

Isaac, with Love and Squalor

The sad and instructive career of an intellectual's intellectual.

By Joseph Epstein

MENTION Isaac Rosenfeld's name, even to people with literary interests, and they are likely to confuse it with that of Isaac Rosenberg, the English poet who died on the western front in France in 1918 at the age of twenty-eight and whose poem "Break of Day in the Trenches" some say is the greatest to come out of World War I. The other Isaac, Rosenfeld, was an American who died in 1956, at the age of thirty-eight, alone, in an apartment in Chicago, leaving a small body of all-too perishable work and a large feeling of promise unfulfilled.

While he was alive and for a brief time after his death, Isaac Rosenfeld enjoyed something like cult status among New York intellectuals. In certain circles—at *Partisan Review* and at COMMENTARY, down in

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Greenwich Village—if you were simply to say "Isaac," everyone would have known of whom you spoke. He was thought a golden boy, full of ideas and glitteringly fresh ways of expressing them. He had come from Chicago and was two years younger than his friend Saul Bellow, than whom he was, at the outset, thought to have had much greater prospects. "It should have been Isaac," Bellow is supposed to have said upon learning that he had won the Nobel Prize.

Isaac Rosenfeld was an intellectual prodigy. He babbled not in numbers, as they used to say of the poets, but in ideas. Friends from his early Chicago days recall him discoursing on Schopenhauer while still in short pants. Bellow, who invented very little in his fiction, had an unfinished novel about Isaac Rosenfeld, a portion of which he published as a story called "Zetland: By a Character Witness," in which he writes about the Rosenfeld figure: "He was wonderful. At fourteen, when we became friends, he had things already worked out and would willingly tell you how everything had come about. . . . He was a clever kid. His bookishness pleased everyone." In a story called "The World of the Ceiling," Rosenfeld, in an obviously autobiographical reference,

writes: “I was a very serious young man, interested only in philosophy and politics, with a way of wrinking my face in thought which I had copied from a portrait of Hegel. I had no girl friends, no frivolities. I had a *Weltanschauung*.”

The sons of immigrant parents, Isaac Rosenfeld and Saul Bellow grew up in the same neighborhood, Humboldt Park, part of the old Chicago Jewish west side, which fed into Tuley High School. Along with a handful of others at Tuley, they formed an outside group specializing in inside information about politics, music, the avant garde, the great philosophical questions. The Depression was in full force, and for such boys books were their chief form of currency. In those bleak times there was little hope of career advancement, which, for young intellectuals, allowed the mind to concentrate on more serious things than merely getting ahead. “In my time,” Rosenfeld wrote in his journals, “the young looked upon life as an adventure. Today, they regard it as an investment.”

Intellectuals of the Depression generation have long since been replaced by that much narrower species known as public intellectuals, men and women who have columns or appear on television talk shows, affiliated with one of the two political parties, pushing one line or another. But the engagement with ideas possessed by intellectuals of Rosenfeld’s day was both wider and deeper. An intellectual was then little more than the stock of his ideas, and these ideas extended well beyond anything so pedestrian as national politics. Dwight Macdonald once said—and he was doubtless speaking for most New York Intellectuals at the time—that he considered the two major American political parties as little more than Tweedledum and Tweedledumber. To be of interest politics had to be international, carrying a whiff of revolution, as did art; other ideas, to capture the imagination, needed to be universal in scope.

The deep engagement with ideas of the generation of the New York Intellectuals was not without its drawbacks. The main question, of course, is not about the value of this engagement per se, but about the quality of the ideas themselves. Marxism in politics, Modernism in art used to be the unspoken banner under which the old and immensely influential *Partisan Review* set sail. Ideas—political, artistic, psychological—were in the air, like so many viruses, bringing down unlikely victims. Today one is still astonished by the degree of commitment to Freudianism, now that it has been so largely discredited, of a man as subtle and as pledged to the complicated rendition of life and literature as Lionel Trilling, but deeply committed to it Trilling was.

The New York Intellectuals, that group of forty or so regular contributors to a small number of magazines—“intellectual marines,” Auden wrote, “landing in little magazines”—chiefly interested themselves in ideas expressed through the form of literary criticism and essays. Although the collectivity called New York Intellectuals has by now been the subject of many books, and come to be viewed as an influential movement in American intellectual life, rather like the Transcendentalists in early 19th-century New England, many of the main figures among them are now sliding out of memory. Philip Rahv, William Phillips, Lionel Abel, Paul Goodman, Robert Warshaw, Meyer Schapiro, Leslie Fiedler, Harold Rosenberg, Elizabeth Hardwick, Diana Trilling—these are names now known only to people of a certain age or of specialized interests.

Yet at the peak of their influence, during the decades after the Second World War, the New York Intellectuals had great power. Small though the circulation of their magazines was, these magazines were read with great care by the editors of *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, and other organs of wide circulation. Susan Sontag could publish an article in *Partisan Review* on the subject of Camp, the homosexual style of deliberately comic, exaggerated vulgarity, and soon the word began popping up in *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*. In COMMENTARY in 1958, Dwight Macdonald wrote a scorching attack on James Gould Cozzens’s *By Love Possessed* from which Cozzens’s reputation, to this day, has never revived. In letters to his friend Theodore Solotaroff, Philip Roth reported that he found it difficult to write his first novel because he was besieged by worry about what Irving Howe and Alfred Kazin might think of it (not all that much, it turned out).

IF THE NEW YORK Intellectuals could be daunting to those outside their magic circle, they could be positively vicious to one another. Norman Podhoretz, himself a junior because younger member of the group, referred to them as the Family. They were a family, though, more in the pejorative than in the approbative sense: envious, disputatious, always sniping at and cutting one another down. I once told Saul Bellow that Irving Howe and Philip Rahv were conducting a dispute on the nature of revolution in the letters columns of the *New York Review of Books*. “Two old Jews arguing in the back of the synagogue,” he replied. “And what do they turn out to be arguing about: Lady Astor’s horse.” In his journals, Isaac Rosenfeld recounts Harold Rosenberg saying to Lionel Abel that, over a long friendship, they rarely talked about anything personal. Given the go-ahead to do so, Abel said: “I think you’re wasting your time writing nonsense

Rosenfeld was a golden boy, full of ideas and glitteringly fresh ways of expressing them. “It should have been Isaac,” Saul Bellow reportedly said upon winning the Nobel Prize.

and marginal stuff. You’ve never written anything central or important. And how can you stand Mae [Rosenberg’s wife]. If you ask me, I think you should divorce her.” In my one meeting with Alfred Kazin, every time he opened his mouth to speak of a fellow writer, a black toad came out. Jean Stafford, who was a peripheral member of the New York Intellectuals, once suggested to her husband A. J. Liebling that they attend a party of the group. “I don’t want to go,” said Liebling. “There’ll be sheenies who are meanies.”

Not that the New York Intellectuals were all Jewish, though Edmund Wilson used to call *Partisan Review* the “Partisansky Review.” Mary McCarthy, Dwight Macdonald, James Agee, James Baldwin were not Jewish; and even the Jews among them weren’t all that Jewish: Philip Rahv and William Phillips and Irving Howe changed their names from, respectively, Greenberg, Litvinsky, and Horenstein. Bellow and Rosenfeld had more Yiddishkeit than most. Bellow’s translation from the Yiddish of Isaac Bashevis Singer’s “Gimpel the Fool” had a lot to do with putting Singer’s work before an American audience; and Rosenfeld and Bellow together translated a parody version, in Yiddish, of T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”: “I grow old, I grow old, and my belly-button grows cold.”

Bellow and Rosenfeld were further distinguished from the New York Intellectuals in their aspirations to be artists. Delmore Schwartz, who began as a poet of great but eventually unfulfilled promise, was the only other central figure among the New York Intellectuals not to think of himself as primarily a critic.

Where Rosenfeld and Bellow meshed with the New York Intellectuals is in the importance they placed on ideas. The red thread of a handful of ideas can be traced through Saul Bellow’s career, most of them futile if not ridiculous, but which he evidently required, as they say, to function. Bellow’s early life was given over to Trotskyism; then came the wild sexual theories of Wilhelm Reich, with its apparatus of the orgone box, literally a box (wood on the outside, lined with metal, called an Orgone Energy Accumulator) in which one sat to contemplate the cosmos and gather sexual energy; this was followed by the airy anthroposophical notions of Rudolf Steiner; and Bellow’s career ended with a vague neo-Platonism learned at the feet of Allan Bloom, with souls mingling and meeting in

the beyond. What helped redeem Bellow from this roiling pot of message was the recognition, set out to comic effect in his novels, of how preposterous so much of it could be. Intellectual among novelists and novelist of the intellectuals though Bellow was, no figures are more foolish in his novels than are intellectuals themselves, not least those who strikingly resemble their author, whose ideas are often badly buffeted by the world’s harsh reality.

ISAAC ROSENFELD was, if anything, even more committed to ideas than Bellow. How deeply committed he was we now know with a certainty, owing to the publication of an earnest book about Rosenfeld by Steven J. Zipperstein, a professor of Jewish culture and history at Stanford. Zipperstein’s is a sad, in many ways an unremittingly depressing book. How could it be otherwise? His subject is a writer who died so early in his life, with so much left undone. The story is one of a genuine talent that didn’t develop, of passion misplaced and misplayed, of a life lived in great squalor, both intellectual and domestic.

“A secondary talent of the highest order” is the way a character in Wallace Markfield’s roman à clef *To an Early Grave* describes Leslie Braverman, the character in the novel unmistakably based on Isaac Rosenfeld. “A secondary talent of the highest order” is, alas, an accurate assessment as far as it goes, but it doesn’t quite capture what was essential in Isaac Rosenfeld. Although nothing he wrote is completely satisfying, everything had a touch of splendor about it. What remained after his death was a novel, *Passage from Home* (1946), published when he was twenty-eight; a book of stories, *Alpha and Omega* (1966), published posthumously; and two different collections of reviews and stories: *The Age of Enormity* (1962, edited by Theodore Solotaroff) and *Preserving the Hunger* (1988, edited by Mark Shechner).

Rosenfeld, as Zipperstein’s book makes clear, was more than the sum of his writings. No one who encountered him seems to have been untouched by the meeting. A small man, pudgy, bespectacled, striking a distinct note of schlepposity in his clothes and grooming, he nonetheless captured attention wherever he went. Everyone who met him came away with an Isaac story. “I’ll

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turn your insults into anecdotes,” says the narrator of *To an Early Grave*, “your mishugass into myth.”

In his memoirs, Irving Howe remembered Rosenfeld as a “Wunderkind grown into tubby sage. . . . Owlsh and jovial but with sudden lifts of dignity, loving jokes even more than arguments, he had a mind strong at unsystematic reflection, though he never quite found the medium, in either fiction or essay, to release his gift.” Rosenfeld made Howe feel “the world was spacious,” and he “envied his staggering freedom.” Yet, Howe concluded, “little remains of this flawed, noble spirit: a minor first novel, some fine critical miniatures, and a legend of charm and waste, a comic intelligence spent upon itself.”

Alfred Kazin, in his memoir *New York Jew*, recalled Rosenfeld’s mad restlessness. “He lived not like a writer but like a character in search of a plot. Every day, he woke up determined to be a new man, to recast everything, to try a new role, to be attractive, promiscuous, and wise.” Kazin remembers Isaac sitting in his Reichian orgone box “as if he were waiting for a telephone call that was not coming through.” Rosenfeld was a Reichian all his adult life.

Steven Zipperstein’s is a more complex view. He feels that more is entailed in Isaac Rosenfeld’s life than the story of early genius flaming out and ending in dismal failure, which is the standard view. He finds that Rosenfeld’s talent was growing stronger as his life neared its end, that he may have begun to get his life in order and to live up to his promise. He thinks that the real meaning of Rosenfeld’s life is to be found in his attempts to resolve the conflict between head and heart that should be at the center of everyone who sets out to live the life of the mind. “I came to see,” Zipperstein writes, “that [the subject of this book] was more a reflection on a writer’s sense of what it meant to be immersed in, and also deeply suspicious of, a life given over to books.”

Rosenfeld’s Lives is not, strictly speaking, a biography, but instead something closer to a study, with such biographical detail supplied as is required to understand its subject. Sometimes one longs for more in the way of detail; we learn, for example, that Isaac Rosenfeld left what sounds like a good job on the *New Republic*, but are not told why he left; late in his brief life, we are told that Rosenfeld was tooling around

Chicago in a red convertible, but the year or make of the car isn’t supplied. Still, Zipperstein’s broad brushstrokes do render a strong portrait of Isaac Rosenfeld of a kind that, with a little imagination, allows one to fill in much that has been left out.

Saul Bellow is more than a supporting character in Zipperstein’s account. Bellow and Rosenfeld, who “as always, each measured success with reference to the other,” though ostensibly friends, were also natural competitors. For Zipperstein the problem is “how to write about failure, particularly played out against the backdrop of Bellow—one of the century’s most fertile writers—and his achievements?” A tack that Zipperstein does not quite follow is to ask why these two writers, with such similar backgrounds, went on to such wildly different careers. What qualities did Bellow have, outside pure literary talent, that Rosenfeld lacked?

The first difference between Rosenfeld and Bellow is that Rosenfeld was the more passionate personality. He lived more freely, took more chances, was wilder in every way. Rosenfeld was a true bohemian, in spirit and in fact. “I have an idea,” Bellow wrote, “that he found good, middle-class order devitalizing—a sign of meanness, stinginess, malice, and anality.” (“Anality,” a character in a Kingsley Amis novel exclaims, “my ass.”) Bohemianism, in Rosenfeld’s case, meant endless parties, around-the-clock disorder, talking the nights away, untrained dogs, neglected children, relentless gossip, domestic squalor of a very high order. Rosenfeld became a Greenwich Village character, ran with Paul Goodman and such tertiary and now forgotten writers as Milton Klonsky and Willie and Herb Poster. Jews have not been known to do well as bohemians; Modigliani, one recalls, living the bohemian life in Paris, died at thirty-five.

Bellow, on the other hand, was an imperfect *petit bourgeois*, always setting up house. How else account for his expensive hobby of marriage, an act he committed no fewer than five times, hope ever winning out for him over experience? Ever the guilty parent, the inadequate husband, Bellow, such was his yearning for a settled domestic life, was always ready, as the song goes, to pick himself up, dust himself off, and start all over again.

Rosenfeld married once, to a beautiful Greek-American named Vasiliki Sarantakis, who was quite

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as bohemian-scruffy in her instincts as he. They had two children together, a boy and a girl, and appear to have early settled into an easy promiscuity (Vasiliki, according to Zipperstein, at least once with Bellow) that appears to have brought both much misery. Artists not infrequently marry women or men who help stabilize their lives; in Rosenfeld's case, something closer to the reverse obtained. Ever the player, he used to speak of marriage as a "base of operations."

If Rosenfeld did anything to advance his career, his biographer hasn't been able to find it. He left jobs—on the *New Republic*, the *New Leader*—that might have helped promote and ultimately elevate his own reputation. He abandoned numerous novels; carried away by intellectual enthusiasms, he set out to write books on Tolstoy and on Gandhi, also never finished. All these projects joined, in Zipperstein's phrase, the "small mountain of incomplete manuscripts" that he couldn't sustain.

Bellow, meanwhile, was an immensely careful caretaker of his career. Perhaps the most famous phrase Isaac Rosenfeld ever wrote was his description of the young hero of *Passage from Home* as "sensitive as a burn." When it came to his own work, Bellow was touchier than ten burns, all on the face. Every less than ecstatic review of his novels was remembered. He discovered insults that were never launched. When John Updike corrected his grammar in a review, he chalked it up to anti-Semitism. In the mid-1970s, he told me that, by keeping his own counsel, he was defeating Norman Mailer and Robert Lowell in the literary PR wars. On another occasion, when someone accused him of being a less than ideal father, he told me that his novels consumed all the energy he had, with nothing left over for anything or anyone else, though this didn't stop him from acquiring more wives and more children.

The competition between Isaac Rosenfeld and Saul Bellow was in the end a competition that was no competition. Bellow had his novels and the world's many prizes, Rosenfeld had his failures and manifold regrets. "I see Saul once in a while—in fact, quite often—but still don't get along too well with him," Rosenfeld wrote to their high-school friend Oscar Tarcov. "I'm jealous of him and I think he is of me: I'm ready to admit it, but I don't think he is. . . . He's poured everything into his work, which seems to be

all he lives for. He's really very sad and the 'literary figure' and the self-consciousness don't hide it." Bellow, for his part, wrote to Tarcov, "I still resent his not too well-hidden hope that I will fall on my face. If we're ever to be friends again, that's got to stop."

PERHAPS the chief reason that Rosenfeld failed while Bellow succeeded is that Rosenfeld genuinely believed in ideas, and, fatally, acted on those beliefs, whereas, in the realm of ideas, Bellow was in the final analysis a kibitzer, however charming a one. Rosenfeld lived his ideas, which can be a terrible mistake if the ideas themselves are defeating—and his were, damnably so. His fatal gift was his aptitude for and attraction to abstraction. "I have a severe case of analysisitis," he said of his too deep involvement with Reichianism. "Away with this rubbish. I want to find myself. Me! Not a reaction formation, an oral sadistic neurosis, a fixation, by myself! This person I buried somewhere under all this rubbish." Yet his gift for abstraction could aid him in writing criticism often enlivened by brilliant formulation. Here, for example, is the concluding paragraph from his essay "Kafka and His Critics":

Only now, with a knowledge of the end, can the beginning, the first of Kafka's symbols, his first parable, be explained. The order of interpretation is circular: the tautology of art has been achieved, but also its truth, and the evidence in support of its truth—a complete description of the condition of man. Kafka begins, where he ends, with an understanding of the limitation of human freedom, and an effort to transcend that limitation to the achievement of as much peace as one can reach in mankind.

Rosenfeld was not himself much interested in limitations; the better part of his life, in fact, was spent in the pursuit of extending boundaries in the hopeless search for happiness. He wasn't so naïve as to believe that happiness was available on a full-time basis. He believed instead that life provided radiant moments in which it revealed its grandeur and beauty, and it is these moments that must be sought and cherished.

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Such a moment occurs in *Passage from Home*, where the novel's young protagonist is taken by his grandfather to a meeting of Hasidim, which transforms the normally petty and grasping older man into a new and different person. "Though unable to understand, I had shared the experience of that ecstasy, and I, too, felt grateful for it." In an early story, "Joe the Janitor," a young man working as a janitor at the University of Chicago comes upon musicians in one of the campus courts playing the Tchaikovsky overture from *Romeo and Juliet*. Swept up by the music, he breaks into tears, and thinks: "Life is precious, let me hold to it, oh let me live forever, yes forever, dear sweet life. Let me always feel myself, know that I am I to the ultimate change in nature, past death, past grass, past stone."

The yearning, the hunger for such moments, appears not merely to have dominated much of Isaac Rosenfeld's fiction but also his life. "The hunger must be preserved at all costs," he wrote in his journal. His intellectual heroes tended to be men who in their own lives sought transcendence: Nietzsche, Tolstoy, Gandhi among them. Reichianism was the ultimate psychology of transcendence, combining Freudianism and Marxism and going beyond both, supposedly by establishing a hegemony over repression—and thereby bringing about in one swoop the end of the superego and the state. A place that Rosenfeld came increasingly to look for his own transcendence was sex: hence the interest in Reichianism, hence the relentless Village chasing. Sex wasn't everything to Isaac Rosenfeld, Zipperstein contends, but it counted for a lot. "All my troubles," he wrote in his journal, "are with women."

When Rosenfeld moved from Chicago to New York, he did so with the notion of studying philosophy, which he did at New York University. But he soon gave this up, believing that what he had to say was better said through fiction. "He became convinced," in Zipperstein's words, "that fiction was the best route to philosophical knowledge."

This turned out to be a mistake, at least for Rosenfeld's own fiction, which tends to be heavily weighted in favor of the parable, the fable, the symbol-laden tale. In art, as we know, there are no rules, except the one I have just set out: that there are no rules. But in superior stories themes tend to arise naturally out of tales, whereas in Rosenfeld's stories, the theme seems

to be steering the story from the outset. One feels Rosenfeld straining for the comic gravity of Kafka—"There lives the Jewish Kafka," Delmore Schwartz is supposed to have quipped when passing Rosenfeld's Village apartment on Barrow Street—but without success. Attempting to set sail, like Melville, another of his heroes, in his fiction he remained landlocked. *Luftmensch*, or air-man, though Rosenfeld was in his daily life, he couldn't really quite manage to get his fiction off the ground. "More and more," Zipperstein writes, "concrete reality disappeared in his prose: what remained were his increasingly abstruse reflections about it." Only toward the end of his life, in his story "King Solomon," did his comic gifts begin to shine through, specificity of detail coalescing with the ambition of theme.

AS A CRITIC, the young Rosenfeld could be very authoritative. Of the highly regarded British novelist Henry Green he wrote: "The over-evaluation of Henry Green in some of our literary circles is a typical American relapse into provincialism, an instance of our tendency to credit a work as a great achievement on the insufficient ground that its sensibility is finer than our own." Not bad for a man just turned thirty who was himself a provincial.

As early as 1951, he nailed Ernest Hemingway: "His reputation must soon decline, and while the excellent aspects of his style, at least in the earlier novels and some of the stories, the clear, clean writing that he does at his best, will retain their value, the deep moral significance that some critics (e.g. [Malcolm] Cowley) have found or pretended to find in his attitude toward life has already begun to look like a hoax."

He is always interesting, sometimes touching on the profound, especially on the brilliance of Sholem Aleichem's Yiddish, in which he finds "a kind of consciousness in verbal form, call it historical paranoia or call it truly mystical, that interprets the whole creation in terms of a people's deepest experience and intuition."

Rosenfeld could also be provocative. In 1949, he wrote the most controversial article ever to appear in COMMENTARY, "Adam and Eve on Delancey Street." The subject was kashruth, or keeping kosher, which Rosenfeld argued was tied up with—was perhaps the primary reason for—Jewish repression of sexuality. "As

our food taboos are also sexually repressive, serious damage occurs,” he wrote. “Kashruth should be permitted only to Hasidim. Where a natural enthusiasm and use for joy are lacking, the ideal of a Kosher Home becomes an insidious ruin of life.”

An essay in a Jewish magazine calling, in effect, for the abolition of Jewish dietary laws—talk about starting a bonfire in an oil field! “The article,” Professor Zipperstein writes, “offended many . . . and led to an effort to censure COMMENTARY, even close it down.” The dean of Yeshiva University wrote to the Anti-Defamation League complaining about the essay. Rabbi Milton Steinberg, the leading Conservative rabbi in New York, excoriated the essay every chance he had and did his best to separate COMMENTARY from the American Jewish Committee, then its sponsor, because of it. A press release went out describing Rosenfeld’s essay as “not only smut, but actually anti-Semitism worthy of the best efforts of Streicher and Goebbels.” Liberals rallied around the magazine’s decision to publish the essay. The immediate result, Zipperstein reports, is that Rosenfeld was excluded from publishing in COMMENTARY for the next eighteen months, no small punishment, since writing for the magazine was then one of his chief sources of income.

“Adam and Eve on Delancey Street” demonstrates, in a heightened manner, the mischievousness of intellectuals. Rosenfeld wrote the essay without any basis in scholarship or religious learning. He was floating an idea, riding one of his favorite hobbyhorses, casting another ballot against sexual repression, which he thought one of the great blockages on humanity’s way to a better life.

“For all of Rosenfeld’s presumption in how sexuality indelibly shapes life,” Zipperstein writes, “he also believed that sex was but one of a large medley of human actions and by no means the most important one.” Yet it is hard to think of another that loomed so large in both his life and his writing, unless it be the notion, taken originally from Marx, of alienation. For the intellectual, and especially the Jewish intellectual, alienation came, according to Rosenfeld, naturally.

Many of Rosenfeld’s admirers see this cultivation of alienation of a badge of honor. “The defining feature of Rosenfeld’s modernity,” wrote Mark Shechner, “was his revulsion against the modern world, and his refusal to collaborate with it.” Theodore Solotaroff lauded him for keeping “himself in the clear, taking risks of instability and independence, or uncertainty,

sterility, and failure.” Zipperstein cites Bellow as praising “him for turning his back on the fat gods and . . . his refusal to welcome the new order of things as a victory of the spirit.”

So there Rosenfeld was, accepting alienation as his natural heritage, lashed to Reichian sexual theories of character analysis, ill at ease in the present yet finding no succor in the past—all this and more in the way of excess intellectual baggage, did not leave him much room to respond directly to life. In his journals, Rosenfeld might mock Paul Goodman and others for being lashed to their theories, but it is difficult to see how he was less so. In his journals he views the then young editors of COMMENTARY, Nathan Glazer, Irving Kristol, Robert Warshow as “locked in offices, locked in stale marriages & growing quietly, desperately ill.” Yet in the end it was Rosenfeld who died young, some would say of a broken heart.

STEVEN Zipperstein, after living long with and looking closely at the sadness of Isaac Rosenfeld’s life, is still enraptured by him and wants even now to revive his reputation. Toward the end of his book, he pictures him as he might have been had he lived a longer life. He imagines that he might have emerged, “as did [Paul] Goodman, an elder sage of this [the 60s] movement.” He feels that the times, which accepted the abstruse fiction of Thomas Pynchon, would have been more receptive to Rosenfeld’s fiction. He believes that “as we experience once again, coolly or in panic, the modern dilemmas of contactlessness, the inability to grasp the life around us, the numbness and uncertainty toward terror and vulgarity that it embodies—that Rosenfeld’s consciousness of contemporary mind and feelings is once again pertinent.”

Is it really? In an autobiographical fragment that Zipperstein quotes, Rosenfeld writes that when younger, “I was surer, I had life. I felt a holiness and beauty in the world. I understood everything, and my own experience as well. I was called upon to be great.” He also wrote, three years before his death, to Oscar Tarcov: “What a life! I remember the dreams, plans, ambitions, and energies I used to have—and they make me feel insignificant now. I hope you’re not such a middle-aged schmuck like me.” Isaac Rosenfeld was thirty-five years old when he wrote this. He felt cornered, trapped, out of luck, and he turned out to be right. What he failed to understand was that his own ideas ensured his defeat. 📖➡️