**Rosenberg, Isaac (1890–1918)**

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 November 25, 1890 in Bristol, England, the son of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants. In 1897, Rosenberg’s family moved to a poor Jewish neighborhood in London’s East End. He showed an early aptitude for painting, studying at the Slade School, and later for poetry. 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 paycheck.

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 emphasizing 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 April 1, 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 skeptical when he entered the conflict, Rosenberg responded to the war not with disenchantment, but with a modernist skepticism 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 to many critics (e.g. Wilson, Daiches) that he might have become a powerful voice in Modernist literature.

**Key Works Published During Lifetime:**

(1912) *Night and Day*

(1915) *Youth*

(1916) *Moses*

(1916) “Break of Day in the Trenches”

(1917) “Louse Hunting”

(1917) “Returning, We Hear the Larks”

(1917) “Dead Man’s Dump”

Further Reading

Daiches, David. Review: The Collected Poems of Isaac Rosenberg, edited by Gordon Bottomley and Denys Harding. Commentary. Jan 1, 1950. Web. Commentary 10. P 91. http://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/the-collected-poems-of-isaac-rosenberg-edited-by-gordon-bottomley-and-denys-harding/

Wilson, Jean Moorcroft. “Introduction.” The Selected Poems of Isaac Rosenberg. London, 2003. Cecil Woolf.