

Digging up the Dying: Bearing Witness to Woundedness in Mary Borden's  
"Unidentified" and Isaac Rosenberg's "Dead Man's Dump"

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As the unidentified dead men of the first world war were buried, their violent deaths were overwritten with clean lines of white crosses, the wounding they experienced quietly ushered away and replaced by a series of small, presentable scars on the landscape. The inauthenticity of these scars, however, is a problematic one, because a scar suggests that past trauma is over and has been overcome – “while the wound evacuates the body of authority and opens it to semantic appropriation, the scar closes the body's narrative and reinvests it with authority” (Sychterz 140). While this healing may certainly be true for Great Britain as a whole, the orderliness of war cemeteries covers up what lies underneath – a twisted pile of bodies whose personal narratives were buried, both by the war but also by the newly instilled post-war narrative. Mary Borden’s “Unidentified” and Isaac Rosenberg’s “Dead Man’s Dump” dig up the wounds of those soldiers and bring them to the forefront of our minds, giving authority to the countless number of nameless deaths that take place throughout the First World War. Jeffrey Sychterz’ paper, “Scarred Narratives and Speaking Wounds: War Poetry and the Body”, discusses the use of the poetic voice as a way for war poets to regain meaning for wounding moments that have been otherwise overwritten by closed narratives (scars) that fit the ideology or mythos of those in power:

It is precisely a poetic voice as a counterweight to history that appeals to many twentieth century poets. They find in the wounded voice not a loss of meaning and authority, but instead an authentic, and therefore paradoxically authoritative, witness to the violence of

the twentieth century, whether the physical violence of war and oppression, or the representational violence of patriarchal history. (Sychterz 146)

Such is certainly apparent in Borden and Rosenberg. Although Rosenberg did not live to see the end of the war, this unlikely soldier's pacifist tendencies would surely have led him to a critical stance on the handling of the narratives of the dead, and as such his words still ring true in a post-war world. In *The Forbidden Zone*, Borden makes it clear she is hyper-aware of the larger forces at play in the war, the forces which have no problem overwriting the suffering of her *poilus* with something more palatable. As "poetry has increasingly become a privileged site for confronting violence in its myriad form" (Sychterz 137), Borden and Rosenberg use their poems to demand their readers bear real witness to the final woundings of these men, and in doing so confer a sense of responsibility and guilt upon them for simply accepting the narrative that has previously been presented to us.

"Dead Man's Dump" and "Unidentified" enact a similar scene, and the degree to which they share qualities simply begs for them to be analysed together. Both poems centre around a man on the cusp of death in the middle of a battlefield, and share many similarities in terms of the imagery they use. Even though these poems were written by two people who would have had quite different war experiences, Rosenberg in the trenches and Borden behind them, both would have seen a wide range of moments of death. In "Dead Man's Dump", the poem begins to climax when we spot the soldier who is "not long dead" (Rosenberg 62) and watch him struggle to hold on to life. Although the introduction to this man comes late in the poem, he is nevertheless a primary (if not the main) character in the poem. Borden's "Unidentified" takes a slightly different approach, drawing our attention to "this man" (1) in the very first line and telling us by

the end of the first stanza that “he is going to die” (14). Both men find themselves in, as Borden puts it, a “vast resounding waste of death” (12). Not only is their whole world on “fire” (Rosenberg 40) with “ceaseless” explosions (Rosenberg 41) causing the “quaking ground [to gape] in sudden holes beneath your feet” (Borden 25), but both soldiers are surrounded by a horrifying scene of “sprawled dead” (Rosenberg 7) and “bones of men [that] stick through the tortured mud” (Borden 26). Both men are forced to die on top of “the older dead” (Rosenberg 54) and will be welcomed by “remnants of men beneath [their] feet” (Borden 13). Although the poems certainly take different poetic approaches in handling the death of their soldier, certain other similarities can be found in the writing of both poems. Both Rosenberg and Borden use imagery of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion, feature a personified Earth, and involve the reader in a dramatic way. These similarities all serve to build up, with language, the significance of the soldier’s woundedness, making it (almost) holy, all-encompassing, and arrestingly immediate.

Woundedness, and the horrific nature of it, plays a central role in both poems. Neither poet shies away from bodies “burnt black by strange decay” (Rosenberg 56) or “death that tears the sky to shrieking pieces” (Borden 35). These lines, like many others, employ powerful imagery and linguistic devices to great effect, making the reader feel, as they read, the bodily impact of the wounds. Sychterz explains that poetry, and in particular the poetic voice, “is better suited for speaking the strange truth of wounds because it is not bound by plot or syntax” (145). In both Borden and Rosenberg, death is “shieking” (Borden 35 and Rosenberg 32), an onomatopoeic description of a high-pitched, ghastly choir of shells “crying” (Rosenberg 12), bullets whizzing by, and men screaming – as Rosenberg says, “the air is loud with death” (39). In Borden, violent imagery is made more present, more real for the reader, with syllabic repetition

(in particular alliteration, assonance and consonance), anaphora, and, of course, onomatopoeia. For example, the language in the line “It rolls and writhes, a shifting, tortured thing, a floating mass of matter, set adrift” (Borden 48) not only describes an action, but enacts it through language as well. Rosenberg’s techniques are similar, focusing “our attention on the aural imagery of death, including dying moans and crunching bones” (Sychterz 143). The use of such aural linguistic devices means that the reader feels present in the moment and can essentially hear the wounding taking place. When describing the final wound Borden’s soldier will be subjected to (in one long, run-on line), many of these techniques become apparent: “One blow—one moment more—and that man’s face will be a mass of matter, horrid slime—and little brittle bits—” (Borden 81). In addition to playing with language, Borden also makes use of the line itself, breaking it into fragments and dividing those fragments with em dashes, favouring “little brittle bits” (81) to wholeness, “plot or syntax” (145). Rosenberg, with the aim of enacting for the reader the confusion experienced by the players in the scene, uses unexpected and unsettling sensory descriptors when discussing aural moments: “dark hearing” (63) uses sight and “sunk silences” (61) takes a kinetic approach (note the alliteration present here as well). This engineered lack of “coherent narrative” (Sychterz 144) serves a key purpose; it “protests the very force of history, which silences the speaking body with conventional meaning” (Sychterz 146). Quiet white cemeteries are starkly contrasted by the cacophonous sounds of dying and wounded men – sounds poetry seeks to bring back to life.

In order to imbue the wounds with meaning, as aforementioned, both poems make reference to the crucifixion of Christ – what one might call the ultimate wounding process. Pure Christ references immediately bring to mind sacrifice, suffering, and martyrdom, but when

surrounded by what seems to be a Godless world, their meaning must be considered with more care. Borden, whose use of the reference is much longer and more drawn out than Rosenberg's, does a great deal of preparation to ensure her message is conveyed properly. First, she addresses philosophers, scientists, and, specifically, "you who founded churches, and all you / Who for ten thousand years have talked of God" (Borden 3-4). She then goes on to describe her soldier as being "like some old battered image of a faith forgotten by its God" (16) – a poignant image that creates a division between him and the ghost-observers (and, perhaps even more importantly, the reader). Although her point has been made, Borden continues the description to further detail and confirm the image of a crucifix:

See how he hunches up his shoulders;

How his spine is bent under his clumsy coat like the hard bending  
of a taut strung bow;

And how he leans, gripping with grimy fists the muzzle of his gun  
that digs its butt end down into the mud between the solid  
columns of his legs (Borden 18-20)

The hunched shoulders, the bent spine, and the gun between his legs like the vertical part of a cross all describe, at length, the image for the viewer. Conversely, Rosenberg's reference is a short one – he refers to the laying of barbed wire on top of the pile of dead men as sticking out "like many crowns of thorns" (3). While Rosenberg relies heavily on this single allusion, it nevertheless accomplishes its objective of giving warped, holy significance to the dead. The "battered" (Borden 16) images of the soldiers tells the audience a great deal: these men have

experienced ultimate wounding – however, unlike Christ, their suffering will not be remembered; they will remain “Unfriended—Unrecognized—Unrewarded and Unknown” (Borden 96).

In an effort to give both men the time and significance they deserve and yet never had, both poems manipulate time. In Borden’s case this means slowing down a moment that would otherwise be almost instantaneous, and in Rosenberg’s it means creating a loud and never ceasing ticking clock that reminds the reader of what little time these men have to die. Borden’s poem seems to take place over just one short moment, and yet she extends it into over 100 lines. The soldier is “going to die” (14) and Borden, omnipresent, tells us that in “one moment more” he will. However, he remains standing throughout the poem, and “does not move” (40) for its entirety. By extending this single moment, Borden is able to restore some authority to an otherwise overlooked part of the war – the moment of death. The poem reads almost cinematically; anaphora creates a repetitive pattern that breaks apart the senses and elongates the moment at hand:

He waits for death—

He knows—

He watches it approach—

He hears it coming—

He can feel it underneath his feet— (29-33)

He would technically know, watch, hear and feel all at once, and yet here each sense occupies its own line. Further down, Borden breaks up the moment even further, calling out individual body parts, not to actually specify which ones he feels the impact in (every part of the body save the head is called out), but to slow down the experience:

He hears it screaming through the frantic air,  
 He hears it burrowing underneath the ground,  
 He feels the impact of it on his back, his chest, his legs, his belly, and his arms,  
 He does not move. (37-40)

In reality, a bullet to the face would make for a swift departure. However, by slowing down the poem and essentially pausing time, Borden is able to describe in much more vivid detail a moment so often pushed aside as too unpleasant to truly look at. Because the poem slows down the moment so much, Borden is able to portray the pain being felt by the soldier in a particularly interesting way. Borden transfuses the man’s pain onto the Earth, physically tying him to it to reinforce that connection. He is “pinning down a shaking world like a single nail that holds; / A single rivet driven down to hold a universe together—” (93-94). This slightly mystical move that allows for two levels of pain to take place simultaneously, the first being a much grander description of physical pain that, if attributed to a human being, would have come across as insincere or silly:

It rolls and writhes, a shifting, tortured thing, a floating mass of matter, set adrift.  
 And in between the flapping, suffering remnants of the sky and the  
 convulsions of the maddened earth

The man stands solid. (45-50)

Secondly, by moving the physical pain the man feels to the Earth, Borden can focus on drawing the reader’s attention to the pain of a narrative cut short. The man mourns “his self that does remember what he loved and what he wanted, and what he never had ... His self that gave its self” (92). By keeping him still, the audience can look into his “deep, bloodshot eyes” (87) and

and appreciate the brutality of watching a man try and hold on to himself as his wounds become more and more fatal.

The treatment of time and earth and the effect it has on the wounds in “Dead Man’s Dump” is quite different to Borden’s, and yet it has a very similar effect on the poem. The wheels of the cart, which the reader is introduced to in the first stanza and which roll throughout the poem, signify the unstoppable nature of time – nothing, not even rolling over crunching bones of fallen “friend and foeman” (Rosenberg 10) stops “the rushing wheels” (74). The wheels grow closer and closer as the soldier approaches death, keeping time at the forefront of the reader’s mind. The “far wheels” (63), the “far torturing wheels” (67) are always on the horizon, heightening the reader’s awareness of the truly short amount of time this man has left. The man hopes, as he dies, “for the end to break, / Or the wheels to break” (Rosenberg 69-70), that is, for either death to come quickly or for the clock to stop entirely so he may be saved. Reading from the soldier’s perspective raises adrenaline and anxiety levels – we pray the cart will reach him in time and yet we know it will not. To reinforce this, Rosenberg personifies the Earth as a twisted, worrying mother figure that reminds the reader that time will always have its way:

Earth has waited for them

All the time of their growth

Fretting for their decay:

Now she has them at last! (Rosenberg 14-17).

Time is so powerful in the poem that its current status is essentially irrelevant. The scene exists both “timelessly now, some minutes past” (Rosenberg 42) and the soldier is “not long dead” (61), which leaves ambiguity as to whether he is already dead, or if it is not long until he dies.



The reader may worry about which it is, but the poem explains with overwhelming certainty that his present condition does not matter – whether it is this moment or the next, he dies. Although quite different in their approaches, both poems make the reader acutely aware of time, be it passing too quickly or not at all, and in doing so also make the reader more focused on the content of the poem. Borden slows down her poem and provides every detail the space it needs to be understood and experienced, and Rosenberg, who uses his words more sparingly, causes the reader to cling, like the man, to every last, futile moment of his life.

Both poems show the death and suffering of the men in a way that elevates their wounds and ensures they are seen and empathized with, but they do not stop there. Both poems make a concerted effort to involve the reader in the poem, particularly at the moment of the soldier's death. The reader is made an active participant in the poem, but remains an observer without the power to do anything. Borden commands both the ghosts she summons but also the reader throughout her poem. She frames her language throughout the poem as a set of commands: "Look well at this man. Look!" (Borden 1), "Come close and look into his haggard face" (74), ending with a series of repeated commands to 'leave' and 'let'. Of course, the reader is unable to act, powerless to do anything but read on. Between lines 58 and 75, Borden gets downright angry at the "peaceful selves" (57), of which the reader is included, explaining that there is no way to remedy the relationship they have with the soldier, as "it is too late to do him justice now" (75). This language scorns the reader and makes them feel responsible for the man's woundedness without giving them an opportunity to make amends. Rosenberg's poem has a similar effect. It places the reader on the cart, using the words 'we' and 'our' to involve the reader in the interaction: "So we crashed around the bend / We heard his weak scream, / We heard his very

last sound, / And our wheels grazed his dead face” (Rosenberg 76-79). The reader is made to feel that they could have and should have tried to reach the man earlier, to save him from death.

These poems are painful and angry, and rightly so: “the war poets ask us to listen to the traumatized body as is, unfiltered and unsilenced by narrative” (Sychterz 146). These poems bring into consciousness what lies under the clean lines of war history, and, more often than not, that reality, the wounding of a whole generation of men (and women), is going to be worth getting mad about.

Mary Borden’s “Unidentified” and Isaac Rosenberg’s “Dead Man’s Dump” unearth an aspect of the war narrative that is gritty, uncomfortable, and difficult to look directly at, and in doing so create pieces that are impossible to turn away from. The careful construction of both poems gives an authentic voice to the soldiers whose lives were cut short and whose deaths were forgotten, and in doing so lifts these moments of death out of the mud to combat the narratives of healing and resolution written on men who will never experience them.

## Works Cited

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## Poems

## Dead Man's Dump

Isaac Rosenberg

The plunging limbers over the shattered track  
Racketed with their rusty freight,  
Stuck out like many crowns of thorns,  
And the rusty stakes like sceptres old  
To stay the flood of brutish men  
Upon our brothers dear.

The wheels lurched over sprawled dead  
But pained them not, though their bones crunched,  
Their shut mouths made no moan.  
They lie there huddled, friend and foeman,  
Man born of man, and born of woman,  
And shells go crying over them  
From night till night and now.

Earth has waited for them,  
All the time of their growth  
Fretting for their decay:  
Now she has them at last!  
In the strength of their strength  
Suspended—stopped and held.

What fierce imaginings their dark souls lit?  
Earth! have they gone into you!  
Somewhere they must have gone,  
And flung on your hard back  
Is their soul's sack  
Emptied of God-ancestral essences.  
Who hurled them out? Who hurled?

None saw their spirits' shadow shake the grass,  
Or stood aside for the half used life to pass  
Out of those doomed nostrils and the doomed mouth,  
When the swift iron burning bee

Drained the wild honey of their youth.

What of us who, flung on the shrieking pyre,  
Walk, our usual thoughts untouched,  
Our lucky limbs as on ichor fed,  
Immortal seeming ever?  
Perhaps when the flames beat loud on us,  
A fear may choke in our veins  
And the startled blood may stop.

The air is loud with death,  
The dark air spurts with fire,  
The explosions ceaseless are.

Timelessly now, some minutes past,  
Those dead strode time with vigorous life,  
Till the shrapnel called 'An end!'  
But not to all. In bleeding pangs  
Some borne on stretchers dreamed of home,  
Dear things, war-blotted from their hearts.

A man's brains splattered on  
A stretcher-bearer's face;  
His shook shoulders slipped their load,  
But when they bent to look again  
The drowning soul was sunk too deep  
For human tenderness.

They left this dead with the older dead,  
Stretched at the cross roads.

Burnt black by strange decay  
Their sinister faces lie,  
The lid over each eye,  
The grass and coloured clay  
More motion have than they,  
Joined to the great sunk silences.

Here is one not long dead;  
His dark hearing caught our far wheels,  
And the choked soul stretched weak hands  
To reach the living word the far wheels said,  
The blood-dazed intelligence beating for light,  
Crying through the suspense of the far torturing wheels  
Swift for the end to break  
Or the wheels to break,  
Cried as the tide of the world broke over his sight.

Will they come? Will they ever come?  
Even as the mixed hoofs of the mules,  
The quivering-bellied mules,  
And the rushing wheels all mixed  
With his tortured upturned sight.  
So we crashed round the bend,  
We heard his weak scream,  
We heard his very last sound,  
And our wheels grazed his dead face.

Unidentified

Mary Borden

Look well at this man. Look!  
 Come up out of your graves, philosophers,  
 And you who found your churches, and all you  
 Who for ten thousand years have talked of God.  
 Come up out of your silent, sheltering tombs  
 You scientists who died unsatisfied,  
 For you have something interesting to learn  
 By looking at this man.  
 Stand all about, you many legioned ghosts!  
 He will not notice you.  
 Fill up the vast resounding waste of death  
 By for him an unseen retinue,  
 For he is going to die.

Look at his ugliness.  
 See how he stands there, planted in the mud like some old battered  
     image of a faith forgotten by God.  
 Look at his grizzled head jammed up into that round, close hat of iron.  
 See how he hunches up his shoulders;  
 How his spine is bent under his clumsy coat like the hard bending of a taut strung bow;  
 And how he leans, gripping with grimy fists the muzzle of his gun that digs its butt end down  
     into the mud between the solid columns of his legs.  
 Look close—come close, pale ghosts,  
 Come back out of the dim unfinished past,  
 Crowd up across the edges of the earth  
 Where the horizon like a red-hot wire writhes, smoking, underneath tremendous blows.  
 Come up, come up across the quaking ground that gapes in sudden holes beneath your feet—  
 Come fearlessly across the twisting field where bones of men stick through the tortured mud.  
 Ghosts have no need to fear,  
 Look close at this man—Look!

He waits for death—  
 He knows—  
 He watches it approach—  
 He hears it coming—

He can feel it underneath his feet—  
 Death bearing down on him from every side,  
 Violent death, death that tears the sky to shrieking pieces,  
 Death that suddenly explodes out of the dreadful bowels of the earth.  
 He hears it screaming through the frantic air,  
 He hears it burrowing underneath the ground,  
 He feels the impact of it on his back, his chest, his legs, his belly, and his arms,  
 He does not move.  
 In all landscape there is just one thing that does not move,  
 The figure of the man.

The sky long since has fallen from its dome.  
 Terror let loose like a gigantic wind has torn it from the ceiling of the world  
 And it is flapping down in frantic shreds.  
 The earth, ages ago, leaped screaming up; out of the fastness of its ancient laws,  
 There is no centre now to hold it down;  
 It rolls and writhes, a shifting, tortured thing, a floating mass of matter, set adrift.  
 And in between the flapping, suffering remnants of the sky and the convulsions of the  
     maddened earth  
 The man stands solid.  
 Something holds him there.

What holds him there, timid ghosts?  
 What do you say, you shuddering spirits dragged from secure vaults?  
 You who once died in kindly quiet rooms,  
 You who were companioned to the end by friends,  
 And closed your eyes in languor on a world  
 That you had fashioned for your peaceful selves?

Some of you scorned this man.  
 He was for you the ordinary man.  
 You thought him pitiable; contemptible or worse;  
 You gave him your idols, temples, formulas of conduct, prisons, laws;  
 Some of you pitied him, and wept over his sins.  
 Some of you were horrified at what you called his passions, lust of women, food, drink, laughter,  
     all such simple things.  
 And some of you were afraid;  
 Wanted to beat him down, break his spirit,  
 Muzzle his ideas, and bind with bands of hopelessness his energy.



None of you trusted him—  
 No! Not a single one of you trusted him.  
 Look at him now. Look well—look long.  
 Your giant—your brute—your ordinary man—  
 Your fornicator, drunkard, anarchist,  
 Your ruthless, seed-sowing male,  
 Your covetous and greedy egoist,  
 Come close and look into his haggard face.  
 It is too late to do him justice now.

But look!—look at the stillness of that face  
 Made up of little fragile bones and flesh,  
 Tissued of quivering muscles, fine as silk,  
 Exquisite nerve endings and scarlet blood  
 That travels smoothly through the tender veins;  
 One blow—one moment more—and that man's face will be a mass of matter, horrid slime—  
 and little brittle bits—

He knows—

He waits—

His face remains quite still.

And underneath the bullet-spattered helmet on his head his steady eyes look out.

What is it that looks out?

What is there mirrored in those deep, bloodshot eyes?

Terror? No!

Despair? Perhaps.

But what else?

Ah, poor ghosts—poor, blind, unseeing ghosts—

It is his self you see—His self that does remember what he loved and what he wanted,  
 and what he never had—His self that can regret, that can reproach his own self—

His self that gave its self, let loose its hold of all but just its self—

Is that then nothing, just his naked self, inviolate; pinning down a shaking world like a single nail  
 that holds;

A single rivet driven down to hold a universe together—

Go back, poor ghosts—go back to your graves.

He has no need of you, this nameless man.

You philosophers, you scientists, you men of God, leave this man alone.

Leave him the grandeur of obscurity,

Leave in darkness the dumb anguish of his soul.

Leave him the great loss of his identity.  
Let the guns chant his death-song down the world;  
Let the flare of cannon light his dying;  
Let those remnants of men beneath his feet welcome him mutely when he falls beside them in  
the mud  
Take one last look and leave him standing there,  
Unfriended—Unrecognized—Unrewarded and Unknown.