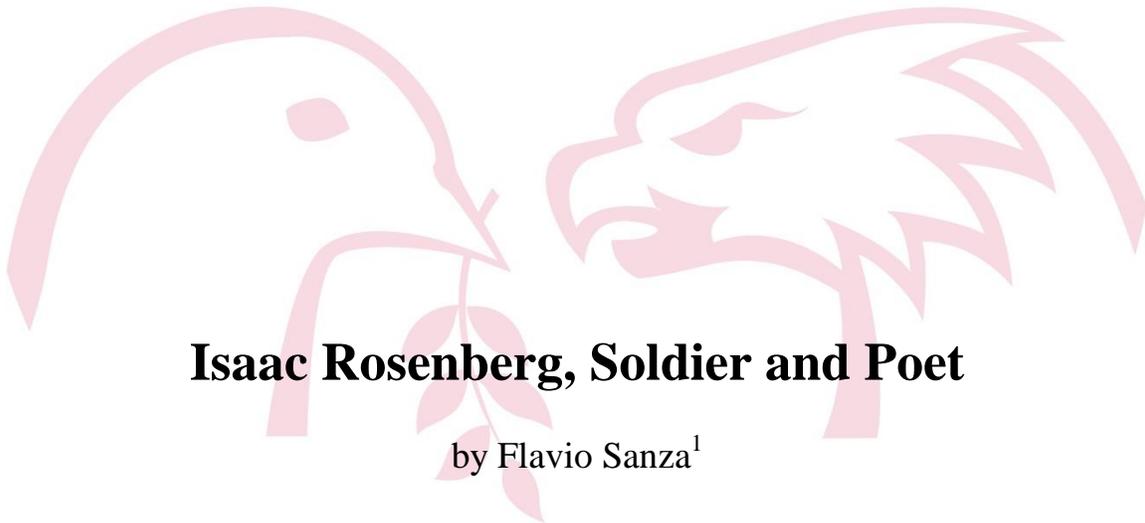


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Isaac Rosenberg, Soldier and Poet

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2014 marked an important anniversary, the beginning of the World War I. Many scholars consider it only as another conflict from the past. My point of view is different. For the first time in Europe, an entire generation literary 'disappeared' in the trenches. War poets were there. They chose the pen to describe the trench, a real 'picture from hell'. One hundred years later their poetry is still so powerful. Words can be more lethal than bullets because they deeply touch our souls. The reader cannot remain indifferent to those verses because they create a big pathos inside. For this reason I have chosen Isaac Rosenberg, in my opinion one of the best war poets. He was born in Bristol in 1890 and he was killed on the Somme in 1918. His greatness was established in 1937 by the publication of the beautiful *Collected Works: Poetry, Prose, Letters and Some Drawings*. In this article I will investigate main steps of his life, the only way key to understand his poetry at the best.

Before the Trench

In June 1914, a young Jewish man arrived in South Africa from London. He was Isaac Rosenberg, painter and poet. His father's name was Barnett, a cultured pedlar escaped from Lithuania to avoid conscription in the Russian army. He was trained for the rabbinate and expert of poetry. Isaac's mother made gardens. They were both pacifists but really poor. They lived in the East End part of London called Whitechapel. At 14, Isaac started his training as engraver, a job he hated. He also attended evening classes at Birkbeck College. In 1911, a rich Jewish patron paid his studies at the Slade School of Fine Art where he met artists as David Bomberg and Mark Gertler. Rosenberg chose to paint self-portraits and landscapes developing a technique similar to the French post-Impressionists. In the meantime, his first collection of poems, titled *Night and Day*, appeared in 1912 showing the influence of great names as William Blake and John Milton. Rosenberg also found some patrons who helped him for the rest of his life. One was the Proust translator Sydney Schiff, another one was the art collector Edward Marsh.

Tired of Whitechapel, Rosenberg chose to go to South Africa where his sister Minnie lived. Marsh paid the ticket and also the publication of a second volume of poems titled *Youth* (1915). But also the life in Cape Town was not easy. In a letter

to Marsh, Rosenberg described it as rubbish that was poisoning his mind. He came back to UK in March 1915. In May Rosenberg wrote the poem 'Moses' to remember 1,200 peoples died during the sinking of Lusitania. Here he described the war as something of evil able to transform the individual freedom in slavery. This tragedy deeply shocked his pacifism. In a letter to Schiff, the poet declared the military life could solve his financial and spiritual problems.

On The Front

So, in October 1915, Rosenberg joined the army going against his 'justice principles' because going to war could mean to commit 'criminal actions'. But his poverty and the desire to help his family pushed him on this way. During his training, he found only bad food, low pay and a strong anti-Semitism. In a few words, for Rosenberg the army was a 'detestable invention', feelings you can find in the poems 'Marching' and 'Spring 1916'. Before leaving, the poet published a third book of verses titled *Moses* by the East End printer Ruben Cohen. Rosenberg arrived in France on June 1916 after a troubled trip he described in the poem 'The Troop Ship'. He was sent near Loos where the trenches were a real hell because of rats, the shellfire and the mud during the winter time. You find all these images in the famous 'Break of Day in the Trenches' where the poet becomes a rat that travels from a trench to another in search of freedom. Thanks to Marsh's influence, Rosenberg could stay away from the first line for some periods repairing the streets or taking the wounded to hospital. Ironically, he noted there was no difference to be the carrier or the carried.

The End

At the beginning of 1917 he was firstly transferred to a mortar battery, then to the Royal Engineers battalion. In June Rosenberg was back to Ypres where he wrote probably his best poem, 'Daughters of War' about the mythical Amazons. In September Rosenberg was in London on leave but the civil life soon disgusted him. Common people were not able to understand the horrors of the trench, so he

composed the poem 'Soldier Twentieth Century', where he put great past soldiers as Napoleon and Caesar near to his comrades. When he returned to the front, Rosenberg wrote his last poem titled 'Through These Pale Cold Days'. Imagining his own death, the poet describes the 'dark faces' and the 'wild eyes' of the dead soldiers around him. After few days he was killed in action. In his notes, he wrote not to be worried about the death because he was a master able to submit it.

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