

# THE IMAGERY OF LANDSCAPE IN THE ENGLISH POETRY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR\*

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*Fecha de recepción:*  
10 de marzo de 2011

*Fecha de aceptación:*  
25 de marzo de 2011

**Resumen:** La Primera Guerra Mundial trajo consigo, en el panorama literario de Gran Bretaña, un nuevo tipo de poesía que combinaba el tono sereno e idílico de la gran tradición inglesa del siglo XIX con una angustia y desamparo de gran carga emotiva. Es precisamente en las descripciones del paisaje bélico donde los poetas de la Gran Guerra demuestran con más crudeza esta ruptura con la poesía anterior y donde un moderno sentimiento de ansiedad se bifurca en múltiples direcciones. Con el análisis de cuatro poemas escogidos, se pretende destacar cómo las imágenes de la naturaleza distorsionada canalizaban esta angustia provocada por la guerra.

**Palabras clave:** Poesía georgiana – paisaje bélico – Primera Guerra Mundial

**Abstract:** The English ‘War Poets’ who took part in the European conflict that shook the world in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, initiated a new kind of poetry which combined the tranquil scenes of the previous tradition with a feeling of despair and intense pain. It is in the descriptions of landscape where this combination is most striking, where the rupture with the past is most evident and where a modern sense of anxiety takes place, exploding in multiple

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\* Este trabajo ha contado con la guía del Dr. José Francisco Fernández Sánchez, profesor del área de Filología Inglesa de la Universidad de Almería.

ways. The aim of this paper is to analyze four representative poems of this period and to examine their portrayal of a distorted nature as the instrument to express a feeling of 'angst' caused by the war.

**Keywords:** Georgian poetry – war landscape – First World War

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The land's sharp features seemed to be  
 The Century's corpse outleant,  
 His crypt the cloudy canopy,  
 The wind his death-lament.  
 (Thomas Hardy, «The Darkling Thrush»,  
 31 December 1900)

The beginning of the twentieth century brought a profound feeling of anxiety among the British. Having reached its apex during the long and changing reign of Queen Victoria, Britain was now waiting expectantly for its turbulent destiny; British people asked themselves if their country will remain the same after such a long period of industrial, political, scientific and military prosperity. Poetry lost much of its vitality in this period; there were no renowned poetic figures, such as Tennyson or Browning, to emerge in this time. As time went by, Edwardian and Georgian poetry found in the former scholarly tradition, as well as in the in vogue Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic values, a way of resurrecting the tireless spirit of progress that had turned British Empire into one of the richest civilisations ever seen in the economic field, as well as, of course, in the cultural and literary one.

In this paper I would like to briefly examine some of the ways Great War poetry dealt with the nineteenth century feeling of despair, focusing on the disruption of the landscape. The poems I have chosen to analyse are: Rupert Brooke's «The Soldier», Sarah Teasdale's «Spring in War-Time», Edward Thomas' «As the Team Head-Brass» and Isaac Rosenberg's «Break of Day in the Trenches». Prior to the analyses of these poems, a historical contextualization seems necessary.

## 2. HISTORICAL AND BRITISH LITERARY CONTEXT OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Historically speaking, not only did World War I become a global war of unprecedented carnage (biological weapons were used for the first time, for instance), but it also changed completely Western civilisation. This was the first war that confronted all the European powers of the epoch, and it became a war of deterioration in which trench warfare, heavy artillery and barbed wire played a major role:

The First World War was the point at which that revolution came of age. Starting in Great Britain in the middle of the eighteenth century, the Industrial Revolution began to turn society on its head. It pushed the British, then a predominantly rural population, into becoming urban dwellers. It revolutionised manufacturing, transport, communications, the production of wealth, and placed immense pressure on the country's whole power base. It helped to make an empire, and to sustain it when it had been made. Its impact on warfare was even more startling [...] Industry had replaced the slow, cumbersome and inaccurate muzzle-loading musket with the breech-loading rifle [...] One rung higher up the ladder of technological development was the machine-gun. Properly handled and positioned, a machine-gun could decimate a whole battalion [...] At the very foot of the ladder was simple barbed wire [...] Simple as it was, it presented an impenetrable barrier [...] Above all, the great weight of the civilian populations, male and female, was called on and used in addition to the large numbers of people in uniform, ensuring that this was indeed 'total' war. (Stephen, 1988: 3-4)

Among the main reasons for this huge conflict to take place were the industrial development and the tough competition that generated strong rivalries between European superpowers. As a consequence, there spread a strong nationalistic feeling in almost every country. But the fact is that the premonition of war became patent as soon as the countries began to take sides, that is to say, when the Austro-Hungarian, German and Ottoman empires, as well as the Kingdom of Bulgaria, joined together forming the Central Powers (1879-1918); and, in response, the Russian and British Empires joined together with France forming the Entente Powers (1907-1917). Finally the war erupted when the Austrian heir to the throne, Franz Ferdinand, and his wife were assassinated in Sarajevo by the Serbian student Gavrilo Princip.

Dealing with the literary situation of Britain, it is necessary to make a brief commentary about the characteristics of Georgian poetry, so that we can appreciate how these features became, in some way, distorted as soon as the Great War broke out. The early decades of the twentieth century saw the rise of a new tendency in English poetry: The Georgian Tradition. According to Bullough, we can state that Georgian poetry had, «at least five main tendencies»:

1. A «scholarly tradition» (Bullough, 1941: 46) that not only recovers, but also improves old themes and forms. It dates back to Shakespearean times and goes on emphasising on some of the everlasting poets of English literature such as Milton, Coleridge or Tennyson.
2. A metaphysical tendency that usually turns to the use of «intricate or irregular verse-forms and ornate or witty imagery» (ibid.: 46).

3. A wistful sentimental yearning of Romanticism showed in the profound aesthetic attitude inherited from the Pre-Raphaelites: «Art for Art's sake».

4. Focus on «“realistic” impressionism based on an acceptance for imaginative purposes of modern city life» (ibid.: 46), avoiding Victorian splendid themes and colossal diction and, subsequently, making it more accessible to all readers.

5. Georgian poets took their inspiration «from pastoral themes and materials» (Johnston, 1964: 4), in other words, there is a praise for the ordinary rural landscapes (countryside, sea, open road, etc.). I would say this is the most important feature, and the one on which we will focus our essay.

### 3. POETIC ANALYSES

Having said this, now we will continue with the poetic analysis of the four chosen war-poems, by doing so, we will select and comment the most relevant excerpts of each poem. In the end we will contrast them briefly.

We will begin with Rupert Brooke's «The Soldier» (1914), probably «the representative of Georgian poetics» (Silkin, 1989: 74) par excellence. What we can tell from the very beginning is that the speaker represents the arrogance of the nineteenth century ethos of Empire that does put forward the idea of the superior Englishman.

If I should die, think only this of me:  
That there's some corner of a foreign field  
That is forever England. There shall be  
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;  
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,  
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam.  
A body of England's, breathing English air,  
Washed by the rivers, blest by the suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,  
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less  
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;  
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;  
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,  
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

When the narrator states «In that rich earth a richer dust concealed», he evokes that foreign landscapes are enriched with the mortal remains of Englishmen. There is a strong colonial sense when he says «There's some corner of a foreign field / That is forever England», since he is implying that the English have some sort of ownership over foreign and unknown lands. We cannot forget that this war, like most of them, was about land, greed, dominance and, in short, about the yearning for European supremacy. Later on, when the speaker says «A body of England's breathing English air, / Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home. / And think, this hear, all evil shed away», the speaker seems to be implying that due to the fact that the Englishmen are fighting for their country (and subsequently are sinning indiscriminately by killing many people), God in the shape of idyllic landscape will redeem them for their war crimes. In some way, he is being Machiavellian by justifying the idea of murdering for a major purpose: the eventual growth of England. Finally, the climax of the poem, «In hearts at peace, under an English heaven», suggests that every single nation is under the British Empire, due to the fact that even the heavens are property of the glorious country. Brook conceived poetry as a «vehicle for imperialist attitudes» (ibid., 1972: 67). And this is something that we can appreciate in his brilliant idealisation of the horrifying war landscape, which is somewhat converted into a pleasure garden.

Sarah Teasdale was an American poet who did not have a direct involvement in the Great War, but she is mentioned here to show that questioning attitudes towards the conflict were not only limited to British intellectuals. She is also a poet closely connected to the tradition of English verse. Her poem «Spring in War-Time» (1915) is an intense piece in which landscape is celebrated as well but in an opposite way from that of the previous example.

I feel the Spring far off, far off,  
The faint far scent of bud and leaf--  
Oh how can Spring take heart to come  
To a world in grief,  
Deep grief?

The sun turns north, the days grow long,  
Later the evening star grows bright--  
How can the daylight linger on  
For men to fight,  
Still fight?

The grass is waking in the ground,  
 Soon it will rise and blow in waves--  
 How can it have the heart to sway  
     Over the graves,  
     New graves?

Under the boughs where lovers walked  
 The apple-blooms will shed their breath--  
 But what of all the lovers now  
     Parted by death,  
     Gray Death?

Teasdale was «very much influenced by the work of Christina Rossetti» (Reilly, 1941: 46) in a sense that we can find a pervading sense of melancholy which sometimes verges the morbid in her poems. This melancholy is made clear since the first stanza of the poem, when the narrator says «Oh how can Spring take heart to come / To a world in grief», that is, how can Spring dare to appear after so many people are suffering the atrocities of war? Spring being the symbol of vitality as we know. In the following stanza, the narrator would desire the daylight to disappear, so the soldiers will stop fighting at last: «How can the daylight linger on / For men to fight, / Still fight?» Also it is suggested that soldiers are not worth the sun or the «evening star» as long as they keep on killing each other, and, subsequently, killing the landscape with their artillery. Continuing along, the narrator wonders how the growing grass, another symbol of sprightliness, can grow along the corpses: «How can it [the grass] have the heart to sway / Over the graves, / New graves?» Here we have the very powerful and scary image of Death vs. Life. Finally she emphasises that there is no salvation even for those that stayed at home, since their heart will be «Parted by death». As it can be appreciated in this poem, Teasdale constantly superimposes nature on battle, but the feeling is quite different from the one of Brooke, since, for her, the «paradise» is not in the battlefield, but outside it. Above all, she is a woman «aligned with pacifism» (Ouditt, 1994: 131) and, obviously, battlefields are not the most peaceful places.

Among the poems that were written by soldiers that experienced first-hand the horrors of war, Edward Thomas' «As the Team Head-Brass» (1916) does certainly stand out. It is a poem that reveals «how extensively his response to the English countryside was influenced by his awareness of the war» (Hibberd *et al.*, 1986: 66). Before the analysis of the poem, I

would like to highlight the fact that the prodigious poetic career of this great poet, who «did not think he would be called upon to do so» (Sisson, 1981: 71), appeared in the «two and a half years before he was killed by a shell in an advance on the German line at Arras, in 1917» (ibid.: 71). Although he was not very enthused over the fact of going to war, he became an effective soldier: 'I have been thinking a good deal from time to time, trying to decide whether to enlist or not. I don't want to: only I feel that it is the only thing to do if a man is able-bodied and has nothing else to do' (Letter to Miss Townsend, November 1914).

As the team's head-brass flashed out on the turn  
 The lovers disappeared into the wood.  
 I sat among the boughs of the fallen elm  
 That strewed the angle of the fallow, and  
 Watched the plough narrowing a yellow square  
 Of charlock. Every time the horses turned  
 Instead of treading me down, the ploughman leaned  
 Upon the handles to say or ask a word,  
 About the weather, next about the war.  
 Scraping the share he faced towards the wood,  
 And screwed along the furrow till the brass flashed  
 Once more.

The blizzard felled the elm whose crest  
 I sat in, by a woodpecker's round hole,  
 The ploughman said. 'When will they take it away?'  
 'When the war's over.' So the talk began -  
 One minute and an interval of ten,  
 A minute more and the same interval.  
 'Have you been out?' 'No.' 'And don't want to, perhaps?'  
 'If I could only come back again, I should.  
 I could spare an arm, I shouldn't want to lose  
 A leg. If I should lose my head, why, so,  
 I should want nothing more... Have many gone  
 From here?' 'Yes.' 'Many lost?' 'Yes, a good few.  
 Only two teams work on the farm this year.  
 One of my mates is dead. The second day  
 In France they killed him. It was back in March,



The very night of the blizzard, too. Now if  
 He had stayed here we should have moved the tree.'  
 'And I should not have sat here. Everything  
 Would have been different. For it would have been  
 Another world.' 'Ay, and a better, though  
 If we could see all all might seem good.' Then  
 The lovers came out of the wood again:  
 The horses started and for the last time  
 I watched the clods crumble and topple over  
 After the ploughshare and the stumbling team.

Plunging now into the poem itself, let us begin by introducing the scene: the very first lines of the poem show that the scene is typically Georgian, that is to say, rural. In it, we can appreciate a team's head-brass watching the ploughman with his horses «narrowing a yellow square of charlock». This part evokes a climate of tranquillity, as one would expect of an anti-war poem, completely unusual in a war; so here we have a different vision of landscape as an ideal place for retreat. That is what we may think at the beginning, but, suddenly, «The blizzard felled the elm whose crest / I sat in, by a woodpecker's round hole» symbolising the fallen dead of the war. Later on, we realise that the soldier has already been to war and the following part of the poem consists of a dialogue between the head-brass, who had lost a friend, and the ploughman. The young head-brass, absolutely shattered by the war, is wondering what would have occurred had the war not happened: «If I could only come back again». Nevertheless, he is also astonished to see how life goes on in spite of everything: «The lovers disappeared into the wood», as if nothing had happened. This indifference towards the lovers indicates «Thomas's doubts as to the continuing harmonious and productive relationship between nature and man and between human beings which, he seems to feel, the war will inevitable disrupt» (Silkin, 1972: 101). At the end, he envisages «the clods crumble and topple over after the ploughshare» as the chaos and destructiveness of war at the same time he profoundly regrets having lost his beloved friend because of the damnable war, although, perhaps, there was some good to be had out of it. It is amazing how Thomas portrays the understanding of the course of war through the landscape.

The analysis of Isaac Rosenberg's «Break of Day in the Trenches» (ca. 1914, published 1916) can provide further elements to consider war landscape from an extreme point of view. From Russian Jewish origin, Rosenberg was raised in the East End of

London in an extremely impoverished atmosphere. He enlisted in the army without a special zest, in his own words, 'I never joined the army from patriotic reasons. Nothing can justify war. I suppose we must all fight to get the trouble over (...)' (Undated letter). One of Rosenberg's main features lies on the fact that he's not considered a mere Georgian or Edwardian, instead he was a poet whose «experience he sought to present was not merely a reportage of his personal life but an apprehension of the complexity of a wide universe» (Sisson, 1981: 89).

The darkness crumbles away  
 It is the same old druid Time as ever,  
 Only a live thing leaps my hand,  
 A queer sardonic rat,  
 As I pull the parapet's poppy  
 To stick behind my ear.  
 Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew  
 Your cosmopolitan sympathies,  
 Now you have touched this English hand  
 You will do the same to a German  
 Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure  
 To cross the sleeping green between.  
 It seems you inwardly grin as you pass  
 Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,  
 Less chanced than you for life,  
 Bonds to the whims of murder,  
 Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,  
 The torn fields of France.  
 What do you see in our eyes  
 At the shrieking iron and flame  
 Hurlled through still heavens?  
 What quaver -what heart aghast?  
 Poppies whose roots are in men's veins  
 Drop, and are ever dropping;  
 But mine in my ear is safe,  
 Just a little white with the dust.

After reading the first lines of the poem, we can guess that Rosenberg is locating us in the trenches, where «The darkness crumbles away». Furthermore he is introducing the notion of pastoral by focusing his attention on a simple rat. Rosenberg exposes a paradoxical image of life and death: «Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew / Your cosmopolitan sympathies». The narrator suggests us that the rats are the real and only winners of the battles, since they get real profit from both sides by eating the carrion and transmitting diseases: «Now you have touched this English hand / You will do the same to a German». This awkward situation brings about the idea of cosmopolitanism, Rosenberg «indicates the absurdity of the situation by permitting the rat, a supposedly lesser creature, to do what men dare not» (Silkin, 1972: 277). In the poem, we can find as well a sort of idealised view of the war field: «To cross the sleeping green between»; obviously there was no green at all, since the battlefield was a complete wasteland. So, this poem, written from the trenches, really shows a «concern for the visual aspects of the war as well as for the subcutaneous suffering» (Sisson, 1981: 91).

In conclusion, the poems I have analysed have all in common the idea of distortion, which can be both presented in a positive way, like «The Soldier», in a melancholic/negative one, like Teasdale's or Thomas', or even in the shape of a macabre irony, as in «Break of Day in the Trenches». Brooke gives a majestic idealisation of the battlefield, perhaps a bit ignorant due to the fact that he never fought in the trenches, but no doubt convincing. On the other hand, Sarah Teasdale gives a very melancholic vision of the landscape that really makes us think about the war in an ominous way. Thomas' makes us aware of the consequences of war, of how they affected incurably to those that survive. Finally, Rosenberg's one is a sardonic poem which shows us that, in a war, there are no victors whatsoever. The melancholic mood, so typical of much of Victorian poetry, exploded in the English World War poetry in a myriad of disturbing variations, all of them trying to account for the blatantly absurd waste of human lives.

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