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| Rosenberg, Isaac (1890-1918) |
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| An important but underappreciated British poet of the First World War, Isaac Rosenberg made a significant contribution to the literature that came out of the war. Throughout his life, Rosenberg was beset by poverty, and unlike many other young men of that time enlisted when the war broke out primarily for the steady paycheque. Rosenberg comments on the indifference of nature to the tragedy occurring in its midst and exposes the precarious position of men in the conflict. He invokes religious imagery to interrogate the role of deity amidst the carnage of the battle. Already strongly sceptical when he entered the conflict, Rosenberg responded to the war not with disenchantment, but with a modernist scepticism toward Western civilization and the Western world view. His unique response to the war gives him a place with Wilfred Owen as one of the most important British poets to write about their First World War experience. Had Rosenberg survived the war, it seems possible that he might have become a powerful voice in Modernist literature. |
| An important but underappreciated British poet of the First World War, Isaac Rosenberg made a significant contribution to the literature that came out of the war.  Rosenberg was born on 25 November 1890 in Bristol, England, the son of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants. In 1897, Rosenberg’s family moved to a poor Jewish neighbourhood in London’s East End. He showed an early aptitude for painting while studying at the Slade School, and later for poetry. Throughout his life, Rosenberg was beset by poverty, and unlike many other young men of his time enlisted when the war broke out primarily for the steady paycheque.  In 1912, Rosenberg published *Night and Day*, a short book of poetry. Three years later, he brought out another short book of poetry, *Youth*. These were followed by *Moses* (1916), which included *Moses, A Play* and nine poems. These works are considered part of Rosenberg’s apprenticeship. In the last two years of his life, Rosenberg’s work achieved more maturity. In ‘Break of Day in the Trenches,’ Rosenberg comments on the indifference of nature to the tragedy occurring in its midst and exposes the precarious position of men in the conflict. ‘Louse Hunting’ recounts a delousing incident in which the men strip naked in an ironic parody of the Garden of Eden in the setting of a Hell-like war. ‘Returning, We Hear the Larks’ resumes the theme of nature’s indifference and juxtaposes the lark’s lovely song with the screech of falling shells, either of which is equally likely to be heard by the soldiers at that moment. ‘Dead Man’s Dump’ is Rosenberg’s most graphic war poem and tells of a cart going about the battlefield amongst the dead and dying (both friend and foe). As in Rosenberg’s other war poems, the narrator’s detached account adds to the horror of the scene by emphasising the soldiers’ inurement toward what they see. Rosenberg also invokes religious imagery to interrogate the role of deity amidst the carnage of the battle — another recurrent trope in his work.  On 1 April 1918, Rosenberg was killed in action, leaving his poetic potential largely unfulfilled. His legacy of mature poetry is small. Unlike war poets Owen, Sassoon, and Gurney, Rosenberg’s response to the war lacks disillusionment. Already strongly sceptical when he entered the conflict, Rosenberg responded to the war not with disenchantment, but with a modernist scepticism toward Western civilization and the Western worldview. His unique response to the war gives him a place with Wilfred Owen as one of the most important British poets to write about their First World War experience. Had Rosenberg survived the war, it seems possible to many critics (e.g. Wilson, Daiches) that he might have become a powerful voice in Modernist literature. |
| Further reading:  (Daiches)  (Wilson) |