

Isaac Rosenberg revisited by Harry Friedland

When I was in second year English Literature at the University of Cape Town, I did a mini-thesis on this all-but-unknown English poet. I stumbled upon a poem of his in an anthology which made no comment about the work (as it did about others) and in my mind and with my training and the preferences that that had created, the poem was embarrassingly bad (compared to Pound, Elliot, Yeats, 'The Boys') and at first reading I couldn't even finish it. But I came back to it later and changed my mind.

I originally wanted to do my mini-thesis on anti-Semitism in Shakespeare, but my lecturer was an English snob of the kind that was typical in the UCT English Department and he would not even contemplate such a topic. Shakespeare was untouchable. And in any event, I was already notorious for trashing Pauline Smith's famous short story "The Pain", so I don't think anyone was prepared to let me have a go at jolly old Shakespeare, although I suppose that if he had wanted to do so he could have allowed it and just failed me as revenge! But he wasn't nasty, he probably didn't even know that he was a snob...

I wanted to do something that connected to who I was, and this unknown poet Rosenberg kept beckoning (if you look at the modern history of English poetry you will find that unlike all the other fields where Jews succeeded, there are pretty few English poets of Jewish descent).

Why? Well, I've got a theory. In all the other fields of endeavour in which Jews succeeded, the measure of success is objective. In physics, chemistry, engineering, medicine, mathematics, law, accounting, etc., something either works or it doesn't work. Success is not dependent on anyone's opinion, and success cannot be denied to anyone whose idea actually works. But in art, no matter what pseudo-scientific language critics employ (and art is awash with pseudo-scientific language), the recognition of success is subjective. And in the pre-World War II ethos, with its rising tide of anti-Semitism, there was just no way that any WASP was going to let a Jew squeeze through a crack in the door into the great and glorious world of European culture. English was their language, damn it, they owned it and they would let in or exclude whoever they liked.

No matter how liberal the English thought they were, they were in fact as bigoted as anyone else in Europe. Look what they did to India. Look what they did to the Boers and the blacks in South Africa. Look how they double-crossed the Jews of Palestine. So, I hold no candle for the English and their much-vaunted liberalism.

But I love the English language. I think that it is the most developed, most sophisticated, most flexible, most organically evolved language on the planet. And the proof is in the pudding. It is now an international language. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the English language no longer belongs exclusively to the English people. It belongs to anyone who speaks it and the English snobs, while they have not been completely dispossessed of it, are no longer exclusive owners of thereof.

I don't care, I thought, I'm doing Rosenberg. And I did.

My thesis got a lukewarm reception and a dodgy mark but I passed.

But I got my revenge at the end of that year. I came top of the class in English II and I got the class prize. It paid enough to cover all my tuition fees for my third year and I bought a cool trench coat, World War I-style, in honour of Rosenberg!

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