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**Space of Unfreedom in the Great War Poems of Wilfred Owen
and Isaac Rosenberg**

Przestrzeń wojennego zniewolenia w okopowej poezji Wilfreda Owena i Isaaca
Rosenberga

“The front is a cage in which we must await fearfully whatever may happen. We lie under the network of arching shells and live in a suspense of uncertainty. Over us Chance hovers. If a shot comes, we can duck, that is all; we neither know nor can determine where it will fall” (E.M. Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*).

Also in the poetic records of the experience of the Western Front, entrapment becomes a powerful metaphor which conveys the destructive potential of the war, transforming man's world into a vast, uniform space of doom. In this space man turns into “a waste land”, his spiritual devastation so great that, rejecting God and His sacred gifts of love, freedom and even life, he wastes his call to sainthood. Such is the story of the modern Fall, with No Man's Land as its outcome; the story of the genuine experience of the trenchworld which found its way into the works of Wilfred Owen (1893–1918) and Isaac Rosenberg (1890–1918), the two most remarkable British soldier poets of the Great War.

Their profound vision of man caught up by the force of the war and deprived of his freedom — the God-given right to the fullest possible realization of his human self — owes much of its complexity to the projection of the reality of the Front: the frame as well as the background of man's negative metamorphosis which is the dominant characteristic of the war. Having shattered the old world, war establishes on its ruins a kingdom of Chance, Evil and Chaos, the kind of independence which in order to exist must be paid with man's enslavement and unfreedom.

Adopting Lotman's view that the "structure of the space of a text becomes a model of the structure of the space of the universe"¹, it is our objective to construct, from the data provided in the poetry of both Owen and Rosenberg, a spatial model of the world of the war. However, in order to assess the extent to which this space of unfreedom shares in the perversion of humane ethics, we need a model which, standing for an ideal of freedom, harmony and order against which spatial inversions could be marked, would also permit investing the space with non-spatial, ethical content.

These requirements seem to be most fully met by a model of mythic space, especially in its religious realization, which, like the poetry of Owen and Rosenberg², stems from the Judao-Christian tradition. A tri-partite structure of this model³ organized along the vertical (ethical)⁴ axis "top-bottom" embraces heaven, earth, and hell, the three mythic planes whose arrangement establishes the hierarchy of values of which the SACRED⁵ — ethically most perfect — is invariably attached to the celestial sphere, and the PROFANE — spiritually imperfect and material — always characterizes *terra firma* as well as the lower world.

Ontologically⁶ created by the SACRED, and oriented towards it, the

¹ J. Lotman: *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, trans. from the Russian by G. Lenhoff and V.R. Vroon, Ann Arbor 1977, p. 217.

² I. Silkin: *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, Penquin Books, Harmondsworth 1984, p. 20. Silkin suggests that the preoccupations of the two undeniably major war poets, Rosenberg and Owen "were, whatever else, religious".

³ An extensive discussion of the mythic model presents T. Michałowska's *Kochanowskiego poetyka przestrzeni* in *Poetyka i poezja. Studia i szkice staropolskie*, Warszawa 1982, pp. 256–341; see also T. Michałowska, *Wizja przestrzeni w liryce staropolskiej*, *Przestrzeń i Literatura*, vol. LI, Wrocław 1978, pp. 106–110.

⁴ See J. Lotman: *op. cit.*, p. 221. Analyzing the vertical opposition "top-bottom" in Zablockij's poem, Lotman states that this "vertical axis simultaneously organizes the ethical space of the poem". Thus it seem logical to use "the ethical" as synonymous with "the vertical".

⁵ As proposed by S. Sawicki, the Sacred is used here as "the cover term for a variety of sacred elements closely related to a religious attitude, to the supernatural. This sense of course includes the very general notion of sacred used in the contemporary study of religion (Eliade)" where it is understood as "that which we worship, which we fear, which is 'above' us, which is mysterious". See S. Sawicki, *Sacrum w literaturze* in *Sacrum w literaturze*, ed. J. Gotfryd. M. Jasińska-Wojtkowska and S. Sawicki, Lublin 1983, p. 25; see also Wojtkowska's and Sawicki's *Introduction*, p. 9 of the above work.

⁶ See M. Eliade: *Sacrum-mit-historia. Wybór esejów*, trans. by A. Tatarkiewicz, PIW, Warszawa 1978, p. 62. According to Eliade's ontology, the world was created with the first split in the homogeneous, boundless and infinite continuum of space. The split is said to have introduced the opposition between "holy place" and "unholy place" (which corresponds to the spatial "top-bottom" opposition) and thus changed space into heterogeneous and organized.

world demarcated by the vertical model emerges as both ordered and heterogeneous, and therefore one in which man's existence is possible.⁷ On *terra firma* where man belongs, in spite of the impenetrable boundary⁸ which separates earth from the realm of the Divine, the SACRED reveals itself through any of the consecrated places which are identified as the Centre⁹ and which make man's orientation in space possible.¹⁰ Moreover, through the Centre, the focal point of intersection binding together the three levels of mythic space, there passes the world axis, AXIS MUNDI, along which man's movement¹¹, the symbolic realization of values, is possible. Any vertical ascent — resulting from man's acceptance of the SACRED — stands for his moral transformation, his need of and struggle for freedom, and, finally, his ability to achieve moral perfection, which, like a symbolic consecration, permits him to shift after death onto a higher level of existence: to the sphere of the Divine. Rejecting the SACRED, man deprives himself of the chance for a positive metamorphosis. As consequence his moral degradation manifests itself either in immobility, a metaphor of spiritual death, or in movement downwards, a symbol of man's fall, for which he is punished and forced out onto the bottom level of the mythic space, hell. Man's complete disregard for the SACRED may even undermine the tri-partite vertical structure of the ethical model since the domination of the PROFANE, as if cutting off any form of penetration of the Divine, changes the earth's surface into a pragmatic, horizontal continuum or, in other words, into a model of space of unfreedom, quite independent of the SACRED.¹²

⁷ M. Eliade: *Traktat o historii religii*, trans. by J. Wierusz-Kowalski, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa 1966, p. 376. Eliade proves that despite the qualitative difference between the SACRED and the PROFANE, man can exist only in space which is both ordered and organized.

⁸ J. Lotman: *op. cit.*, p. 229. Lotman states that the boundary, with impenetrability as its basic attribute, "becomes the most important topological feature of space".

⁹ Cf. Eliade: *Traktat...*, pp. 372–382; see also *Sacrum-mit-historia*, p. 50 and p. 76.

¹⁰ The spatial relations the Centre constructs turn out to be one of the basic means of comprehending reality. Lotman writes: "The concepts 'high-low', 'right-left', 'far-near', 'demarcated-not demarcated', and 'discrete-continuous' prove to be material for constructing a cultural model with a completely non-spatial content and come to mean 'valuable-not valuable', 'good-bad', 'one's own-another's', 'accessible-inaccessible', 'mortal-immortal', and so on". See Lotman, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

¹¹ Lotman writes: "Associating 'height' with distance and depth with its opposite makes the 'top' the direction in which space expands: the higher one goes the more limitless the expanse; the lower one goes the more cramped it is. [...] It follows that only upward movement is possible and the opposition 'top-bottom' becomes a structural invariant, not only of the antithesis 'good' versus 'evil' but also of the antithesis of 'movement' versus 'immobility'". See *ibid.*, p. 222.

¹² See *Wizja przestrzeni w liryce staropolskiej*, pp. 100–102 where T. Michałowska

Characterizing man as destroyer of God's order, this particular transformation confines man to the sphere of mortality, often invested with such qualities as helplessness, suffering, and even regressive darkness, all of which are symbolic of the state of undeveloped potentialities.

As a realization of space organized ethically, the Sacrum-oriented mythic model defines human existence in terms of man's attitude towards the value which, only when accepted and cherished, allows for his moral growth — a way to develop his freedom, to preserve harmony and order in his life. All these qualities, however, are missing in the world of war, which suggests that he has chosen to disrespect the SACRED.

In the trench poems of Owen and Rosenberg, man's defiance of the "top" value appears to manifest itself first of all in an attack against God. Owen's *Exposure* forces man to realize that "love of God seems dying"; the discovery which rendered in a variety of ways in other poems colours the portrayal of the Absolute. Bloodthirsty, heartless and uncaring, (*Apologia, The Parable, Greater Love, Inspection*), God turns out to be the causative cause of the soldiers' plight, accused of its deliberate continuation:

I dreamed kind Jesus fouled the big-gun gears;
And caused a permanent stoppage in all bolts;
And buckled with a smile Mausers and Colts;
And rusted every bayonet with His tears.

And there were no more bombs, of ours or Theirs,
Not even an old-flint lock, nor even a pikel.
But God was vexed, and gave all power to Michael;
And when I woke he'd seen to our repairs.

(*Soldier's Dream*, CP, p. 84)¹³

Anti-war Jesus and pro-war God no longer represent the biblical Unity. Instead, a powerful clash of interests — God — revenge, Jesus — love — leads to the rejection of God, and thus also to wasting Christ's sacrifice. However, Owen's presentation of God, cursed by the soldiers' gun "towering towards Heaven" (*Sonnet*) is but a prelude to the unorthodox treatment of the Deity that in Rosenberg's works exists mainly "to be called into

enumerates and discusses three basic models of space: "cosmic space", "mythic space", and "pragmatic space".

¹³ All quotations from Owen's poems come from *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* (henceforth CP), ed. with an Introduction and Notes by C. Day Lewis and with a Memoir by Edmund Blunden, Chatto and Windus, London 1974. All quotations from Rosenberg's poems come from *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg. Poetry, Prose, Letters, Paintings and Drawings* (henceforth CW), with a Foreword by Siegfried Sassoon, ed. with an Introduction and Notes by I.M. Parsons, Chatto and Windus, London 1979.

account".¹⁴ His *God* with "malodorous brain" and the body lodging a rat soul resembles a mean, cowardly tyrant, oppressing the weak and helpless:

On fragments of an old shrunk power,
 On shy and maimed, on women wrung awry,
 He lay, a bullying hulk, to crush them more.
 But when one, fearless, turned and clawed like bronze,
 Cringing was easy to blunt these stern paws,
 And he would weigh the heavier on those after.

This anthropomorphic Deity has a more malignant version in *God Made Blind* where God appears as "an enemy to be fought, a bully"¹⁵, yet one that can be defeated by human beings' love for each other; the love which giving man the access to "the rays of Eternity" makes him God's equal. The transformation of the Divine reaches its peak in *Daughters of War*, exploring the concept of the female, pluralistic, pagan Deity, incarnated in the Amazons whose lustful and oppressive love, however ennobling, results in destroying men's lives. Another Rosenberg "god" of war is a cunning, amorphous worm from *A Worm Fed on the Heart of Corinth* (henceforth *A Worm*) which, making men crave power and greatness, eventually leads to their fall.

Out of all Rosenberg's trench poems, once only, in *Dead Man's Dump*, is the biblical God referred to, and only to emphasize His absence in the soldier's soul, "Emptied of God-ancestral essences". This specific context of human space seems to mirror the Deity's insignificance in the outer world, where, marked only indirectly, He becomes reified, reduced to the "many crowns of thorns", sticking out from the shattered track. A loving God exists only beyond the trenchworld (*The Dead Heroes, On Receiving News of the War*) where lonely, and himself wounded, He mourns His dead children — so very human in this somewhat desecrating vulnerability which deprives Him of immortality and omnipotence.

Having realized God's weakness, man attacks and destroys the places of worship — the Centres — which have previously determined the sense of his existence on earth. Owen's *Le Christianisme* reports that:

[. . .] the church was hit and buried
 Under its rubbish and its rubble.
 In cellars, packed-up saints lie serried,
 Well out of hearing of our trouble.

(CP, p. 83)

¹⁴ Cf. J. Liddiard: *Isaac Rosenberg: The Half-Used Life*, Victor Gollancz Ltd., London 1975, p. 137.

¹⁵ J. Silkin: *Out of Battle. The Poetry of the Great War*, OUP, London 1978, p. 268.

Distancing himself from modern warfare, Rosenberg describes *The Burning of the Temple* — (henceforth *The Burning*) whose desecration breaks man's Covenant with God. Without the axis mundi Solomon's Temple has represented man cannot hope to reach heaven. He can, however, and does, create his own axis — the thundering flame which, setting the sky on fire, marks the beginning of his indivisible reign on earth.

With God dethroned and His Centres destroyed, the world of war reveals itself as the centreless space of chaos and homogeneity, in which the only vertical "orientation" of man seems to be rendered by his attacks on the celestial sphere. As a result of these attacks, heaven, which reflects and/or anticipates the metamorphosis of the Divine, begins to exist mainly as a target for destruction: the "highway for the shells" (Owen's *Apologia*), an elevated battleground for the "thundering fires" as well as for the "shrieking iron and flames" (Rosenberg's *Break of Day* and *The Burning*). More importantly, anticipating the modification of the structure of the vertical model, Rosenberg's desecration of the zone of the Sacred finally leads to a creation in *Dead Man's Dump* of the new order of the universe. Due to its capitalization as well as its initial position in the line — "Dark Earth! dark heaven swinging in chemic smoke"¹⁶ — earth becomes the dominant component of the model in which dwarfed heaven changes into a "dark" replica of *terra firma*.

Thus vastness and spaciousness of the celestial sphere disappear to be replaced by a space which possesses a concrete shape and is usually closed or demarcated. In Owen's *Happiness* "toy-like" heaven "looks smaller than the old doll's home" whereas in *The Unreturning*, its doors, "so chained" make it a prison of life, a place of dread.

Beside the few poems where heaven or sky appears as a direct reference to the desecrated mythic space, the "top" plane is occasionally characterized by means of the sun, deprived, however of its Divine qualities. In Rosenberg's *Soldier: The Twentieth Century* (henceforth *Soldier*) the sun is no longer omnipotent, its power stolen by the "cruel men", thus made immortal. Impotence is also characteristic of Owen's sun in *Futility* where it has lost its ability to give or restore life. The only power left to it is that of avenging itself on whoever dares spurn its "bounty". However, apart from this only instance of the dynamism of the sky reflected in Owen's *Spring Offensive*, the celestial sphere is usually passive. Its stillness is broken only by the

¹⁶ Here I am referring to Rosenberg's version of the poem from May 14 1917, taken by Bottomley as the final one. See CW, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

cannonades which, advertizing each transformation of metaphysical heaven into physical sky, confirm the beginning of the reign of chaos and anarchy.

Ethically lowered, the "top" plane has incorporated numerous attributes such as oppressiveness, darkness, smoke and fire, which resemble those of hell. As a result of the profanation of the celestial sphere, the *nether regions*, characterized as omnipotent, seem to become elevated. This "raised" position of the underground makes it possible for hell to firmly establish the ethos of evil which determines the negative metamorphosis of man.

Of all the presentations of *inferno* Owen's and Rosenberg's poems provide, the one depicted in *Strange Meeting* seems most unusual, if only because Owen's underground can be equated with real heaven:

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dark tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

(CP, p. 35)

The ancient tunnel becomes the place where, finding forgiveness, men can reach mutual understanding and learn the truth of "the pity of war". In this hell where blessing still has meaning, the division into enemies and friends, so crucial for those on "the upper ground", ceases to exist. The killer is greeted with the words "strange friend" and offered a place to sleep. None of Owen's remaining or Rosenberg's poems describing the celestial sphere, even in its least desecrated form, can equal this vision of hellish paradise, symbolic of reconciliation of two human beings who, in the end, prove capable of peaceful coexistence in the space to which they are confined.

The ostensible boundary, which, separating hell from earth, allows for an interaction between *terra firma* and *inferno*, is also demonstrated in *Spring Offensive*. In Owen's poem the men "meet a bombardment that seems to come from the whole sky burning against them; the earth seems to open for their blood and they step past any possible sense of a secure ground, delirious and terrified".¹⁷ Fighting, man creates hell on earth; what is more, his destruction liberates the evil force from the underground. The

¹⁷ D. Graham: *The Truth of War: Owen, Blunden and Rosenberg*, Carcanet Press, Manchester 1984, p. 76.

hill on which the spring offensive takes place gets transformed into a chasm through which "the hot blast and fury of hell's upsurge" forces its way onto the surface. With the chasm which now "steepens" sheer "to infinite space", the boundary between earth and hell is both broken and dislocated, thus allowing for movement upwards and downwards.

From "existence's brink" the soldiers descend into the *inferno*, using their "superhuman inhumanities" to outfiend "all its fiends and flames". Finally, so exhausted that they can only crawl, men find their way back to earth and in so doing they establish a precedent for the elevation of hell. Now, internalized in them, hell can freely expand, marking its evil presence not only on *terra firma* but also in the metamorphosed heaven.

Rosenberg's unique vision of hell presented in *Daughters of War* also stresses the dynamism of the underworld, restoring at the same time what Owen's *inferno* has somehow been deprived of. The Amazons' kingdom lies somewhere in "the underside of things", "shut from earth's profoundest eyes". The central point of this world occupies the root of the tree of life, which they blow "to a live flame" in order to destroy human existence on earth. As "the mortal tree of life" — the internal channel of destruction — connects the low and the middle worlds, it appears to constitute a specific axis, allowing for movement between them. However, in spite of the associations with flames, suffering and death, the underworld becomes a symbol of the positive transformation of man. His soul, finally "clean of the dust of all days", can leave the body's "crimson corpse", exchanging it for the new, eternal life — the sisters' gift for their lovers. Besides, since the characteristics of the daughters reflect those of the space to which they belong, the low world acquires such attributes as beauty, wisdom and love which not only rescues man from the routine and dreariness of his life on earth, but transfigures him into a superior being. Having thus assumed the features, position and functions of the celestial sphere, Rosenberg's *inferno* organizes the space of war, controlling it through the centres of hellishness established on *terra firma*. However, despite the occasional violation of the principle of movement characteristic of mythic space (in *Strange Meeting* and *Daughters of War* man's descent actually marks his moral improvement) these enclaves of evil are all to some degree indicative of man's confinement, suggesting in this way that freedom — no longer man's natural property — depends exclusively on the mercy and/or the paradoxical nature of the war. Hell finally reveals its 'true feathers', making it very clear that it stands for death, torture and incarceration.

"The funnelled hole", a shell crater described in Owen's *Fragment* is merely "one of many mouths of hell". Entrapped in these "death's jaws" man

can only be cramped, stuck in the space whose centrelessness prevents any kind of movement. This same misdirection turns the world of Owen's *Miners* into one, where, bereft of directionality¹⁸, "the poor lads" are doomed to get "lost in the ground". Apart from the hole, another hellish enclave is a trench, in which, as depicted in Owen's *S.I.W.* even man's memories of home turn into a mockery. The "blind, trench wall / Curtained with fire, roofed in with creeping fire" no longer protects; instead it represents man's "inescapable thrall", "a trap between a promise of life and a promise of death"¹⁹, a trap of men's grounding in earth (*The Sentry*) where they hide to give "hell" to their enemies and where they are surrounded by their own pain, fear and the curse of the dead.

The openness of a "funnelled hole" and the nearly total enclosure of the narrow, cramping trench meet in Owen's *Mental Cases* where a mental asylum constitutes yet another realization of hell on earth, the *inferno*, which in spite of its closed structure is at the same time qualified by the "spaciousness" always characteristic of human thinking and memory. In the twilight of the hospital ward the visitors notice some "purgatorial shadows", men with minds ravished by Death, the incarnations of living hell which, through the hands of the patients, can reach even those who have escaped its direct influence.

The realization of the underground, most characteristic of the war space described in Owen's and Rosenberg's poetry, indicates that the variety of forms hell assumes (abyss, hole, tunnel, trench, house, mental asylum, evil force, human space — corresponding to their being either closed, open, or both) qualifies the low world as omnipresent. Its omnipotence reveals itself through the dynamic power with which it expands as well as in the ease with which it generates evil, transforming man and earth into its forces. Even when defeated in the underground, evil is restored to still greater power on earth, where Satan appears as the "dirty louse" (Rosenberg's *Louse Hunting*) and where its domination is established and marked by means of its operating centres. Hell can and does replace the celestial sphere and this reversal corresponds to the simultaneous change from order and harmony into unfreedom, menace and apocalypse. Consequently, since the ostensible boundary between hell and earth allows for mutual interaction between them, *terra firma*, subordinated to the power of *inferno*, becomes its reflection as well as its intensification.

¹⁸ T. Sławek: "Dark Pits of War": An Attempt at the Hermeneutics of War in *The Image of War in the Anglo-American Literature of the 20th Century*, Uniwersytet Śląski, Katowice 1983, p. 82.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Desecrated heaven and elevated hell constitute the frame within which there spreads the central plane of the space of war — *terra firma*. Transformed into the world of chaos and surrounded by hostility which penetrates the ostensible borders, earth can by no means be regarded as safe. Man's existence on it is as imperilled by the illusory freedom resulting from the prevalence of natural, open places — *loci naturales* — as it is by the penetrability of *loci artificiales* — the man-made places which are represented by the spatially closed forms.

The *totus mundus* of Owen's *Spring Offensive* created by such open forms as "field", "meadow", "grass", "hill" and "valley" merely reflects the axiological metamorphoses of heaven and hell. Thus the blissfulness of the valley ("bottom") is countered by the oppressiveness of the "top" — the hill, on reaching which the soldiers come "to the end of the world". From there they can only descend to the "infinite space" of hell.

This ethical reversal is further developed by the fields which, no longer symbolic of life and its fertility, turn into the landscape of dying (Owen's *Asleep*), exposing man's vulnerability as well as war's destructiveness (Rosenberg's *Break of Day* and *August 1914*). Grasslands also contribute to the semantic dialectics of space, demonstrating in *Spring Offensive* how relative values have become; their sense defined not by some fixed Centre that would help man to determine their clarity and univocal character, but dependent exclusively on his location against his operational targets. Separating the "near" from the "far", grass actually functions as the boundary which can be realized non-spatially as the opposition between "familiar-safe" and "strange-dangerous".

Rosenberg also explores the concept of grass as a boundary. In *Break of Day*, the neutral territory of "the sleeping green" which divides the soldiers into "ours" and "theirs" reveals its menace whenever they move towards the 'peaceful' ground. However, impenetrable as it is for the man who lacks the courage to cross it, the grassland is easily traversed by the rat, implying thus the penetrability of such a boundary. The border-like nature of grass is also focused on in *Dead Man's Dump* and *From France* where grass separates the world of the dead from that of the living. One is therefore reminded that in the space of war — in the trenches and wherever the action takes place — the boundaries lose their mythic significance of real protection. Moreover, even if their existence creates an impression of some organization in this space, the ostensible boundaries show how artificial and illusory is this "order" which, directing and orienting man always towards evil and entrapment, removes the truly mythic "openness" from the sphere of the real to that of the desirable (Owen's *A Terre*).

The examination of the natural world with respect to openness has established that death chaos and oppressiveness are its fundamental non-spatial characteristics, showing also how the fragmentariness of *loci naturales* seems to reflect the disintegration of life on earth, confirmed by their anthropomorphic descriptions (i.e. "grey grass"; "sleeping green"; "old fields" etc.).

Aware of the danger associated with openness, man seeks shelter in the places specially made to provide protection. Demarcating space and therefore isolating it from its natural continuum, he has created not only towns, houses, and hospitals, but also military barracks, trenches and dug-outs. Although these *loci artificiales* are representative of the space of war, only the last two epitomize the trenchworld; others denote the areas behind the Front. They all, however, provide evidence of man's unfreedom defined in terms of his dependence on Chance and nature, his enslavement by the orders from his superiors, or else resulting from his own centrelessness.

In spite of the crucial difference between a trench and a dug-out, reflected in the opposition between a total and only partial enclosure, these two forms share in a number of characteristics. Both of them stand for man's descent and his deliberate shift down to a lower level of space. Not only do they lead man underground, but what is more, they mark his grounding in earth, the grounding which has a double value: "metaphorically — it stands for man's rootedness in nature as the source and termination of his energy, metonymically — it signifies the literalness of man's attachment to the earth, the liaison which unobservedly becomes imprisonment".²⁰

While portraying the enclaves of tragic security, revealing the fragility as well as the unique significance of constantly endangered life, Owen and Rosenberg seem to concentrate on the penetrability of their space. Stuck in the "den", as the trench is often referred to, soldiers are oppressed by the rat (*A Terre, Break of Day*), death hiding in the innocent poppies (*In the Trenches, Break of Day*), even by the merciless wind and rain presented in Owen's *Exposure* and *The Sentry*.

Moreover, both a dug-out and a trench are easy targets for bullets and shells. "Shell on frantic shell" hammer against the roofed dug-out in *The Sentry* to find "our door at last" and to strike the soldier blind. In Owen's *The Letter* as well as Rosenberg's *In the Trenches* men get "hit" or "smashed", and their wounds, mutilation and death belie whatever illusion there may be about the safety of these *loci artificiales*.

Penetrability appears to be the attribute attached also to the soldiers' camp which is presented in Owen's *Inspection* and Rosenberg's *Louse*

²⁰ Sławek, *op. cit.*, pp. 79–80.

war, is desolate, deserted, and no longer an enclave of human life. With the doors and shutters closed, the house separates man from the values it represents, protecting them from the evil and destructiveness he now embodies. Man, therefore, is deprived of a place to belong, and the closed doors push him back outside, to the sphere of the PROFANE which he has come to incarnate.

The dream of home recurs to haunt the man in the battlefield where his pain-blunted perceptions transform gun emplacements²² into an area of comfort. The 'house' he has thus constructed becomes a centre of disorientation rather than orientation, a tragic illusion, part of the agony of *The Dying Soldier* who, unable to reach the hallucinatory shelter, almost within reach, finds a new and permanent one in a gunpit.

In order to complete the presentation of *loci artificiales*, the concept of town should be discussed. In Rosenberg's *From France*, deprived of "the café lights" round which man's life used to centre, it becomes a collective, forsaken grave of "heaped stones". Instead of protective walls which would surround a town in mythic space, one sees but "ruin and woe"; the once closed form transformed into a landscape of complete homelessness has therefore acquired an attribute of openness in which normal, free, and unthreatened life is no longer possible.

Spontaneity, joy and happiness do not belong even to the civilian town far from the Front. In Owen's *The Calls*, having acquired the attributes of self-complacency, insensibility, and routine, life turns out to be as — if not more — dangerous for man's humanity as is the soldier's direct exposure to the evils of war; the war that already penetrates the ostensible safety of the town, announcing its nearness with the occasional "blatant bugle" or the window bumping from the gunnery practice.

Deprived of any positively orienting centres, *terra firma* seems to become a homogeneous continuum whose lack of heterogeneity is reflected in the complete disappearance or in the reversal of oppositions characteristic of mythic space. The "low" takes over the attributes of the "high", and the "demarcated" loses the quality of isolation, thus turning into a replica of "not demarcated", from which it has previously been separated. Regardless of the form — open; totally or partially closed — the space of war is invariably invested with oppressiveness, disintegration and danger. Resulting from this is the elimination of the opposition "open-closed" and the undisturbed domination of openness, a projection of man's vulnerability and unfreedom.

²² See R. Andersen: *Isaac Rosenberg: A Critical Study of His Plays and Poems*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Leicester, England 1974, p. 418.

While *loci artificiales* and *loci naturales* allow us to interpret space as definite, they are at the same time indicative of its anonymity, and consequently, of life-endangering malignity of the place to which it is attributed. Suggestive of a lack of directionality, namelessness leads to the homogeneity of space, its disorientation and confusion. Besides, being a category of space perceived from the outside, anonymity appears to be connotative of the same meanings which, because of openness, have been ascribed to the interior of the war space. Moreover, since a space is invariably a projection of a speaker who registers and demarcates it in his utterance, we can say that the anonymity of the space mirrors the namelessness of man and is therefore representative of his essential experience: dehumanization, reflected in this case by man's loss of the right to have a name, and the right to name, and so to create his world.

The domination of anonymity in the space of unfreedom is occasionally broken by geographical details which, marking out the areas of historical or strategic significance for the Great War, often become an integral part of some wider, biblical or mythological context. For instance, Europe, mentioned only in Owen's poems, is depicted as victimized not only by the "foul tornado" centered in Berlin (1914) but also by Abraham's sin of pride (*The Parable*), changing the continent into a huge "titan's grave" (*Not One Corner*).

Apart from Germany which Rosenberg sees as the 'benefactor' of all earth to which she gives chaos (*Lusitania*), the space of Europe expands through references to France and England. Rosenberg's *Worm* presents this last as a follower and successor of Corinth, Babylon and Rome, the ancient powers which in the end had to pass. The presentation of France (Rosenberg's *Home Thoughts From France* henceforth *Home Thoughts, From France*) is also far from exhaustive. In this desolate "land of ruin and woe" where "men groan to broken men", the Somme (Rosenberg's *Soldier: Twentieth Century* henceforth *Soldier, Girl to Soldier on Leave* henceforth *Girl*) and the Ancre (Owen's *At A Calvary near the Ancre* henceforth *At A Calvary*) demarcate the space of the actual in the world of the titans and Golgotha, symbolic of the sufferings both Prometheus and Christ had to experience. Finally, the town of Cérisy marks the starting point of the journey to Avalon and its world of oblivion sought after by the mortally wounded. Besides, France serves to convey the spatial opposition "far-near", hardly ever existing in anonymous space. In *Home Thoughts*, in which France, depicted by the soldier who fights there, is perceived from within, it represents the zone of the "near". As, however, this area becomes also a symbol of the pitilessness of the war, the attributes of safety of

which “nearness” is symbolic in mythic space are thus contradicted, and even parodied. At the same time the “far” world of the civilians existing beyond the reach of the war acquires a positive characteristic: only there can man still be human.

However, the opposition between France and the civilian England (contributing as it does to develop Owen’s fundamental contrast between the soldiers and the non-combatant) changes its meaning in *Smile, Smile, Smile* (henceforth *Smile*) where we read that “England, one by one has fled to France” and that “Not many elsewhere now save under France”. The poem, therefore suggests that the real people are no longer in England, representative of the zone of the “far”. Instead, they are in France (the “near”) where, by implication, the real England now exists, kept alive with suffering, and despite her sons’ deaths.

Of the two poets only Rosenberg managed to transcend the reality of the war, replacing it symbolically with the biblical context. His presentation of the conflict between Lebanon and Babylon resulting in *The Destruction of Jerusalem* completes the ‘Old Testament’ space already referred to in Owen’s *The Parable*. The existence of constantly universalized geographical space is indicative not only of the speaker’s change in perspective and the distance assumed while portraying the reality of the war, but it also makes one aware of the complexity of the treatment of time. Numerous references to the Bible and mythology seem to construct mythic time, whose presence is reflected either in the mention of some specific event (Christ’s Crucifixion — *At a Calvary; Trojan war — A Worm*, the burning of Solomon’s temple — *The Burning, The Destruction*) or of a person (King Arthur and Merlin *Hospital Barge*, Caesar and Napoleon — *Soldier; Titan, Prometheus, Circe — Girl to Soldier* etc.).

Whereas the time of the historical and legendary past constitutes a *Vorgeschichte* and prepares the ground for the events of the actual, the Great War of 1914–1918 finds its epilogue in Owen’s *Strange Meeting* and *The Next War*, a pessimistic prophecy of more, worse and greater conflicts to come. Within this ‘*Vorgeschichte — Nachgeschichte*’ frame there exists the plane of the present, the historical time of the war. Apart from the sporadic instances of time specification reflected in the information concerning the year, month or season (Rosenberg’s *August 1914, Spring 1916*), the actual is most often characterized by the word “war” (Rosenberg’s *In War, On Receiving the News of the War*) or some situation representative of it (*Break of Day, Spring Offensive* etc.).

Although time usually constitutes the background of human actions, occasionally it is introduced as a theme in itself, a problem to ponder.

Rosenberg's *Break of Day* demonstrates a paradox of time which changes and yet stays the same. Apart from this he also touches upon the problem of the relativism of time and timelessness which in *Dead Man's Dump* turns out to be synonymous with man's independence of time, granting him the illusion of immortality and thus a sense of freedom, created by a moment of realization of one's luck to survive.

The passing of time as one of the forms of changeability introduces the problem of movement, which, functioning in mythic space as a symbolic representation of the condition of humane ethics, will now help us to determine the position of earth, either as a middle component of the tri-partite model or as a horizontal continuum.

In spite of the stereotype which invariably associates the space of war with fighting, its images are extremely rare and appear in Rosenberg's *Louse Hunting*, and such Owen's poems as *Spring Offensive*, *Dulce Et Decorum Est* (henceforth *Dulce*), *The Sentry*, *Apologia*, *The Show*, *The Last Laugh*, and *The Next War*. Fighting seems to be a complex, cyclical and horizontal movement whose rhythm is naturally measured by attack and defense and whose destructiveness, reaching its peak in *The Show*, deprives man of his human dignity. Enslaved by the proliferation of killing, himself turned into a predatory, cannibalistic animal, man can hope to regain neither his humanity nor freedom which it determines. Also "marching" contributes to man's negative metamorphosis. "Limping", "blood-shod" and close to exhaustion, the soldiers lose their military identity, becoming instead "beggars" and "hags" (*Dulce*). Rosenberg's *Marching* changes men into mindless, volitionless automata for killing, always on the move towards death and darkness, or as in Owen's *Insensibility* "from larger day to huger night".

Owen's *Exposure* and Rosenberg's *Returning*, *We Hear the Larks* (henceforth *Returning*) picture "dragging" which shares in the characteristics of "marching" and which invariably leads the soldiers into a trap of confused imaginings of home, merely increasing their disorientation in space, or of the seeming safety of the camp, the place of their very private, almost intimate war against lice.

Thus, in spite of the fact that marching is a "horizontal" movement (suggesting the horizontality of the space in which it exists), the attributes associated with it — darkness, suffering and the negative transformation it brings about — show it as indicative of man's moral decline, which in mythic space would usually be represented by downward movement.

Another form of movement characteristic of the space of war is "crawling" (*Spring Offensive*), which symbolizes man's moral degradation and the defeat of his humanity. No wonder that in the world where any kind of move-

ment is connected with danger, "walking", especially "walking alive" (*Home Thoughts*) can exist only in the sphere of dreams and "wishful thinking". In the space of war the negative, horizontal-descending movement is further confirmed by the motif of the road which in Owen's *The Send-Off* symbolizes the soldiers' farewell to civilian life and to the world of peace:

Down the close, darkening lanes they sang their way
To the siding-shed,
And lined the train with faces grimly gay.
(CP, p. 46)

The same loneliness and darkness that lead downward, towards death, recur in Rosenberg's description of the "poison-blasted track" (*Returning*) and in Owen's *Insensibility* where "alleys" are "cobbled" with the bodies of the dead.

In Rosenberg's creation of space only the Amazons (*Daughters of War*) move upward when, leaving their underworld kingdom, they invade and triumph over the earth. Manifestations of vertical ascent are extremely rare in Owen's poetry as well; limited, in fact, only to *Spring Offensive* where the "boots coming up" to the "top" of the hill are instantly forced to descend, to fall "away past this world's verge". Falling therefore becomes a predominant form of movement in space of war. Apart from *The Show* and *Spring Offensive* where "falling" equals death and dehumanization, man's descent is rendered in a number of ways. Owen's *The Dead-Beat* concentrates on the soldier who "dropped more sullenly than wearily". In *Strange Meeting* and *The Send-Off* it manifests itself in the preposition "down" qualifying the direction of the soldier's escape to the tunnel or his departure from the safety of the "close lanes"; even from light as is the case with *The Sentry* where the man, coming "down the steep steps" descends into blindness.

Moreover, downward movement is also intrinsic to "sinking" and "drowning" — metaphors for death at the Front. *The Sentry* makes a reference to a man who "would have drowned himself for good" if others did not drag him out of the mud just in time. Yet, in Rosenberg's *Dead Man's Dump* the man's "drowning soul" sunk "too deep for human tenderness" is past help. Finally, Owen's *Dulce* depicts the agony of the gassed man whose death remembered as "guttering, choking, drowning" invades the dreams of the survivor. All this, together with man's "grounding" in earth as another form of descent, allows us to see *terra firma* as the space where "human movement", which according to the mythic model is symbolic of either physical or spiritual death, transforms earth into the sphere of the PROFANE.

It should be noted, however, that apart from these few manifestations of movement, man's moral decline is most often rendered by means of immobility. Rosenberg's man is "shut in pitiless trance" (*Home Thoughts*). "Caught in the wild wave" of the war, he breaks himself on it (*In War*). As the breaking symbolizes the disintegration of life, passivity can therefore be said to result in man's entrapment by the Big Sleep whose images also occur in *Futility*, *Dulce*, *Asleep*, and *Spring Offensive* — Owen's portrayals of human stillness that invariably projects or defines death.

Suggestive of man's entrapment is also partial immobility of the wounded, bedridden (Owen's *Conscious*, *A Terre*, *Disabled*) and sitting in wheel chairs (*Mental Cases*), or, outside this hospital space, the soldiers' "lying"; their painful restlessness on board of *The Troop Ship* merely a prelude to the "torture of lying machinally shelled" (Owen's *S.I.W.*) — the plight that would sometimes drive man to suicide.

Passivity is additionally emphasized by man's speechlessness, broken only occasionally when he moans, groans or gasps (*From France*, *The Dying Soldier*, *The Last Laugh*), curses (*Dulce*), swears so "that God-head might shrink" (*Louse Hunting*), and, eventually "cries", dying from the impact of "the far torturing wheels" (*Dead Man's Dump*). This rather limited range of sounds man produces is completed by the "wailing", the voice of the victimized earthmen, heard in Rosenberg's *Daughters of War*.

Man's stillness in the space of war is further intensified by the dynamism of nature and the implements of war. "Swift", and "unseen" (*Spring Offensive*), bullets which "long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads" (*Arms and the Boy* — henceforth *Arms*) attack in "successive flights" (*Exposure*). Extremely active in this doomed space is Death (capitalized!) "spitting" with bullets and "coughing" shrapnell (*The Next War*). "Shells go crying" over men (*Dead Man's Dump*), "spouting" the reddest spate (*Apologia*), their "wailing" (*Anthem for Doomed Youth* — henceforth *Anthem*) the only form of mourning to the accompaniment of which the young keep dying. The "monstrous anger of the guns" (*Anthem*) also dynamizes the energy of the implements of war: their incessant "rumbling" (*Exposure*), "thumping" (*Strange Meeting*), "battering" (*Mental Cases*), their "thunder and flash" (*The Dying Soldier* or "moaning" (*Strange Meeting*) — these "hasty orisons" "pattered out" also by "the stuttering rifles" and their "rapid rattles". Their destructiveness, as a dominant attribute of the space of war, finds its symbol in Rosenberg's *Lusitania* — one of the most compressed analyses of chaos:

Chaos! that coincides with this militant purpose.
Chaos! the heart of this earnest malignancy.

Chaos! that helps, chaos that gives to shatter
 Mind-wrought, mind-unimagining energies
 For topless ill, of dynamite and iron
 Soulless logic, inventive enginery.

(CW, p. 99)

This "soulless logic" appears at its worst in Owen's *The Last Laugh* where it triumphs over man, satisfied with the victory of its powers which mock and sneer at the dying and the dead:

"O Jesus Christ! I'm hit", he said; and died.
 Whether he vainly cursed, or prayed indeed,
 The Bullets chirped — In vain! vain! vain!
 Machine guns chuckled, — Tut-tut! Tut-tut!
 And the Big Gun guffawed.
 Another sighed, — "O Mother! Dad!"
 Then smiled, at nothing, childlike, being dead.
 And the lofty Shrapnel-cloud
 Leisurely gestured, -Fool!
 And the falling splinters tittered.
 "My Love!", one moaned. Love-languid seemed his mood,
 Till, slowly lowered, his whole face kissed the mud.
 And the Bayonets' long teeth grinned;
 Rabbles and Shells hooted and groaned;
 And the Gas hissed.

(CP, p. 59)

Reduced to an insignificant "one", "another", or "he", man is easily dominated by the power of the guns, manifest in their numbers and their capitalization. He is also defenseless in the face of the oppressive dynamism of nature, which, reinforcing man's passivity, reveals his spiritual paralysis evident in his encounters with the dug-out rats, lice, or the combined forces of rain, snow and wind (Rosenberg's *Break of Day*, Owen's *The Sentry*, *Exposure*). In *Exposure* man is "knifed" by "the merciless, iced east wind"; "pale snowflakes" reach for his face "with fingering stealth" while frost "fastens" on him, "shrivelling" hands and "puckering" his forehead "crisp". And finally, there is rain which, "guttering down the waterfalls of slime" (*The Sentry*) entraps man in the "dens" of his own making, where sometimes buried alive, he leaves not just his "corpse" but also his "curse" (*The Sentry*).

Prisoner in the world of war, man is victimized by numerous forms of enslavement, all of which materialize after his rejection of the Divine guidance and protection. Thus arrested in his moral and spiritual growth, beset with danger and easily controlled by evil (war implements, malign nature,

enemies), man is free to move only towards his degradation. Furthermore, since the war space lacks any significant realization of vertical ascent, it follows that *terra firma* — no longer qualifying to constitute the middle plane of the mythic model, constructed around the attributes characteristic of the Divine — liberates itself from it and evolves into a model of its own, a horizontal continuum, a pragmatic space in which, ironically, man pays the “liberation” costs with his entrapment and his dehumanization.

The presentation of the transformation which mythic space undergoes under the impact of war has allowed for a more profound understanding of nature as well as the mechanisms and processes of war itself. It has been shown that war on earth begins with man’s rebellion against the established order. Yet, once unleashed, it dominates man, becoming a principle which governs the world; a coherence that is simultaneously chaos. As R. Callois has stated, war is inhuman, and this is enough to regard it as a travesty of the Divine²³. The attribute of divinity whose tragic measure manifests itself in the inhumanity of war seems to justify the war’s transforming power, which, while destroying the established order (the mythic model in this case), leads to the creation of a new structure of the world, represented by a horizontal continuum and a new hierarchy of values associated with its space, the space which both conditions and reflects the perversion of humane ethics.

The very moment in which man profanes and rejects the SACRED makes him his own destroyer; his annihilating power reflected in and externalized by the soulless logic of the implements of war. Desecrating the Divine, man degrades himself and his humanity. Symbolic of his moral decline is his grounding in earth, which entraps him and transforms him into nothing but a physical, fear driven form of existence. Unable to find or construct a real shelter on earth, man is literally and metaphorically “lost in the ground”. In the space of the war, even his immobility pushes him step by step towards danger. If he has the courage to face it, he is a loser; if not, he simply keeps on escaping from the evil he impersonates; a glorious warrior has been transformed into a miserable, victimized coward.

Homeless and thus fenced off from the world of the “familiar” and “safe”, man exists in a space of chaos and confusion. Deprived of the Centre which he has himself destroyed, he is doomed to vegetate in a world bereft of directionality, where life is but a form of unfreedom, a form of spiritual decay.

²³ See R. Callois: *Wojna i sacrum in Żywioł i ład*, trans. by A. Tatarkiewicz, PIW, Warszawa 1973, pp. 170–171.

STRESZCZENIE

Odczytując wolność jako Boży dar, pozwalający człowiekowi jak najpełniej realizować swe człowieczeństwo i powołanie do świętości, autorka pokazuje jak świat wojny, niosąc ze sobą zanegowanie *sacrum* i zburzenie zorientowanego nań etycznego modelu przestrzeni, przemienia wolność w stan zniewolenia i zagrożenia, cechujący powstałe na gruzach dawnego porządku horyzontalne kontinuum ziemi. Przedstawiwszy transformacje („obniżenie” nieba; „wywyższenie” piekła) prowadzące poprzez uniezależnienie się ziemi do uzależnienia człowieka i uwięzienia go w kręgu zła, z danych tekstowych, występujących w wojennej poezji W. Owena i I. Rosenberga, autorka „buduje” świat okopowego zniewolenia. Potęga wojennego zła, nieustanny chaos (zanik opozycji przestrzennych) oraz ciągle osaczenie przez niebezpieczeństwo (dominacja form otwartych, pozornosc granic, zamknięte formy—pułapki, złowrogość przyrody, ruch nieodmiennie prowadzący ku dehumanizacji lub śmierci) — wszystko to przemienia człowieka w bezwolny automat do zabijania, redukując jego wolność do uciekania w głąb ziemi, gdzie musi stać się jedynie fizyczną, kierowaną strachem formą istnienia.

