History and Literature

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Published by Brown Judaic Studies

Band, Arnold J., et al.

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Everyone knows the great Dr. Johnson, and the scholars seem to know him in the minutest detail; almost no one knows anything definite about the obscure, minor poet Richard Savage. But Johnson and Savage were friends—intimate friends—in London for about two years in the 1730s. In those dark days in the city, dark for both of them in many senses, the position was almost exactly reversed. Johnson was then unknown, and Savage was notorious. Thereby hangs a small, but haunting mystery of biography.¹

Isaac Rosenfeld’s death—he died of a heart attack at the age of thirty-eight in July 1956—fascinated, even obsessed his contemporaries in the circle known as the New York intellectuals. The novel To an Early Grave (later made into the film, Bye Bye Braverman) was based on the day of his funeral. Saul Bellow has admitted that the tragic hero put to death, King Dahfu of Henderson, the Rain King, was based on his lifelong friend. Early drafts of Bellow’s Humboldt’s Gift, in which a character modeled after Rosenfeld was called Konig, were inspired as much by Rosenfeld as by Delmore Schwartz, and the novel’s title recalls the expansive neighborhood park where Rosenfeld and Bellow spent so much time together as teenagers. Humboldt’s Gift, of course, is a tale of promise, of intellectual waste, dissipation, and premature death. Bellow also wrote an unpublished, full-length novel about Rosenfeld, which he tentatively called “Charm and Death.”²

¹ Richard Holmes, Dr. Johnson and Mr. Savage (London: Flamingo, 1994), 1.
² For biographical information on Rosenfeld, see Steven J. Zipperstein, “The First Loves of Isaac Rosenfeld,” Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, and Society 5 (1-2) (Fall 1998-Winter 1999): 3–24; Theodore Solotaroff’s introduction to Isaac Rosenfeld, An Age of Enormity: Life and Writing in the Forties and Fifties (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1962); and Mark Shechner’s introduction to
Isaac Rosenfeld, a writer of great promise and stature, was the author of the novel *Passage from Home* (1946) and a large number of superb essays and short stories. At the height of his career, in the early 1940s, he was seen—as Irving Howe puts it in his memoir, *A Margin of Hope*—as the golden boy of New York’s fiercely ambitious literary intelligentsia. Some went so far as to predict that he might well be the future Tolstoy or Kafka in the *Partisan Review*’s literary stable. According to the *Partisan Review*’s savvy editor, Philip Rahv, Rosenfeld was a more expansive writer than Delmore Schwartz and more erudite than Bellow. “There was,” writes Howe, “an air of yeshiva purity about Isaac that made one hope wildly for his future.” Rosenfeld, not Bellow, won the first *Partisan Review* literary contest, he was selected as an assistant literary editor of the *New Republic*, and, almost immediately after arriving in New York as a philosophy graduate student at NYU in 1941, he started publishing in the best national intellectual magazines. Bellow, still in Chicago, remembers thinking at the time that Rosenfeld had left him behind in the dust.

Much of the fictional work he produced even in his best, most fertile years was built around lonely men living in rooming houses. Indeed, in the last short story he wrote before his death, he described King Solomon contemplating his demise in a place that looked much like a grim boarding house. The king here is disarmingly sloppy. He lives in a city that is something of an unholy cross between Jerusalem and the Lower East Side, and he is unmoved by the Queen of Sheba, herself portrayed as resembling a middle-aged widow in the Catskills. Here is the story’s end:

> The counselors vouch for it, they swear they have seen the proof. That King Solomon now takes to bed, not with a virgin, as his father, David, did in old age, or even a dancing girl, but with a hot water bottle . . . [I]f there were any rewards, he’d settle for a good night’s sleep. But sleep does not come. He hears strange noises in the apartment, scratching—Mice? He must remember to speak to the caretakers. . . . at last he drowses off, to sleep

*Preserving the Hunger: An Isaac Rosenfeld Reader* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988). Wallace Markfield published his novel in 1964. On Rosenfeld’s impact on Bellow during the writing of *Henderson, the Rain King*, see Daniel Fuchs, *Saul Bellow: Vision and Revision* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1984), 115, 257–64. The drafts of *Humboldt’s Gift* are in the Saul Bellow papers, Special Collections, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago; they reveal that in its early versions the still mostly unpublished manuscript “Charm and Death,” which is built around the life of Isaac Rosenfeld, was part of that novel.

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a while.... Meanwhile, the bottle has grown cold. Shall he ring for another? He shifts the bottle, kneads it between his knees. "And thou like a young hart upon the mountains of spices." Look forward, look back to darkness, at the light, both ways blind. He raises the bottle to his breast; it does not warm him. He gropes for the cord, and while his hand reaches, he thinks, as he has thought so many times, there is a time and a season for everything, a time to be born and a time to die. Is it time now? They will lay him out, washed, anointed, shrouded. They will fold his arms across his chest, with the palms turned in, completing the figure. Now his own hands will lie pressed to his breast, and he will sleep with his fathers.4

Writer's block stymied Rosenfeld. Nevertheless, at the time of his death he left no fewer than five unpublished novels. He published only one book, Passage from Home, a subtle, quiet tale of the coming of age of a Jewish adolescent in Chicago. The chasm between promise and execution is what is typically remembered. As Alfred Kazin writes in New York Jew, "As even the [Greenwich] village desperadoes noticed, Isaac was a 'failure.' Precocious in everything and understandably worn out.... Even his death would be a kind of failure."5

How the massive heart attack that felled him so young was itself a sign of failure Kazin did not explain. But similar signs were detected in the many depictions of him after he died. The most authoritative such text was Saul Bellow's frequently reprinted essay on Rosenfeld. It was, itself, a revised version of his obituary in the October 1956 issue of the Partisan Review, the magazine where the two—dubbed the "Chicago Dostoyevskyians"—vied most visibly for primacy. Bellow admits that theirs was sometimes an uneasy relationship: "I loved him, but we were rivals, and I was peculiarly touchy, vulnerable, hard to deal with—at times, as I now can see, insufferable." The document is touching and vivid. Its chilling conclusion is what is most often cited:

He was perfectly aware that in this America of ours he appeared to be doing something very odd. To appear odd did not bother him at all. Nor did he ever pursue eccentricity for its own sake, for its color. He followed an inner necessity which led him into difficulty and solitude. During the last years of his life he was solitary, and on Walton Place in one of his furnished rooms, he died alone.6

4 See "King Solomon," in Isaac Rosenfeld, Alpha and Omega (New York: Viking, 1966), 278–79.
6 Bellow's obituary appeared in Partisan Review 23 (4) (Fall 1956). There the reference to Rosenfeld's room is somewhat different from the version quoted
Much the same appraisal is repeated often in descriptions of Rosenfeld and his death. For example, James Atlas’s poem, “Isaac Rosenfeld Thinks about His Life,” published in the Chicago journal *Poetry*, begins:

I’m living in the single room again.  
Always it’s the same: a cellar crammed  
with papers, ashtrays, books. Even if I  
chose to survive without these means, why  
is it that I return to this, a way  
of life I would remember as my own?\(^7\)

Similarly, John Berryman, who taught both Bellow and Rosenfeld at the University of Minnesota in the early 1950s, wrote the following poem soon after Rosenfeld’s death:

“He ought to be a father, not a child”—
his own child too said so. I had to glare  
into a room where, half-through, he crampt dead,  
where all his lovers, seeking his cry, drown,  
and the solo I reel in a word dispelled.\(^8\)

This identification of Rosenfeld with a sordid, anonymous room proved so resilient that in Brian Morton’s remarkable recent novel of New York literary life, *Starting Out in the Evening*, mention of Rosenfeld’s name immediately inspires reference to such a room. The book’s protagonist, an erudite, out-of-print novelist named Schiller, explains to his young, eager, would-be biographer his ambivalent relationship in the 1940s and 1950s with the work of D. H. Lawrence. He tells her that what particularly upset him about Lawrence at the time was his impact on the likes of Norman Mailer and Isaac Rosenfeld—

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8 A typed copy of the poem, signed “To George Rosenfeld for his father, John Berryman,” dated “24 October 56” may be found in the Isaac Rosenfeld collection, Special Collections, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago, box 5, file 18.
Jewish intellectuals like himself, he adds, whose attraction to the “wisdom of the blood” he deplored:

She wasn’t happy about this answer. She had never heard of Isaac Rosenfeld, and Mailer had never meant much to her. But it wasn’t that she wasn’t interested in these people. It unsettled her to hear Schiller putting himself in this context. When she thought of Schiller as a writer, she liked to imagine him in the “one big room” that E. M. Forster speaks of in Aspects of the Novel—the room in which all novelists, past and present, are writing side by side. In her mind Schiller’s place was somewhere in eternity, next to Lawrence or Melville, not in the 1950s, next to Isaac Rosenfeld.  

So, on the one hand, there is Forster’s room, a place of grand achievement, even immortality. Many floors below—in truth, in the basement—there is Rosenfeld’s room, a grim place, a mid-twentieth century metaphor for Grub Street, where the unread (like Rosenfeld) or the overrated (like Mailer) go to die.

In concentrating attention on the room where Rosenfeld died, I’m reminded of John Updike’s challenge in a recent essay in the New York Review of Books, “One Cheer for Literary Biography”: “The main question concerning literary biography is, surely, why do we need it at all?” Updike explains how such books aren’t, as he sees it, utterly dispensable, but they’re not altogether essential either. He tends to tuck away most of them in his barn, not on the more accessible shelves of his house.

I offer as a reply to Updike this small item that, like most data, is without intrinsic significance of its own. It seems to me, however, that it supports the argument that such biographical knowledge is significant not only in what it tells us about the making of literature in the strictest sense of the term but also, and more generally, about the construction of the cultural past.

This data that I offer is, simply, that Isaac Rosenfeld did not die in the room on Walton Place. His new, airy, two-room apartment, to which he moved a few months before his death, was then on Huron, near Chicago’s Loop, where he was teaching at an evening-school branch of the University of Chicago. Bellow had, indeed, last seen him at the Walton flat. And many of Rosenfeld’s previous apartments had been dreadful. The one in which he died, it seems, was not. Without access to

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the primary sources used by biographers—letters, journal, interviews, and the like—this would not be known.

This information was culled from the standard fare of biographical data—above all, interviews and letters. In one letter, written a couple of months before his death, Rosenfeld tells Freda Davis, the friend who discovered his dead body, about the apartment. He relates here a conversation he had with his son, George, still living with Rosenfeld’s ex-wife in New York: “[George] knew I was sad. I assured him my life was much better now. I’m no longer in that basement. I have a nice room, new clothes, a car. I have lots of friends.”

Freda Davis, his lover, spent much time in the flat. As she described it to me, it had a bright kitchen, a desk in the living room piled high with manuscripts, the bathroom was in the hall, the bedroom was tiny and somewhat dingy, but the main room was large and filled with books. Isaac bought himself a convertible that same year. Interestingly, nowhere in the description of his sudden, sordid death is this sporty car ever mentioned. What we have instead are the same, repetitive references to dinginess and abandon, to places of waste, or worse. Yet, in this same place, in Davis’s account, Rosenfeld enjoyed cooking for her, an apron tied around his waist, a flashy car waiting for them outside the window. In letters to friends, he speculated that he might soon break off their relationship. He also suggested that he might well marry her.

Rosenfeld completed several of his very best essays and stories in the last months of his life. He was at work at the time on a book on the Chicago fire and a literary study of Tolstoy. He was writing sketches for Chicago’s Compass Players, the precursor to the comedy group Second City; one sketch, The Liars, was performed in Chicago by Mike Nichols, Elaine May, and Shelly Berman. Mike Nichols later optioned it for television. “King Solomon” appeared in Harpers soon after his death. A lengthy essay he wrote in the last weeks of his life about Chicago, published posthumously in Commentary, is often regarded as his finest piece of nonfiction. Perhaps

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11 Freda Davis (Segel) interview with the author, March 19, 1998. Rosenfeld wrote Freda Davis about his new apartment in an (undated) letter, on Hotel Drake, New York City stationery. The author has copies of Rosenfeld’s letters to Davis, dating back to their friendship at Tuley High School in Chicago.

12 See the last of the journals he kept (the first entry is November 11, 1955), Issac Rosenfeld Collection, box 4, file 6.

13 On Rosenfeld’s skit, see Jeffrey Sweet, Something Wonderful Right Away (New York: Avon, 1978). I am grateful to Jeffrey Sweet for providing me with both the text and a sound recording of The Liars. “Life in Chicago” appeared in Commentary (June 1957); it is reprinted in Rosenfeld, An Age of Enormity, 323–47.
Rosenfeld was on the verge of a breakthrough near the end of his life. There is, however, no reference to such a development in the writings of his friends. "Wunderkind grown to tubby sage," is how Irving Howe summed him up at the time of his death.\footnote{Howe, \textit{A Margin of Hope}, 133.}

A passage in Richard Holmes's recent biography of Coleridge may help us understand better his friends' reactions. With reference to Coleridge's turbulent, sometimes dreadful, final decade, Holmes writes of the responses of his friends once the now-puffy, opium-addicted, but still brilliant writer returned to England after his extended stay in the Mediterranean. Significantly, Coleridge still had many superb works ahead of him:

He was living out what many people experience, in the dark disorder of their hidden lives, but living it on the surface with astonishing, even alarming candor that many of his friends found unendurable, or simply ludicrous. Moreover, he continued to write about it, to witness it, in a way that makes him irreplaceable among the great Romantic visionaries. His greatness lies in the understanding of these struggles not (like Wordsworth, perhaps) in their solution.\footnote{Richard Holmes, \textit{Coleridge: Darker Reflections, 1804–1834} (New York: Pantheon, 1998), 65.}

Rosenfeld, too, seemed to have lavishly and all-too-visibly squandered an extraordinary opportunity. Years went by without a new novel. His first book, written at a time when he was lauded as a new Kafka, was, or so it seemed to many, a slim, predictable tale of a Jewish adolescent's struggle with his father. Rosenfeld's marriage fell apart for reasons that remained obscure, it seems, to Rosenfeld himself. He wandered between New York, Minnesota, and Chicago. He gave up the job at the \textit{New Republic} to work on a barge. He experimented, often with mixed results, with many different forms of writing. He threw himself into the teachings of William Reich, the errant, controversial disciple of Freud. He devoted himself, somberly, to free love. He benefited little from his Reichian work, and, judging from his journals, he gained little palpable pleasure from his sexual experimentation.

Friends watched perplexed and, perhaps at times, fearful that they, too, might similarly stumble—that the various, sundry, messy details of their everyday lives might also come crashing in. Many of them did fail, in one way or another. William Phillips, a \textit{Partisan Review} editor, admitted late in life that he had "pissed his time away in talk." Rahv, Phillips's
fierce colleague, fell into terrible, prolonged depressions, and he never managed, despite his much-lauded brilliance, to complete a single full-length work. Alfred Kazin, too, never produced a book of comparable stature to On Native Grounds, which he published in his twenties. He would revisit this singular moment, time and time again, in memoir after memoir, throughout the remainder of his life.\(^1\)

These were, on the whole, self-made men, essentially self-taught, with their learning picked up in prodigious fits of reading at the local library (as in the case of Philip Rahv) or during long, dull stints in the army. (Howe claims to have started reading seriously only as a soldier.) They had little to fall back upon, except for their willfulness and their ambition. William Phillips writes in his memoirs: “I now feel . . . that our little world was deficient in friendship and loyalty and that objectivity often has been a mask for competitiveness, malice, and polemical zeal—for banal evils.”\(^2\) Rosenfeld may well have been a victim of this, in terms of his posthumous reputation, that is. He was among the first of this circle to die. He had many visible meanderings about which he talked far more openly than most of the others in this milieu, and his faltering steps as a writer were all too well known. Many near him may well have lived with the fear that they, too, might fall prey to similar demons.

No one has captured such demons better than Bellow. Near the beginning of his second novel, The Victim, his narrator muses:

> He said occasionally to Mary, revealing his deepest feelings, “I was lucky. I got away with it.” He meant that his bad start, his mistakes, the things that might have wrecked him, had somehow combined to establish him. He had almost fallen in with that part of humanity of which he was frequently mindful (he had never forgot that hotel on lower Broadway), the part that did not get away with it—the lost, the outcast, the overcome, the effaced, the ruined.\(^3\)

This is uncannily similar to how Rosenfeld himself came to be seen. Attached to him were many of the more discordant, embarrassing moments of the collective life of those writers best equipped to remember

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\(^3\) Saul Bellow, *The Victim* (New York: Viking, 1947), 16.
him. Many, including Bellow, for example, had been devotees of William Reich. Bellow writes extensively about this influence in *Seize the Day* and *Henderson, the Rain King*. Still, in the memoirs of their friends—Kazin, Howe, and others—one is left with the distinct impression that this, too, was a singularly mad enthusiasm of Rosenfeld. Kazin goes so far as to assert that Rosenfeld’s Reichianism contributed, somehow, to his early demise: “And everything came back to the Isaac the prisoner in his cell the orgone box. He never broke out.” Whether the symbols are a grim, awful room or that small, silly box, Isaac in such accounts locks himself in and suffocates his talent, his potential, and his life.

Brandishing, once again, the nuts and bolts of a biographer’s work bench, it seems germane to add that Rosenfeld abandoned his orgone box, too, a couple of years before his death, and not long after Bellow did. Both had their orgone boxes built for them—in both instances by childhood friends from the Humboldt Park neighborhood. Rosenfeld brought his box along with him to the Chicago apartment where he died. It was folded up in a corner of the room. In his last years, he poked much fun at the Reichian movement; one of his unpublished novels is a grim, anti-utopia set in a Reichian sex colony, a place that rivals in its totalitarianism another unpublished novel set in Soviet Russia.

In the end, it seems to me, Rosenfeld was made, and arguably undone too, by the same intellectual circle in which he lived much of his life: left-wing, post-Trotskyist, Jewish, and competitive in almost epic terms. This circle nurtured him, advertised him, mythologized him, and, eventually, played a role in marginalizing him. His story can only be told as part of that story, too. He would be used as both clown and object lesson, as an unsettling but also reassuring example of what they, so they hoped, had managed to avoid.

Some of these men—Kazin, Lionel Abel, Irving Howe, Philip Rahv—knew Rosenfeld only briefly; others, especially Saul Bellow, had a lifelong, intense friendship with him. Bellow’s was, arguably, much akin to the relationship of a brother—close, keenly competitive, a relationship of sincere, sustained love. Rosenfeld remained very much alive in his imagination. Most of the others knew him rather more casually, and they dispensed with him far more easily. They knew him first as an unusually gifted, promising intellectual, then as a stunted, blocked writer, and eventually as a blocked writer who died prematurely. His life story

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20 Sid Passin interview with the author, October 27, 1997; Freda Davis (Segel) interview with the author, March 19, 1998. The text of “Halberline” may be found in the Isaac Rosenfeld Collection, box 2, file 42.
emerged, soon enough, as a potent, unsettling metaphor, a reminder of what to avoid.

The room, then, in which Rosenfeld did not die might, like the orgone box that almost certainly did not trap him, teach us something essential about this milieu. It shaped him, it helped launch him, and eventually it also played its role in consolidating his oblivion. When recalling in *New York Jew* Rosenfeld’s stunning ability to play the flute ("[Isaac’s] style would make me gasp"), Kazin capped off the depiction by adding: “Isaac expressed himself in perfection at last, [writing] his signature on the air.”21 In the world where Kazin lived, to write one’s signature on the air was to disappear. The depiction sounds, superficially, like an elegy, but it is, in fact, a stark, harsh dismissal.