but, out of guilt, because of it. “Cold...wet wind” and “careless...lurching men,” common elements of the scene of urban squalor, are ever-present, ever close (so close they “Are on your face” [10]), and ever disrupting the natural yearning for sleep. Read this way, the poem provides a stark picture of the imposition of city life on the individual realms of privacy, sleep, and even morality. In its invocation of the wind, of sleeplessness, of the haunting, restless insomnia of modern urban life, this poem presages T.S. Eliot’s speaker in “The Wasteland,”:

My nerves are bad tonight...

‘What is that noise?’

The wind under the door.

‘What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?’

Nothing again nothing.

‘You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember

‘Nothing?’...

And if it rains, a closed car at four.

And we shall play a game of chess,

Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door. (111-138)

A quite different picture of an urban scene opens Rosenberg’s “From France,” ostensibly a lavish scene from the fabled *belle-époque*—. This poem, also devoid of end-rhyme, is structured by the declining refrain ending each stanza about the status of life in France, and carried along rhythmically by interior rhymes within the third line of each stanza, “hiding” the rhyme so to speak within his lines, to an extent obscuring his form. The active agent throughout the poem is not the men or the women, who are either overhead or have been killed, but it is the abstract

character of “The spirit” (1). In the first stanza it is drinking, not coffee as people would, but “the café lights” and “All the hot life that glittered there” (1-2), things that cannot literally be drunk but the image of which conjures the vague feeling of the remarkable splendor of the scene with a precise visual and sensory image. Remarkable as the scene may seem, the spirit overhears “men say to women gay,” taking for granted, that “Life is just so in France” (3-4). By the second stanza, the “café lights...golden faces” and “soft tones” (5-6) that fueled the “hot life” the spirit consumed are gone. Now the overheard conversations of groaning “men to broken men” (gone is the intercourse between men and women from the first scene) are complaints that “This is not life in France” (7-8).

In the third stanza the spirit’s action is delayed so that the scene can take primacy, a scene that could easily be a graveyard “with grass between and dead folk under,” or could still be the café, demolished into “Heaped stones and a charred signboard,” (9-10) abandoned after its destruction and apparently forgotten for so long that grass has begun to grow through the remains, its patrons still crushed beneath the rubble. As “the spirit takes wing” and flees the scene abandoned by human companionship, nature now takes the stage as grass permeates and “some birds sing” (11). Idiosyncratic songs of birds over men crushed to death, a scene bereft of spirit—as the speaker’s voice now tells us, authoritative and no longer overheard, now “this is Life in France” (12).

This is the evidence by which I seek to affirm Jon Silkin’s succinct conclusion that “Rosenberg was not a Georgian” (258). While Silkin goes on to claim that neither was he associated with Imagist poetry, I disagree, for in his formal departures from Georgian traditionalism, obscurity in meaning, and visual precision of his imagery, his poetry is simultaneously a more nuanced depiction of war than much of what Brooke and the Georgian crowd produced, and more closely resembles avant-garde Imagism. If anything can account for Rosenberg’s exclusion from the Imagist coterie, it cannot be based upon the text of his poetry, but instead the result of his social and financial estrangement from the literary society which bore that group. I see him at certain points thoroughly fulfilling Ezra Pound’s maxim for the Imagists to be “wholly precise in representing a vagueness”, in that his imagery at times can be utterly vivid, as though he were still painting instead of writing, while with these same precise images he hopes to convey a vague, abstract, nearly intangible idea. Indeed, the degree to which his work depends upon this interplay between complexity of meaning and plainness of image, the *visual* intuition required by it, is the most impressive feature of his poetry, and one which justifies for his whole body of work more widespread critical attention.

In a lecture on modern art delivered in Capetown, South Africa in 1914, Isaac Rosenberg wrote: “Art is now, as it were, a volcano. Eruptions are continual, and immense cities of culture at its foot are shaken and shivered. The roots of a dead universe are torn up by hands, feverish and consuming with an exuberant vitality—and amid dynamic threatenings we watch the hastening of the corroding doom.” That Fred Crawford, who concerns himself with much of the same material as this study does, should conclude that in “This remarkable utterance, eight years before the appearance of “The Waste Land,” Rosenberg seems to anticipate both Eliot’s ‘message’ and his imagery” (203), only serves to lend credence to my assertion that this anticipation goes beyond the given passage to Rosenberg’s poetry, insofar as he departed from Georgianism in ways which bring him closer to Eliot’s avant-garde predecessors, Ezra Pound and the Imagists.

Intimations of Modernism from the Trenches

Reading the poetry of Rupert Brooke and Isaac Rosenberg through the lens of their biographies, we witness the structural failure of Georgian War Poetry. While more obscure figures may more accurately fulfill the category’s suppositions of Georgian style and genuine combat experience, each of these two poets, household names in the study of First World War poetry, fail or exceed the category in some respect. Rupert Brooke, undoubtedly the more well-known of the two, while thoroughly Georgian, should by no means be considered a “war poet” in the commonly inferred sense of “combat poet”—his poems do not speak from the same position of experience that has come to define the most strict and most common definitions of “war poetry” and thus he cannot be included in that group without distinct qualification. Isaac Rosenberg, while dealing at length with his war experience in poetry, should in no wise be considered a “Georgian” poet. The strictest definition of Georgianism limits membership to those poets and poems included in the Georgian anthologies. In this regard, Rosenberg’s contribution is paltry. Along broader definitions that take into account stylistic character, his poetry is a stark diversion from Georgian norms of Nature as subject and nearly constant adherence to rhyme and pre-Victorian poetic form (e.g. the sonnet). Rosenberg did not, as one reviewer of Marsh’s 1917 anthology characterized the Georgians, “[pour his] wine into the old bottles” (Ross 159); he broke the old bottles apart and fashioned them together again into bowls, jugs, carafes, or tea-cups as he saw fit.

Continuing this a propos metaphor, it is abundantly clear that Rupert Brooke was content to pour the “red / Sweet wine” (“The Dead [III] 4-5) of his youth into the old bottles, before literally doing so in dying in the Ægean in 1915. I believe we

can comfortably, then, make an appropriate place for his reputation among the young Georgian poets of the pre-war era. Having thus shorn Brooke from Georgian War Poetry, the assurance of this poetic category's homogeneity is called enough into question that one can, likewise, submit that Rosenberg deserves distinction, if not outright removal, from the category as well. But, as I have offered an alternative category for Brooke, so too must we not merely take labels off Rosenberg's work, but seek to affix new ones as well.

I return now to the remarks of W.B. Yeats referred to earlier. Let us see what the old man (Brooke's senior by 22 years, Rosenberg's by 25) has got to say about the young men whose poetry from the battlefield he so disliked. "The writers of these poems" he writes, "were invariably officers of exceptional courage and capacity, one a man constantly selected for dangerous work, all, I think, had the Military Cross... they were not without joy...but felt bound, in the words of the best known, to plead the suffering of their men" (xxxiv). None of these qualities belong to Rosenberg. He was a private of exceptional absent-mindedness and feeble capacity for combat, who won no medals and frequently sought to avoid dangerous work—least of all does one find pleas for the suffering of others in his poems. Officers observe the suffering of enlisted men beneath them and plea; Rosenberg was one of the sufferers and merely expressed it as reality through verse. The sage criticisms of the aged Modernist Yeats then do not hold true for Rosenberg. But Yeats is but one voice and these observations cannot in themselves vindicate Rosenberg in Modernist eyes. They can, however, call into question Rosenberg's exclusion from the early intimations of Modernist poetry, as his biography does not match that of those war poets who drew Yeats' ire.

What of other influential Modernists then, say, T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound? Can we look to what they have written to find unquestionable grounds for Rosenberg's exclusion from the Modernist lineage? In fact, reading Rosenberg through the lens of some of their writing has quite the opposite effect. In his essay "*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth," Eliot writes that James Joyce and Wyndham Lewis, "being 'in advance' of their time, felt a conscious or probably unconscious dissatisfaction with the form" of the novel. One could equally claim Isaac Rosenberg felt dissatisfaction with the inherited form of English poetry, I believe. But, we shall recall, Rosenberg did not wholly repudiate inherited form and this, too, is in agreement with Eliot, who writes that in *Ulysses*, Joyce is "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" as a means of "giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (167). We see something similar going on not only in Rosenberg's form but also

in his poetic subject matter, such as in “Marching (As Seen from the Left File)”. In describing the writers who are best disposed to wield the techniques Eliot has described, one can almost imagine he is describing Rosenberg, who was certainly among the ones “who have won their own discipline in secret and without aid, in a world which offers very little assistance to that end” (167).

Another stipulation that Eliot makes about the artist striving toward classicism is that they do so by “doing the best one can with the material at hand” (166). Isaac Rosenberg had none of the material at hand during his lifetime with which Eliot is concerned. Perhaps we should turn, then, to pieces of early Modernist (more specifically Imagist) writing to which Rosenberg would have had access. There are two documents which are of interest in this regard. The first is an essay, published in 1913, originally attributed to F.S. Flint, but later revealed to have been written by Ezra Pound, entitled “*Imagisme*.” It included three unofficial and previously unpublished “rules” for Imagist poets, the third of which read “As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome” (94)—in other words, with variance and looseness. In terms of both rhythm and line length, the Imagists advocated and utilized an organic fluidity, a fluidity observable in the poems of Rosenberg, in opposition to the doctrinaire, almost mechanical regularity of form in most Georgian poetry. That Rosenberg may in 1913 have found this a compelling theory to apply to his own composition cannot be ruled out. Further, in the preface to her 1916 anthology *Some Imagist Poets*, Amy Lowell outlines certain principles of Imagist poetry. Though in 1916 it is unlikely that Rosenberg was able to actually read the document on the battlefield, the principles proposed describe the general consensus of a group of poets with which he was familiar and by whom, it would seem, he was influenced. First among Lowell’s principles is “to use the language of common speech” (v), an aim toward which we know Rosenberg worked, specifically by reading his letter to Edward Marsh in August 1916 in which he wrote in defense of his “Break of Day in the Trenches,” that it was “surely as simple as ordinary talk” (*Complete Works* 239). If we can assume a definition of “free verse” as that poetry which makes no regular use of either rhyme or meter, then Rosenberg’s occasional endorsement of this technique seems perfectly in accord with Lowell’s second principle that Imagists “do not insist upon ‘free verse’ as the only method of writing poetry. We fight for it as a principle of liberty. We believe that the individuality of a poet may often be better expressed in free-verse than in conventional forms” (vi-vii). Is it also mere coincidence that, in her fourth principle, Lowell gestures toward “painters” when discussing Imagist intent “To present an image,” which in principle five is

stipulated as “hard and clear” (vii), or does Rosenberg’s background in the visual arts in fact particularly qualify him to develop in his later years, as Cohen appraises them, poems that were “competent, clear, hard, and precise” (173)?

Biographically, then, Rosenberg seems to disqualify himself from Modernist criticism of First World War poetry, and textually he seems to qualify, at least sometimes, as an Imagist or proto-Modernist. It is my belief that it has been Rosenberg’s estrangement, from other people and from pigeonholing poetic movements, which has most significantly contributed to his exclusion from interpretation through a Modernist lens and encouraged his pervasive categorization as a “Georgian” war poet. Rosenberg was never socially accepted widely enough to hope to break into the social relations which mediated the unity of the upper echelons of Modernism, and he would never allow his poetry to shirk poetic convention with enough extremity to overcome this social deficit. He also refused to obsequiously fulfill the traditionalist expectations of his Georgian patron Edward Marsh, and did not gain widespread acclaim in that group of poets either. As a result of this estranged suspension between two literary categories that would, after the war, become distinctly hierarchical with Modernist innovation becoming superior to Georgian convention, Isaac Rosenberg has gone from lukewarm reception by a select few critics in the inter-war years to enthusiastic reinvention in the wave of scholarship on war poetry in the later twentieth century following Paul Fussell’s landmark study *The Great War and Modern Memory*. The better part of this criticism has praised Rosenberg as a “special” Georgian or a “detached” war poet, observations that, while valid, foreground Rosenberg’s Georgian classification and situate him in relation to other Georgian War Poets, side-stepping a larger observation to be made about literary categories within, beyond, and across the scope of the war.

As the exclusive elitism of Modernism increasingly breaks down through retrospective literary re-analysis, bringing more and more authors into the fold of Modernism, Rosenberg appears to me a perfectly viable candidate for adoption as a semi-Imagist, proto-Modernist filling the perceivable gap between pre and post-war Modernisms, writing from the trenches of France, seeking a modern, innovative, individual mode of expression that anticipates later developments in literary Modernism. It is thus not impossible to advance Rosenberg as a transitional figure for Modernism during the years 1914-1918, between Ezra Pound’s pre-war Imagism and T.S. Eliot’s post-war *Wasteland*.

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Born and raised in Carteret, New Jersey, **ROBERT MAGELLA** received his BA from Monmouth University in 2014. He is currently pursuing a Master's degree in English and American Literature at New York University.