**Rosenberg, Isaac (1890–1918)**

An important but underappreciated English poet of the First World War, Isaac Rosenberg, contributed strongly 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 of London’s East End. He showed an early aptitude for painting and later for poetry. Throughout his life, Rosenberg was beset by poverty, and unlike so many other young men of that time enlisted when the war broke out primarily for the steady paycheck.

**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”

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 were part of Rosenberg’s apprenticeship. It was really in the last two years of his life that Rosenberg’s work achieved its maturity. In “Break of Day in the Trenches,” Rosenberg comments on the indifference of nature to the tragedy occurring in its midst and displays 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” returns to 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). The narrator’s detached account adds to the horror of the scene (as it does in Rosenberg’s other war poems) by emphasizing the soldiers’ inured attitude toward what they see. Rosenberg also invokes religious imagery (again as he often does) to interrogate the role of deity amidst the carnage of the battle.

On April 1, 1918, Rosenberg was killed in action, leaving an unfulfilled poetic potential. His legacy of mature poetry is small, and he was just growing into his poetic abilities when he died. Unlike other war poets like Owen, Sassoon, and Gurney, Rosenberg’s response to the war lacks their disillusionment. Already strongly skeptical when he entered the conflict, Rosenberg responded to the war not with disillusionment but with a Modernist skepticism toward Western civilization and Western world view. With his unique response to the war, he takes a place with Wilfred Owen as one of the two most important poets to write about their war experience. Had Rosenberg survived the war, he might have become a dominant voice in Modernist literature.