Golden Boy

James Atlas

Passage From Home
by Isaac Rosenfeld,
with a new foreword by Mark Shechner.
Markus Wiener, 280 pp., $9.95 (paper)

Preserving the Hunger:
An Isaac Rosenfeld Reader
edited and introduced by Mark Shechner,
foreword by Saul Bellow.
Wayne State University Press,
463 pp., $45.00; $17.95 (paper)

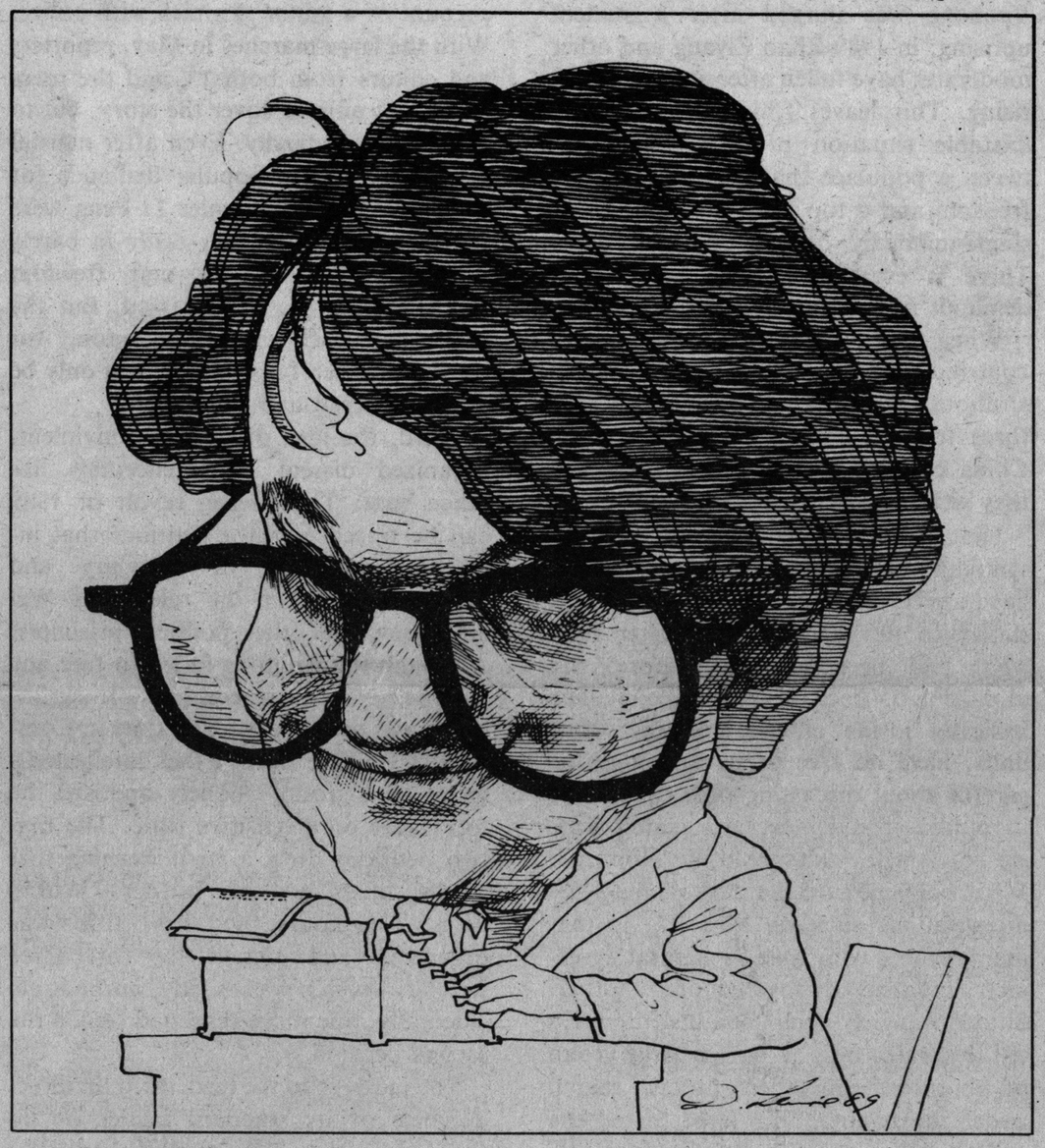
1.

Some writers are remembered more for their unfulfilled promise than for anything they wrote. Like Delmore Schwartz, Isaac Rosenfeld burned out young. *Passage From Home*, his first novel, was published to much critical acclaim in 1946, when he was only twenty-eight; it was also his last. Two other books followed after his death: *Alpha & Omega*, a collection of stories, and *An Age of Enormity*, a selection of essays and reviews. In 1956, thirty-eight years old, Rosenfeld died of a heart attack. His early death has contributed to the legend he's become. Saul Bellow, who grew up with Rosenfeld in Chicago, wrote: "He swayed his friends with an unknown power. We called it 'charm,' 'wisdom,' 'genius.' In the end, with a variety of intonations, we could find nothing to call it but 'Isaac.'"

Whatever else he was, Rosenfeld was a memorable figure. "He gave himself to conversation with the mad energy of a clown and the many bright sayings of a thinker still faithful to Wisdom," Alfred Kazin, another contemporary, wrote in *New York Jew*. "What another man with Isaac's rebellious imagination might have put entirely into his work, as Norman Mailer was to do after the war, Isaac frantically sought to *make* life." He played the flute, had ruinous love affairs, was drawn to the ideas of Gandhi and Wilhelm Reich. He was a superb mimic. His improvised Yiddish version of T.S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" was famous in Village circles.

But he was more than a picturesque Village type. "He was our golden boy, more so than Bellow," Irving Howe recalled in *A Margin of Hope*, "for there was an air of Yeshiva purity about Isaac that made one hope wildly for his future." Rosenfeld arrived in New York in 1941, newly married and short of money, with a B.A. from the University of Chicago, and enrolled as a graduate student in philosophy at New York University. A year later, he dropped out, determined to make his way as a man of letters. After working briefly as the book review editor of *The New Leader*, he joined the editorial staff of *The New Republic*. He began to publish essays and reviews in *Commentary* and short stories in *Partisan Review*, and soon had many admirers in the New York literary world.

What was it about Rosenfeld that made his work, even a casual book review, distinctive? Mainly, I think, his voice. "I expect criticism to have the same personal development, the same intuitive accent, as the finest fiction," he noted in the journal he kept for many years.[1] His own criticism had that quality. Coming upon one of his pieces in a magazine, you knew at once he had written it, without having to look at the byline. The first sentence was often brief and provocative: "'New writing' makes for conservative criticism." "The imagination is the man." Theoretically minded and aphoristic, Rosenfeld seized upon the nominal subject at hand as an opportunity to try to explain the meaning of modernism, the failings of contemporary fiction, even the age in which he found himself. His criticism had a polemical energy that was both characteristic of the period's combative intellectual style and entirely his own. He was obsessed with politics and current literature and ideology, and his essays continually refer to Orwell and Malraux, Simone Weil and Silone, Koestler and Sartre.



To the critics who were introducing them in the pages of *The New Republic* and *Partisan Review* during the 1940s, these European writers were liberating. For American Jewish writers of Rosenfeld's generation, the culture of European intellectuals was the passport to a new life—"a means of flight," Clement Greenberg has observed, "from the restriction and squalor of the Brooklyns and Bronxes to the wide open world which rewards the fugitive with space, importance, and wealth."

The two young Chicago writers, Rosenfeld and Bellow, had an even greater distance to traverse. "Chicago was nowhere," says the narrator of Bellow's story about Rosenfeld, "Zetland: By a Character Witness," the fragment of a novel that he never published.[2] "It had no setting. It was something released into American space." What happened to the precocious boy whom Bellow described rising in short pants at the Tuley High School Debating Club to read a paper on Schopenhauer? The last sentence of Bellow's foreword to *An Age of Enormity* is haunting: "During the last years of his life, he was solitary, and on Walton Place in one of his furnished rooms, he died alone."

2.

Passage From Home has been out of print for many years. Now a new edition is available, issued by a small press in New York City; as well as, just published, a collection of Rosenfeld's stories, journals, essays, and reviews. "The stock-market of American success can be as unpredictable as Wall Street," noted William Barrett a few years ago, apropos the renewed interest in Delmore Schwartz. I doubt these books will prompt a similar rehabilitation. There is nothing in them to rival "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" or a handful of Schwartz's lyric poems. But they reveal a shrewd intellect and a unique sensibility that confirm the high opinion of Rosenfeld's contemporaries. Four decades after it was written, much of his work is still of interest.

In an effort to find a wider audience for *Passage From Home*, its latest publisher has added a subtitle, "The Erotic Awakening of a Young Intellectual," that has nothing to do with Rosenfeld's novel, and is at odds with the photograph of an old-fashioned family on the cover: the Tolstoy-bearded grandfather, two solemn couples and their melancholy-looking children gathered around a dining table laden with cut-glass decanters. It was this world that Rosenfeld captured in his modest *Bildungsroman*, a book about growing up Jewish in Chicago—virtually the only book of its kind.

Often when one rereads a novel that one has admired at a young age, the qualities that once excited admiration seem deficient. *Passage From Home* is hardly a neglected masterpiece. The charged prose of *The Adventures of Augie March*, Bellow's description of indigenous Chicago neighborhoods and types, is nowhere in evidence. The story is uneventful, static: Bernard Miller, a bookish boy who lives with his father and stepmother, runs away from home and goes to live on the North Side with his progressive, free-thinking aunt and her unemployed hillbilly lover. A few weeks later, put off by their sordid bohemian ménage, Bernard returns home to a tentative reconciliation with his father.

There are many touches of true feeling in this novel. In rendering Bernard's confusion, his longing to escape the cold and stifling environment at home, Rosenfeld has beautifully evoked the loneliness of adolescence. Trapped in his parents' unhappy marriage, afflicted with feelings he can scarcely articulate, Bernard finds himself awakening to "the universal sadness of life." Tragedy and betrayal—his mother's death, his father's clandestine affair with his aunt—hover just beneath the surface, but no one ever acknowledges their existence. The pretense of harmony is more oppressive than discord.

For Bernard, family life is a prison because of the expectations it creates. Moody and ineffectual, a failure at business, his father transfers his frustrated aspirations to his son, who rebels by rejecting them and struggling to create an identity of his own. But this merely serves to deepen their estrangement. Bernard can never earn his father's unqualified love because he can never gratify his ambition. As Irving Howe put it, reviewing the novel in *Commentary*, "that very fulfillment [of his father's hopes] becomes the brand of alienation."

In dealing with this conflict Rosenfeld was at his most eloquent. In the novel's climactic scene, Bernard is confronted by his father in his bedroom after he comes home. As they sit in their pajamas talking, the father runs his hand along the books in the bookcase—a tacit rebuke. Doesn't his son have better things to do than hang around with a decadent, corrupting aunt? But Bernard has the advantage now:

> [My father] was a weaker man, no longer the impartial, disinterested, yet intimate judge who, if he restrained himself, did so only out of an inherent modesty in the recognition of his righteousness and the employment of his strength. Now, rather, he had cause to defend himself—he had begun to fear me for the same reasons that I had long feared him.

In the end, Bernard experiences a liberation from the tyranny of family life: "Now there would only be life as it came and the excuses one made to himself for accepting it." But he suffers more keenly than ever the feeling of isolation from his family, the sensation of "a certain homelessness in the world." Bernard is a son without a father he can respect, a Jew

[1] I am grateful to Dr. George Sarant, Rosenfeld's son, for granting me access to the journals, correspondence, and other materials in his possession.

[2] "Zetland: By a Character Witness" appears in Bellow's collection of stories *Him with His Foot in His Mouth*. A draft of the novel is in the Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago; its contents are summarized in Daniel Fuchs, *Saul Bellow: Vision and Revision* (Duke University Press, 1984). Bellow has acknowledged, in a letter to the author, that Zetland was based on Rosenfeld.

without believing in the things that make one Jewish. While at his aunt's, he receives a package of new clothes from home, including a prayer shawl and a pair of phylacteries—though his own father is at best a casual observer of the faith. To be a Jew is Bernard's fate, his inheritance, whether he is a believer or not:

> [To be Jewish] was vacant of God, but it had the element, as of religious transmission, whereby we were united in feeling. I knew what fathers must feel when children break away; when I should have children, I would feel the same. For fathers, deep in themselves, were still sons, and still remembered the love they had broken; and sons were forever preparing to enact, and regret, an unchanging transgression. We were united in generation as those might be in God, who had always spoken the same prayer.

Passage From Home is highly autobiographical. Rosenfeld's father, like Bernard's, was a small merchant. He started out working in a poultry market on the West Side of Chicago, where the Russian Jews who had ventured westward from New York during the Great Migration settled, and later became a buyer of imported foods in a downtown department store. Rosenfeld's mother died in the flu epidemic of 1918, the year Rosenfeld was born. He was raised largely by his stepmother (as is Bernard in the novel), and by his father's spinster sisters, Dora and Rae, who lived nearby. One of the weaknesses of Rosenfeld's novel is a vagueness about details. For the atmosphere of this household, one must look elsewhere—primarily to Bellow's "Zetland":

> The neighborhood was largely Polish and Ukrainian, Swedish, Catholic, Orthodox, and Evangelical Lutheran. The family, Zet's bullheaded father and two maiden aunts who were "practical nurses" with housebound patients (dying, usually), read Russian novels, Yiddish poetry, and were mad about culture.

Rosenfeld, like Zetland, was ordained to be a genius—a Chicago version of John Stuart Mill. Precocious he was. Among his papers is a poem scrawled on the back of an envelope when he was eight years old:

> *Grandfather sits in his armchair*
> *Long is his beard*
> *white are his hair*
> *He is reading a book*
> *with much interest*
> *Please, don't disturb him*
> *He is taking a rest.*

By the time he was an adolescent, he had found his vocation. To his Aunt Rae at sixteen, he complained about the meagerness of his literary output—three poems a week, all of them "vile." A pale, bookish boy with clear blue eyes and thick glasses, he had a scholar's fragile health. In his *Partisan Review* eulogy, Bellow recalled dropping in at the Rosenfelds' on the South Side and finding Isaac hard at work in his room, "with shades drawn and lights burning all day." On his desk was an old office typewriter, "a huge torn Webster's Dictionary," and a bust of Beethoven.

But Rosenfeld was not only serious; he was in love with the avant-garde. He read Breton and Tristan Tzara, played ragtime on the piano, discovered dada while he was still in junior high. Self-styled surrealists, Rosenfeld and Bellow put on a play called "Twin Bananas" in the lobby of the Harper Library, dressed up as headless men. The University of Chicago in the 1930s was made for such encyclopedic, irreverent intellectuals. Under Robert M. Hutchins, the university had gone from an ambitious but provincial center of learning to a vigorous institution—the "Athens of the Midwest." In its own way, the enclave of young intellectuals Rosenfeld found in Chicago was a midwestern branch of the famous Alcove 1 at City College, the lunchroom table where Irving Kristol and his anti-Stalinist friends met. In Kristol's memory of a stay in Chicago during the 1930s, the "Chicago boys" (Bellow, Rosenfeld, and Oscar Tarcov) were "much more literary, much less political...." "You didn't *have* to be political," he later wrote.[3]

Rosenfeld felt he was ready for New York. "I had left home, as young men do, & had come to the largest city in the world," he wrote in his journal, an exuberant twenty-two-year-old on his own for the first time. "Bless new life, bless novelty & difference oh ye lights while I plunge underground, content now to roar home in the subway."

Rosenfeld had married a young Chicago girl of Greek parents named Vasiliki Sarantakis—"the pagan beauty with hibiscus in her teeth," Bellow said of her. Having found an apartment on West 76th Street, Rosenfeld lived an ascetic student life, largely supported by Vasiliki's temporary office jobs. NYU had a distinguished philosophy department in the Forties; James Burnham and Sidney Hook were both on the faculty, and Rosenfeld was one of their most promising students. For all his impulsiveness, he had a disciplined mind, capable of mastering analytic philosophy and adapting it to his own literary purposes. But Rosenfeld was impatient with philosophy. It was a joke among his friends that he had given up on logical positivism after reading *Moby-Dick*. It was the analysis of motive that interested him, not whether a proposition was true. In "Philosophical Naturalism: The Failure of Verve," a reply to a *Partisan Review* symposium on "The New Failure of Nerve" (1943), he declared his resistance to the narrow methodology of empiricism, which denied "the richness, the variety, pleasure, tragedy, the sheer possibility of experience."

For Rosenfeld, this richness wasn't to be found in the academy, and it wasn't long before he joined the staff of *The New Republic*. The letters he wrote his aunts on *New Republic* stationery show him full of—his own immigrant locution—"hopes of making good." He had reason to be optimistic. His short stories were appearing in little magazines, his poems in *The New Republic*. He contributed to a symposium on "The Situation of the Jewish Writer" in the *Contemporary Jewish Record*. And on June 15, 1944, when he was twenty-six, he dispatched a telegram to his aunts on Wabansia Avenue in Chicago: "SOLD MY NOVEL DETAILS TO FOLLOW LOVE AND KISSES ISAAC."

Daniel Bell, reviewing *Passage From Home* in *The Jewish Frontier*, identified it as "a parable of alienation." Rosenfeld was a representative figure of the postwar period, Bell wrote, an underground man for whom conventional American hope was an illusion, but who had

[3] "Memories of a Trotskyist," *The New York Times Magazine* (January 23, 1977).

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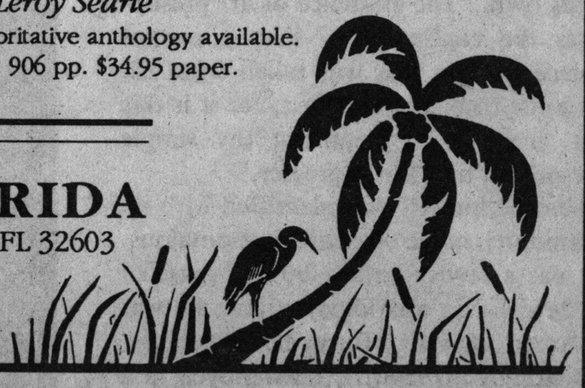

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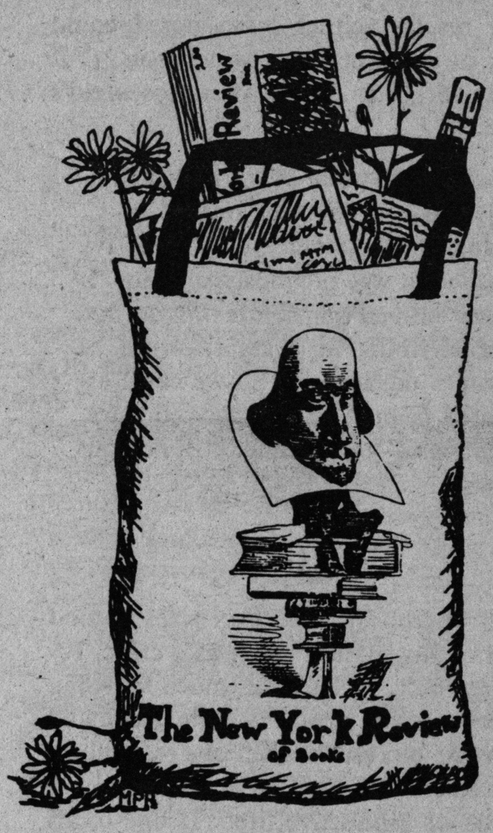

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nonetheless embarked upon a quest for "moral independence." There was much youthful, high-flown theorizing but also some truth in Bell's review; Rosenfeld used the ntellectual terminology of the 1940s—"a ienation," "moral crisis," "the masses"—with the self-consciousness of a writer aware of his audience and determined to appeal to it.

He was both ambitious and skeptical of his ambition. Indeed, self-irony was one of Rosenfeld's charms. Unlike most of his contemporaries, he took a deep interest in Jewish life and culture, and was one of the few intellectuals of his generation who bothered to study the Yiddish he absorbed at home. (One of his editors, Elias Schulman, claimed Rosenfeld's Yiddish was "almost as good as Bashevis Singer's and Sholem Asch's.") When he wrote about Kafka, Sholom Aleichem, or Isaac Babel, he showed a particular sensitivity to their situation as Jews. Rosenfeld was a kind of secular Hasid, conversant with a tradition that had, he claimed, all but disappeared. In his review of *The Vanished World*, an album of photographs of the Jews of Eastern Europe just before the Holocaust, he wrote eloquently of the extinction of a community that had, he said, nourished his sense of having a cultural inheritance of his own. "The existence of art presupposes the continuity of life; it cannot replace the life that was taken from us. Art must recognize this fact, for it is this that gives it its greatness: the simple recognition that life is greater."

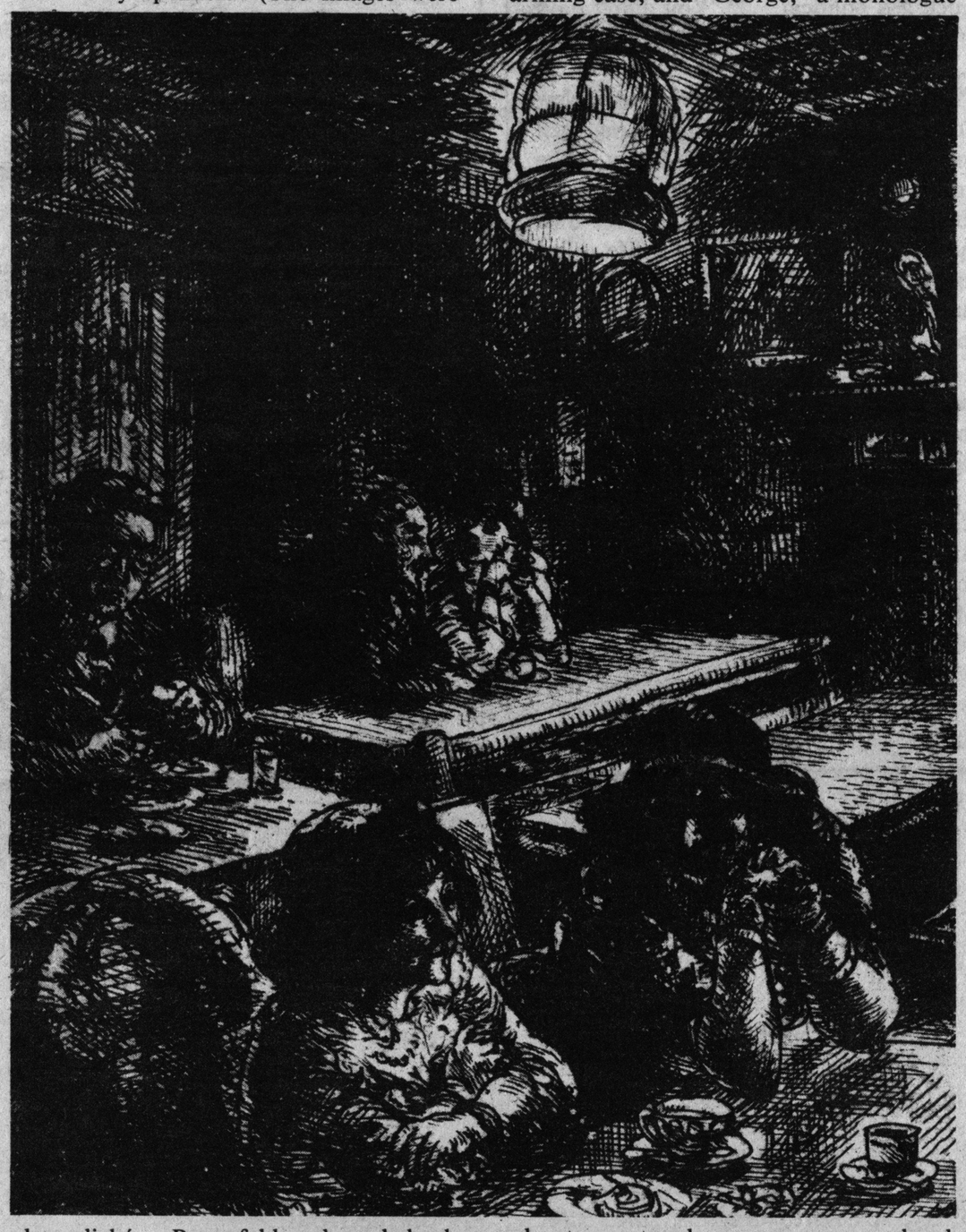
That he himself was identified with no community made Rosenfeld anomalous. He was a Jewish writer, but his sense of his Jewishness was idiosyncratic; he was an American with a European sensibility, a floating *Luftmensch*, unemployed in a society that required young men to have a profession. But both Rosenfeld and Bellow had—and flaunted—an independence that may have had something to do with their early years in Chicago. "For some reason neither Isaac nor I could think of ourselves as provincials in NY," Bellow wrote to Kazin after Rosenfeld's death:

> Possibly the pride of R.M. Hutchins shielded us. For him the U. of C. didn't have to compete with the Ivy League, it was obviously superior. It never entered our minds that we had lost anything in being deprived of Eastern advantages. So we came armored in provincial self-confidence, and came to conquer. Ridiculous boys![4]

3.

Mark Shechner's collection gives a good sense of Rosenfeld's range as a critic. It's a long book, yet includes much less than half of what he wrote—a bibliography all the more impressive when one remembers that Rosenfeld had little more than a decade of productive life. "If one totals up all the reviews," Shechner notes in his introduction, "Rosenfeld seems a marvel of output, though most of his achievements were unpremeditated triumphs of occasion, book reviews drawn out into proclamations."

As a critic, he was often dismissive. He was put off by the empty bohemianism of Henry Miller, who was contemptuous of American vulgarity yet unabashedly self-promoting in a typical American way, and by the "toughness and sentimentality" of John O'Hara. He was enraged by Irwin Shaw's "middle-brow" sensibility, his "guts-and-Dry Martini attitude toward life." He derided E. B. White, resorting to an ethnic phrase to describe him, *hack a tcheinik*—Yiddish for a talker of nonsense. What infuriated Rosenfeld about White, he made clear, was what infuriated him about *The New Yorker* in general: its genteel liberalism. The magazine managed to deplore all the right things—fascism and racism and so forth—while ignoring the vocabulary of what Rosenfeld took to be authentic radicalism, concepts such as capitalism, imperialism, revolution. "These words have a sweaty air; they suggest crowded downtown East Side meeting halls with their folding chairs and smoke in the dingy room, the stain in the armpits of the sweaty speaker." (The images were



also clichés, Rosenfeld acknowledged, but at least he used them deliberately.)

His own criticism was heavily psychoanalytical. He didn't stop at noting his subjects' deficiencies; he asked why they were deficient. James T. Farrell, a writer whose Chicago toughs he could identify with—they also lived on the other side of the tracks—he called a "repressed" writer, out of touch with the impulses behind his anger. Hemingway's later work tended to sound false because he was afraid to confront his own fear. Henry Green used elaborate, "literary" language to avoid the reality of his material. Critics had been taken in by Green's style, Rosenfeld asserted. But did it really work? Dissecting an elaborate trope in *Nothing* about a man and woman making love, he demonstrated how contrived it was, how showy in its effects. The sensibility was "cold...incapable of sympathy." There was no pleasure in this negative appraisal. Rosenfeld was hardly a generous critic, but he tried to give writers the benefit of the doubt. As an example of good writing, he singled out the closing pages of *Back*, in which Green gives way to a sudden burst of unguarded feeling, "where the need of love, the submerged tears, the anxiety, the fear, the loneliness burst to the surface of a man's relationship to a woman in a surrender of sensibility to life. If only this force were more often available!"

Rosenfeld's own stories, as he himself sensed, were spoiled by the same tendency to artifice. He was at his best when he stuck to realism, as in "The Hand That Fed Me," a story in the form of imploring letters from a sad loner to a woman who fails to acknowledge his existence. He also wrote a few stories about Greenwich Village life that vividly capture the period, notably "Wolfie," about a misfit in a boardinghouse who covets the women his neighbor seduces with disarming ease, and "George," a monologue about a party where everyone was drunk and fighting in the self-dramatizing manner of the 1940s. This story, with its vignettes of marital difficulty, fierce political debates, and general unhappiness among intellectuals, has a sociological accuracy reminiscent of Delmore Schwartz's story "New Year's Eve."

But there is something willed about Rosenfeld's fiction. His proletarian tales of janitors and railroad men have a dated, Thirties feel to them, and his allegorical tales about mysterious kingdoms and utopias are heavily imitative of Kafka. After the modest success of *Passage From Home* he struggled for years with a new novel, tentatively entitled *The Enemy*, which was rejected by several publishers. A somber allegory about the wartime experiences of an intellectual known variously as Pathfinder and The Brigadier in a land beset by "the Enemy," the novel is beautifully written, but also hopelessly labored. Pathfinder's wanderings in the nightmarish, indeterminate landscape where he is both a citizen and a stranger are quirkily episodic. The novel is didactic, theoretical; it has no narrative interest. Alfred Kazin put his finger on the problem in a letter to Rosenfeld praising *Passage From Home*; its only flaw, he noted with admirable diplomacy, was "the tendency to explain rather than to demonstrate."

Rosenfeld himself was impatient with the book. "*The Enemy* bores me," he wrote in his journal. "How I've ruined it with this nonsense. I want in Pathfinder a person, not a case-history. A *character*, by God!" He filled his journals with notes on mystical gurus, possible characters with names like Jarman and Bramallah Gudoy; but he acknowledged to himself that he would do better to find material in the daily dramas of his own life: "As for the India novel, the Russian novel—somehow I'll get through them. But I'm dying to write about myself, Vasiliki, the kids, the Village, my family.... Enough psychological abstractions—people, flesh and blood, reality!" Pascal Covici, Bellow's editor at Viking, gave him similar advice: "Write about the Kazins, write about the Trillings...."

If only he had. But his self-consciousness invariably got in the way:

> I look at something I have published—say, most recently, the *Three Parables*. I understand that there is an external Isaac Rosenfeld, who exists in the reader's mind, a person and a character deduced from the writing, and which, even at the time of writing, I have helped to create. I see the great distance between myself as I am in publication, and myself as I actually am. When will I actually be able to write so truthfully that only I, as I actually am, will appear on the page?

In his journals Rosenfeld addressed the flesh and blood reality he banished from his fiction. Spontaneous and candid, the diaries are full of malicious gossip, observations about friends, details of his marriage and the "libertinism" (as he referred to his many love affairs) that he indulged in with such deep ambivalence. Rosenfeld's sex life, both marital and extramarital, was exhausting and complex. How could he reconcile the "bourgeois" pleasures of domesticity with the equally seductive pleasures of *la vie bohème* as he found it in the Village? "This is what generates the conflict," he noted: "the desire to keep the marriage intact and the desire for strong sensations."

In the untidy student notebooks he used, he recorded every detail of his affairs—what Richard Ellmann once called the "precise anatomical convolutions"—with a clinical detachment that left nothing to the imagination. Unlike many of his anarchic friends, Rosenfeld was a family man; he had two children before he was thirty,[5] but, as he told Kazin, he saw "marriage as a base of operations." He had many girlfriends, women who provided sexual excitement ("strong orgasms with full bodily convulsions"). Only Vasiliki ever seemed to elicit feelings of genuine tenderness and love. The passages in which he describes his devotion to her are among the most moving in his journals. During the 1950s he records the "resurgence of family feeling" that accompanied their lovemaking in a cabin at Black Mountain College, the

[4]The Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

[5]Lionel Abel, who went out to Chicago to work on the Writers' Project in 1940, was surprised to discover a cell of Trotskyists, among them Rosenfeld and Bellow, already burdened with families. "They had married in order to show their disapproval of the sexual promiscuity in the Communist party." In *The Intellectual Follies*, Abel has Bellow telling him, "My marriage broker was the Fourth International."

children in bed, a fire blazing. "And gradually, slowly, to sleep, as the fire burns out, the first blissful night in a long time."

For Rosenfeld, as for Bellow's Zetland, "the sign of a good disposition, of being on the side of life and willing health, was that you loved children and made every sacrifice to save them." (One of his correspondents was the utopian theorist of childhood A.S. Neill.) A devoted and guilty father, he faithfully recorded the many instances when he was impatient with his own children, even cruel; but he felt their vulnerability. Observing them huddled with their playmates beneath a cardboard box on a rainy afternoon, he was reminded of their parents' unconscious brutality and selfishness, the cycle of rejection that produced generation after generation of love-starved neurotics. The sustenance they drew from each other, "the comfort, the nurture, the love," was a tacit rebuke to their elders.

This sensitivity to children was intensified by an awareness of the child within himself. Rosenfeld's journal is filled with memories of his infancy and childhood, brooding meditations on the death of his mother and the lifelong bereavement to which he felt it had condemned him. Afflicted with a powerful fear of abandonment, he produced a telling image of his forlorn youth: "The little boy with the pale face and the large dark circles under his eyes, and probably underweight; who gives way to the stout adolescent always in a wide sweat under the arms."

For Rosenfeld, sleeping around had political significance. In the midst of the Eisenhower era, when the nation was supposed to be in a trance of repression, Rosenfeld was a convert to the idiosyncratic sexual theories of Wilhelm Reich. (He and Bellow both saw Reichian therapists.) In the living room of his Barrow Street apartment he'd constructed a flimsy orgone box. A skeptical Dwight Macdonald, invited down to try it out, acknowledged a mild physiological effect: "When I emerged I admitted I felt much hotter, but so would I have in a phone booth." Others made the same comparison. Sitting inside his orgone box amid children, manuscripts, and Village hangers-on, Rosenfeld "looked lost," Kazin recalled, "as if he were waiting in his telephone booth for a call that was not coming through."

For Bellow, Reich was an intriguing fad; for Rosenfeld, he was a cause. Sexual freedom was going to accomplish what socialism never had: a new utopia that would banish forever the terrors of the modern age. Orgasm was a means of liberation from totalitarianism and mass terror; the fulfillment of one's potential was the beginning of a collective social transformation. "Our joy will be in love and restoration, in the sensing of humanity as the concrete thing, the datum of our cultural existence," he rhapsodized in 1949 in an article called "The Meaning of Terror" in *Partisan Review*. "It will lie in the creation of a new capacity, proof against terror, to experience our natural life to the full."

It was Rosenfeld's conviction that if he could only pierce his own defenses, his rigid "character armor" as Reich called it, and fight through to some more authentic self, his writing would somehow open up, make available to him the simple joy in being that was indistinguishable from truth. But the more he got involved with Reich, the less he wrote. He had developed, he acknowledged, "a severe case of analysitis" that made him self-conscious and distracted him from the work at hand. "You had so many ideas on literature," Vasiliki chided him after one of his lectures on Reich. "Why don't you ever talk about that? Why not Dostoyevsky's life, for instance?"

It's a pity that he didn't follow her advice. In his journals, Rosenfeld scribbled brilliant tossed-off annotations of Turgenev and Tolstoy, Eliot ("Eliot's ideas are not those of a man who is daring, *vorausgehend*, enterprising toward life, but rather of a man who is in retreat but would like to make his retreat appear a voluntary retirement from action") and Stendhal: "The secret—(Chekhov recommended it too, but never went so far) is to be absolutely cold about the warmest thing, love."

The diaries record periods of happiness and productivity during the late Forties, idyllic summers in Vermont ("My terrible sex-anxieties vanish like mist in the country"), a year abroad on a Fulbright, life in Greenwich Village. The Rosenfelds' Barrow Street flat was a salon for Jewish intellectuals and bohemians, with Bellow, Clement Greenberg, Paul Goodman, and William Phillips, the editor of *Partisan Review*, among the regulars; they were offered coffee and cake, but no liquor.

By the Fifties, the innocence was gone. The *gemütlich* bull sessions had degenerated into one long raucous party. In *New York Jew*, Kazin gives a memorable description of the Rosenfelds' "tumultuous apartment," with its "unpainted wooden furniture, gaping sofas, masses of review copies, back issues of *Partisan Review, Antioch Review*, the *Journal of Philosophy* forever falling down from the shaky handmade shelves." Playing to the crowd he gathered around himself for solace and distraction, Rosenfeld was Captain Ahab, "alone in the universe with his prey." Home life bored him now. "To hell with the house and the way one lives," he wrote after an argument with Vasiliki about curtains: "The important things are freedom, art, etc." Writers were by nature unhappy; their search for truth condemned them to solitude. "My patron saint is Dostoevsky's Underground Man."

To go his own way was a matter of pride. For years, Rosenfeld scraped a living from book reviews, teaching, occasional stints as a writer for trade journals. In the autumn of 1949 he left *The New Republic*. As Rosenfeld was cutting himself adrift, the New York intellectuals were clambering aboard. Introducing a famous *Partisan Review* symposium, "Our Country and Our Culture," in 1952, the editors announced that America was no longer hostile to "art and culture." The era of "alienation" was over; it was now right for intellectuals to belong: "They now believe that their values, if they are to be realized at all, must be realized in America and in relation to the actuality of American life."

It was a trend Rosenfeld deplored. While Philip Rahv and Irving Howe took jobs teaching at Brandeis, he was pining for the old bohemian days. In a talk given to editors of *Chicago Review* toward the end of his life, he reminisced about the Village of his youth: "Of course, the garret still exists, but the rent has gone up in Bohemia, and it's only the advertising men who can afford to live in the studios."[6] The notion of the writer as a rebel was obsolete, Rosenfeld complained. "I am used to thinking of the writer as a man who stands at a certain extreme, at a certain remove from society."

[6] "On the Role of the Writer and the Little Magazine," *Chicago Review* (Summer 1957).

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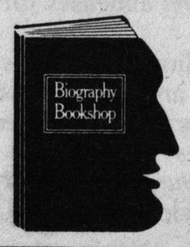

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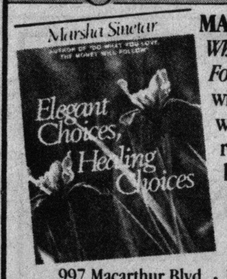

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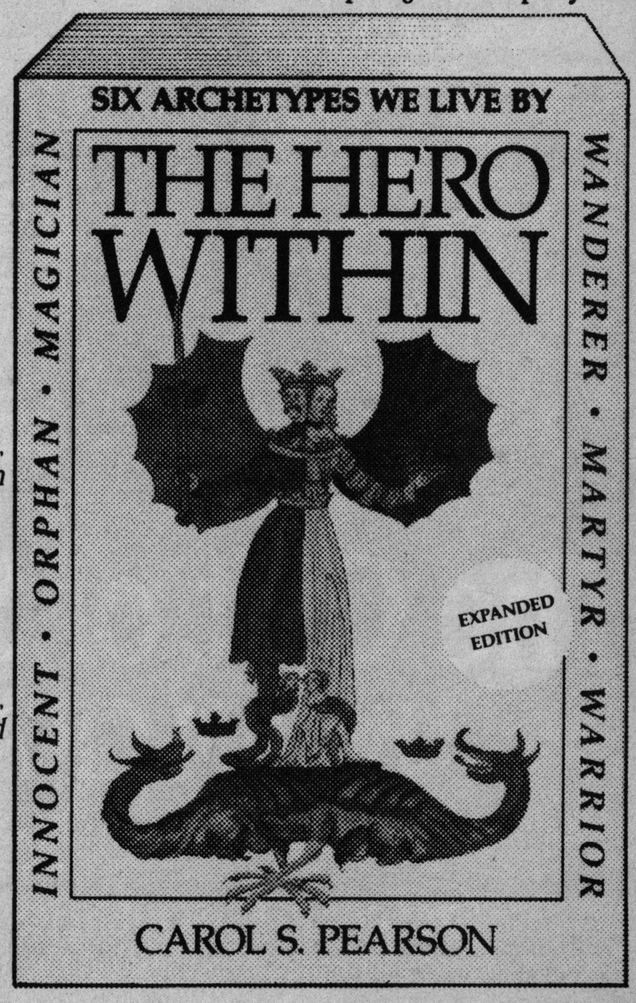

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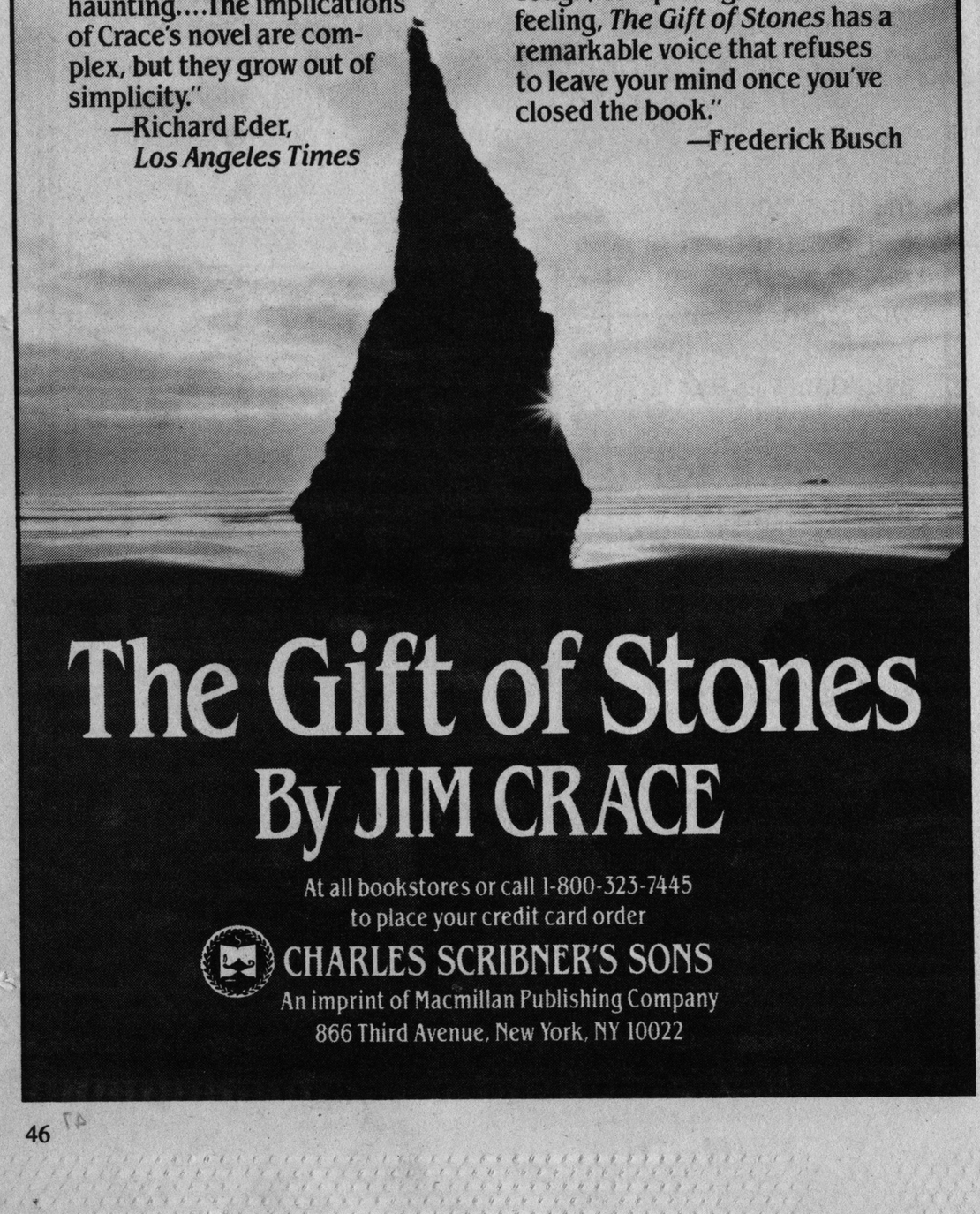

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Those days were over. As far as Rosenfeld was concerned, his intellectual colleagues had sold out. Visiting the offices of *Commentary*, he thought he detected an air of resignation among the staff. Nathan Glazer and Irving Kristol, then on the masthead, had "gone Orthodox," he lamented in his journal, decades before they discovered neoconservatism. "The young men locked in offices, locked in stale marriages & growing quietly, desperately ill"—a misdiagnosis that failed to identify who was really sick.

Bellow, meanwhile, was "making it." *The Adventures of Augie March* appeared in 1953 to nearly universal praise. Delmore Schwartz ranked it above *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* Not only did the novel make Bellow famous; it validated the literary aspirations of his generation. Rosenfeld, who, like most of his contemporaries, had admired Bellow's early novels, found the success of *Augie* hard to accept. "Ordinarily, I'm fairly modest," he confided in his journal:

> I try to be humble, to keep my tremendous ego under cover. When someone praises something I've written, I shrug it off. My greatest pleasure, when young kids talk about writers, is to pretend I'm no writer. "Oh, I've written a few things," I say. Or about Saul's book. I'll say, "I like this about it. I don't like that." While all along, what I really have in mind is: "That? Why my book's a million times better!" I'm terribly competitive.

In his journal, Rosenfeld dwells at length on feelings of guilt. What provoked Raskolnikov to murder, he theorized, was the need to "have a great guilt to expiate." Killing off the pawnbroker and her sister was a substitute for killing off "Mom and Sis," an act of revenge against his family. It was the same with Kafka's Joseph K, who longs for the court to execute him in the hope of provoking God's intervention: "Yet he feels it is precisely his guilt that keeps God from forgiving him; precisely his effort to provoke God that deepens and reaffirms his guilt." God, he surmised, was the Father; more likely, the father.

In the mid-Fifties, after his marriage broke up, Rosenfeld taught at the University of Minnesota, joining a faculty that included Bellow, John Berryman, and Allen Tate; in 1954, he returned to Chicago. The cozy disorder of Barrow Street gave way to the poverty of Hyde Park—"a hideous cellar room at Petofsky's where he had lived as a student," Bellow recalled in the sad, eloquent memoir that appears as the foreword to *An Age of Enormity*. "The sympathetic glamour of the thirties was entirely gone; there was only a squalid stink of toilets and coal bins here." Toward the end, Rosenfeld gave up even the gritty environs of Hyde Park for the anonymity of a furnished room on the Near North Side—"the kind of place," a friend recalled, "where you expected to see Raskolnikov sharpening his axe." He had always been sickly; in the late photograph on the back of *An Age of Enormity*, his pasty face enshrouded in cigarette smoke, he looks a decade older than a man of thirty-eight. In his journal, he wondered: "Maybe I have learned something? That I have been wrong for the last seven to nine years. One does not, must not live by or for passions alone: that a life of such a kind is destructive?"

Early in 1956, Rosenfeld dreamed that he would soon be dead: "It is dreadful to look two weeks ahead and know one's life will be over." Thoughts of suicide alternated with memories of his Chicago childhood and summer days in Humboldt Park. Listening to Toscanini and the NBC orchestra play the Beethoven Choral Symphony one afternoon, he was seized with nostalgia for the gang he'd hung out with in his youth. Why hadn't he written about them? "It is my task to know my own story, to recover my shame. What do I know? I have access to myself—but not the courage to go into it."

In June of that year, Rosenfeld came East to visit his children. He was "yellowish, burnt-out," recalled Wallace Markfield, the author of a novel, *To an Early Grave*, that was inspired by Rosenfeld. A few days later, Markfield received a note: "He'd had it with Chicago, he was desperate, he wanted a job in New York. 'Anything, please, anything.'"[7] Two weeks later, he died of a heart attack.

Rosenfeld was a "failure," Kazin remarked in his memoir (putting the word between quotation marks as if also to disavow the verdict). By whose definition? Three books—even if two of them were posthumous—is a substantial achievement for a writer dead at thirty-eight. No matter what he accomplished, he felt he could never measure up. "He combined all the reticence and shyness of a small sickly Jewish boy from Chicago with heroic ideas about destiny," Bellow wrote. "And after all, history would not have been history without these apparently timid and inconspicuous Jewish children."[8]

The last entry in his journal reads:

> This is what I have forgotten about the creative process, & am only now beginning to remember—that time spent is time fixed. One creates a work to outlive one—only art does this—& the source of creativity is the desire to reach over one's own death. Maybe now, if I want to create again, I want once more to live; & before I wanted, I suppose, to die. □

[7]Wallace Markfield, entry in *Contemporary Authors*, Vol. III.

[8]In a letter to Mark Shechner (September 30, 1975).

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