

Introduction

“TAKING A GOOD LOOK” IS HOW HE DESCRIBED READING.¹ Isaac Rosenfeld chewed at ideas, clawing at them with commodious learning and childlike wonder. He admitted, often desperately, that the world around him was chaotic and dark, but also found it more mysterious, more splendid, than the cooler heads around him believed it to be. As a writer he was loving and fierce, thoroughly committed to the indispensability of books and distrustful of the mind itself. He knew how excruciating it was to get things right on the page, and despite mostly joyless detours that led him elsewhere, he remained convinced that nothing was more crucial.

The only recording I have of his voice sounds clipped, formal, like the sound of someone reared too meticulously. Rosenfeld was cultivated to be a cloistered, bookish boy. He grew into an edgy, infectiously charming man, an erudite, ambitious intellectual who wrote novels, essays, poetry, hundreds of book reviews, and started (soon before his death) books on the Russian classics and on his hometown, Chicago. Time and again, Rosenfeld wrote with insight and candor about what it was that made reading and writing essential, and the cost of being caught in their grip. He wrote brilliantly about the capacity of books to deepen and diminish life, to enrich it but also to render it abstract, fleshless. His only pub-

ROSENFELD'S LIVES

lished novel, *Passage from Home*, was about just this wager. Beginning in his early teens, he wrote and rewrote more or less the same story. He never quite mastered it, but he came close. This book examines his pained, insistent quest.

Born in Chicago on March 10, 1918, dead on Bastille Day 1956, he published *Passage from Home* in 1946. By then, he was a contributor to *The Nation*, *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, *The New Republic*, and *The New Leader*; the latter two he also served as an editor. He taught at New York University, Black Mountain College, the University of Minnesota, and, at the time of his death, at a humanities program of the University of Chicago, where he had finished his BA and received his master's degree in philosophy. He wrote poetry (some eulogies listed him first as a poet), as well as fiction and essays. A collection of his stories, *Alpha and Omega*, and his essays, *An Age of Enormity*, were published posthumously. "He swayed his friends with an unknown power," wrote Saul Bellow in his obituary in *Partisan Review*. "We called it 'charm,' 'wisdom,' 'genius.' In the end, with a variety of intonations, we could find nothing to call it but 'Isaac.'" Spoken of at the time of his death as one of his generation's most promising writers, still in 1966 *Commentary* described *An Age of Enormity* as "one of the finest American books of the last twenty years." A close friend of Bellow's recalls that the first thing Bellow said to him after hearing he had won the Nobel Prize was, "It should have been Isaac."²

To be sure, in his lifetime he exasperated many that knew him. Rosenfeld's literary history is an episodic one, filled with gaps, holes, the leaden disappointments of unfinished manuscripts. Half a century after his death, he tends to be recalled, if at all, as a writer of great promise who faltered, as someone of astonishing potential who once seemed still more promising than his closest friend, his lifelong rival, Bel-

INTRODUCTION

low, and who then fell, as both were aware, far behind. Often the two childhood friends from Chicago are placed side by side, one with the biggest prize of all, the other buried young and little known, a ready, all too obvious metaphor for the cruelties and unpredictability of a writer's life.

The early excitement surrounding his work (he was anointed by discerning critics—Diana Trilling, Irving Howe, Delmore Schwartz—in his early twenties, as a “golden boy”) morphed into a gray, dour reputation, with Rosenfeld as the quintessence of writer's block.³ His one published novel, released by the still small Dial Press, was dwarfed by the proximity, the drumbeat, of Bellow's achievements. Bellow often injected Rosenfeld as a lightly fictionalized character in his work, and he wrote the most widely cited obituary for Rosenfeld. This, too, seemed to highlight Rosenfeld's own imperfect and sparse output.

Rosenfeld has survived, on the whole, in the memoirs of friends—Alfred Kazin, Irving Howe, Norman Podhoretz, and others. They lived far longer, wrote far more, and described him as a man of unrivaled warmth, immense erudition, and talent gone astray. In these works—the mainstay of the huge body of literature that has grown around the New York intellectuals of the 1940s and 1950s—he is depicted, with rare exception, as an exceedingly bookish, boyish man gone bohemian but unable to enjoy the abandon of an unfettered life. He is described as an unlikely ideologue of hopeless causes (above all, the mechanistic, spooky teachings of Wilhelm Reich); a writer of fierce ambition and barely sequestered jealousies (especially of Bellow); and a genius who couldn't manage to sit long enough with any one book to make it great. Particularly as he died young—suddenly, of a heart attack at thirty-eight—his life was reduced to a cautionary tale: all the promise, the sincere expectation engulfing him (all the more

ROSENFELD'S LIVES

striking in a circle known for anything but selflessness), tended to be pushed aside. What remained was a story of waste.

Time and again, it has been related in much the same terms: directionless charm, genius unachieved. "Charm and Death" is what Bellow titled his unpublished novel about Rosenfeld. "Wunderkind grown into tubby sage . . . he died of lonely sloth," wrote Howe. Some spoke of him with uncommon cruelty: "As even the [Greenwich] Village desperados noticed, Isaac was a 'failure.' Precocious in everything, and understandably worn out, he died at thirty-eight. Even his dying would be a kind of failure," stated Kazin. In a novel about the day of Rosenfeld's funeral, *To an Early Grave* (the movie *Bye, Bye Braverman* was based on it), Wallace Markfield described him: "He had a habit of helping himself to whatever was in [his wife's] purse. He begrudged her an old razor blade to shave her legs. No library would issue him books, so he took cards out in her name and in the name of her Bessarabian grandmother. He peed in sinks. He would go to movies in the afternoon. He would demand all kinds of crazy dishes. He sat in the toilet for three hours at a time. He held on to no jobs. He farted away golden opportunities. He met no deadlines. He could be your best friend and, overnight, disappear like Job's boils."⁴

These were among Rosenfeld's closest friends, and a good many of them had praised his work when it first appeared. Irving Howe insisted that it was reading *Passage from Home* that persuaded him to become a writer. "A son to Sholem Aleichem, Franz Kafka's brother," enthused Eliezer Greenberg, an influential Yiddish poet. Diana Trilling, a fiercely acerbic judge of fiction (she hated Bellow's first novel), likened the author of *Passage from Home* to Henry James.⁵

INTRODUCTION

Literary biography is designed characteristically to provide signposts to achievement: on the whole, it begins and ends best with the texts it seeks to open up, expand, deepen, or at least better understand with the help of life experiences the biographer comes to know more about than the literary critic. While there is literature essentially impervious to such efforts, other work feels less resistant to the presumption that one can learn something new from the intersections between experience and interiority. Failure, of course, is an almost unavoidable fellow traveler of most accounts of a life lived with literature. Literary biography is replete with tales of bleak, relentless struggle, reputations made and unmade and, sometimes, remade. The life and work of Herman Melville (Rosenfeld claimed that reading *Moby-Dick* persuaded him to abandon philosophy for fiction) stands as the totemic mountain of such tales, a grim but stunningly hopeful beacon with its interplay of initial promise, eventual oblivion, and posthumous redemption in the form of something far more than mere fame. Still, with Melville no less than with others, the best biographical work begins and ends with the writer's work and with interest in him tied, always, to an interest in *Redburn* or Ahab.⁶

This book seeks to open up Rosenfeld's work, to explore how he sought to produce a luminescent fiction that melded philosophy with the most concrete, fleshly stirrings of life. It leads the reader back to no forgotten *Moby-Dick* but so much of what is most familiar in a life spent with literature—and so much, arguably, that is the hardest to capture—is precisely the uneasy recognition, often despite considerable effort, that aspiration cannot match achievement. Few have examined quite how this feels, day after day, with the depth or candor mustered by Rosenfeld.

This book has been a struggle to write. It has taken too

ROSENFELD'S LIVES

long, it has been interrupted by too much else, but once I sat down to finish, its basic contour was clear. I started it, and wrote several hundred pages as a rather more standard biography—more densely detailed and structured in a more strictly chronological way than it now is. But I came to see that it was more an extended 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. That Rosenfeld never resolved this tension is, no doubt, of far less significance than that he faced it, head-on, that he wrote about it with the willingness to be ridiculed, yet with grace, and beauty, and genius.

This struggle of his, at the core of his life as a writer, is at the center of this book. There seems no better way to write about Rosenfeld. He was remarkably alert, self-aware; his reflections on life and work are astute. My study is built around his examination of what it felt like to write or, as was often true, to be unable to do so. Few have written with Rosenfeld's acuity about what life spent at a writing desk gives and takes away.

My work began in much the same way that an interest in a writer's life often starts: I read him and felt startled, jolted by his prose. I found him difficult to put aside, his mind impossible to categorize. Still, after having spent so long thinking about him, I remain unconvinced that such categorization is possible: was he a secular or a religious writer, a political writer, a deeply Jewish one? Why the apparent inability to write a persuasive prose about everyday life when he was such a vivid storyteller, a brilliant gossip? Why the obsessive need (mostly unhelpful, as he knew it to be) to imitate others like Kafka, Melville; why not imitate writers better suited to his tastes or gifts such as Isaac Babel?

Coincidences, odd, jarring, and intriguing, kept stalk-

INTRODUCTION

ing me as I circled around Rosenfeld and his work. Above all, there was the way in which I discovered the first of his unpublished manuscripts: Bellow had once insisted that Rosenfeld found in the “squalid stink of toilets and coal bins,” in a “disorder [that] ended by becoming a discipline,” an “ascetic significance.” “I have an idea,” Bellow wrote, “that he found good, middle-class order devitalizing—a sign of meanness, stinginess, malice, and anality.”⁷ And I stumbled on his manuscripts and many other piles of unpublished work in a gray, grim apartment, a place given to dissipation, to the sort of bookless, day-to-day existence that Rosenfeld admired more lavishly than he ought to have.

I went there soon after I learned, through an article by James Atlas, then at work on his biography of Bellow, about Rosenfeld manuscripts in the possession of his son, George Sarant. (Sarant was a shortened version of Rosenfeld’s widow’s name, Sarantakis; she had dropped the use of Rosenfeld shortly after his death because of a break with his family.) I called Sarant’s listing in the Bronx and a woman answered. She told me that George had died about a year earlier but I could come over and look at his papers.

The apartment was in Throg’s Neck, wedged at a corner of the Bronx, a shadowy maze of bridges and highways with its streets darkened by concrete overhead, a neighborhood of small, nondescript houses, modest storefronts, bars small and ill-lit and well off the main road. Manhattan was only a few miles away but seemed distant, perilously so. A friend told me this was a neighborhood favored by low-level mafia types—perhaps this was one of the rich welter of urban legends that keeps New York feeling mysterious. Still, the information felt accurate, especially once, while sitting amid George Sarant’s papers later that evening, I heard sharp, in-

ROSENFELD'S LIVES

termittent sounds that seemed like gunfire. I mentioned this to his widow, and she said it might well be. But she may have been teasing.

Claire Sarant is slight, a woman with brown hair who dresses plainly and has a modest, quiet way of handling herself. She is a person who tells you, very soon after she meets you, all about her life, and she did so that evening as she handed me manuscript after manuscript from the drawers of Sarant's study in the small, spare flat. She handed me the typescript of "Charm and Death"; she gave me letters from Bellow, Delmore Schwartz, Alfred Kazin, and others. Letters came pouring onto the table where I sat. She handed me her deceased husband's phone books, with the numbers of relatives he had recently contacted; he had been, she told me, in the midst of a quest to learn more about his father. He had sat with Bellow one evening in Chicago speaking about Rosenfeld: "I felt how much he really did love my parents and also felt how terribly lonely he is," George wrote of the meeting.⁸

Claire gave me manuscripts written by George, too. They had started sleeping together while she was his patient; she added, wryly, that perhaps he chose her because she was the first Jewish drug addict he had ever met. George's training as a Reichian therapist was connected, he knew, to his desire to learn more about his father, perhaps to communicate with him since "channeling" was a skill perfected by his Reichian teachers. Among George's manuscripts was a brief memoir that described (in prose jarringly reminiscent of his father's) his inability to concentrate on his work as a doctor—he had graduated from the University of Hawaii medical school, trained as a psychiatrist, and worked in emergency rooms for a while—because all he wanted was to be "the emperor of pussy." Claire showed it to me, watching as I read. "He was a good writer, wasn't he?" she asked.

INTRODUCTION

I sat in the living room at a large table now dense with manuscripts and letters, thinking about whether there might be a place in the neighborhood to photocopy the papers. (I doubted it.) A large dog, smelly and affectionate, pranced about at one point, jumping on the couch, its tail pushing the documents I read from side to side. Claire would call at it to stop: "Isaac," she would shout, "off the table!" A gaunt man entered the apartment with his own key. Claire introduced him as a friend. He called her honey. He limped (he had recently been hit by a car) and he, too, after brief introductions spoke freely about his addictions. I gathered up my courage and asked if I could take the material back with me to Stanford—where I was returning the next day—photocopy it, and send it back. Claire readily agreed. I called for a taxi, and neglected to give her the number where I was staying (I feared she might change her mind and ask for the material back before I had the chance to copy it). Leaving, I felt like an intruder, sensing that Claire's trust was too readily given, that it was made of the same stuff that had landed her in trouble: her addictions, her incapacity to sequester details, to withhold information, to hold herself back from the entreaties of her therapist, or from this new love whose hold on life seemed thin.

I knew this was the emotional terrain that Rosenfeld had made his own: anonymous rooming houses; sporadic sexual encounters; furtive, excruciatingly isolated people; good, hopelessly sincere individuals seeking to confess, to connect somehow, to regain something lost long ago. Here, in an obscure corner of the Bronx, was his legacy: his papers, a dog named for him, a daughter-in-law right out of the pages of his prose. Even Claire's lanky new lover resembled the charmingly afflicted Willy of Rosenfeld's *Passage from Home*.

That night I read Bellow's "Charm and Death" from

ROSENFELD'S LIVES

beginning to end and decided it was foolish to write a book about Rosenfeld. Though not Bellow's best work, it was better, more verbally inventive, and more humanly persuasive than anything Rosenfeld had produced. Its words cascaded, rumbled. Why write about a writer who didn't succeed—as much as he tried, and Rosenfeld tried hard—at what he sought to do? How to write about failure, particularly failure played out against the backdrop of Bellow—one of the century's most fertile writers—and his achievements? What to tell about Rosenfeld's life and work? Any life is packed, overwhelmed with small, inconsequential, messy details whose telling leaves even the hardiest skittish. We persist with literary biography because these details, presumably, connect us to texts that we cherish. How to do this with a writer whose texts have, on the whole, been buried, or left unpublished, or, even when published, remain obscure?

It was dusk in Claire's emotionally taut apartment—with its talk of addictions; the overlay of misspent time and random sexuality; and manuscripts piled, one after the other, on the table—that kept bearing down on me, reminding me that there was a story to be told about just this sort of messiness that weighed on Rosenfeld often and until the end of his life. While Rosenfeld understood that to write one had to protect oneself, what he sought to write about—as often as not—was the cost of such self-protection. That his son had started but never managed to ferret out all that much about his father, that he so desperately wished to do so that he persuaded himself to turn, in the end, to New Age cranks, made my own pursuit feel all the more pertinent.

I began calling the numbers in George's phone book and discovered far more material than I could ever have imagined: huge caches of unpublished manuscripts and letters,

INTRODUCTION

immeasurably more than the book I had envisioned could contain. Much of Rosenfeld's writing had been placed by George, with Bellow's help, at the Regenstein Library, at the University of Chicago. I returned there several times. But other material—unpublished, unknown, and in private hands—came tumbling in. Hundreds of letters to Rosenfeld's childhood friend Oscar Tarcov were saved by Tarcov's wife, Edith (a German-born Jew and the long-standing managing editor of *Dissent*), and I was given use of them. Tarcov's collection also included contemporaneous letters from many of Rosenfeld's other friends. I traveled to Chicago, New York, Austin, Waikiki, and Los Angeles to speak to people who had known Rosenfeld. I spent time with his daughter, Eleni, a Buddhist nun, a follower of Thich Nhat Hanh. I spoke with Rosenfeld's widow, Vasiliki, and with his first girlfriend, who was also one of his last lovers (they remet soon before his death), Freda (Davis) Segel. I met with Bellow, old Chicago friends, their wives, and ex-wives. His cousins soon felt as if they were my own cousins. Once, I picked up the phone to hear the voice of one of Rosenfeld's friends tell me that his tombstone in Chicago had fallen. She was collecting money to fix it and was calling Rosenfeld's closest friends. I sent a check.

Often I considered putting all this aside and returning to my work on European Jewish history. This, finally, became inconceivable as I wrote and rewrote this book against the background of the end of my own marriage, as I remet and fell deeply in love with the woman who is now my wife, and as I came to think more and more about the matters at the heart of Rosenfeld's own quest for clarity: in particular, his wrestling with how to live fully with one's mind and heart without losing oneself to either. This book felt, in the end, essential to write precisely because it demanded that scholarship be wed-

ROSENFELD'S LIVES

ded, intimately, with some of the most basic, inescapable questions in life. But isn't this precisely what good, meaningful scholarship ought to be?

The insights of two individuals I met while working on this book—Rosenfeld's daughter, Eleni, and the dramatist and critic Lionel Abel—helped me best concentrate on why it was that I refused to give it up. Abel, by then old, frail, and uncommonly vain (he was reputed to have left one of his marriages by telling his wife he was going out for cigarettes and never returning), had urged me to come see him at his Upper East Side apartment, in Manhattan, when I first telephoned. He told me that he had much to say about Rosenfeld, but when I arrived, he admitted that he remembered little about him and talked about himself, his plays, his own life. He mentioned that it was a "rotten idea" to work on Rosenfeld.

Still, as I sat with Abel, feeling testy for having spent taxi money to listen to him rehearse the story of his life, the wiry, fabled narcissist offered an observation that came, eventually, to haunt me. If you're intent on writing about Rosenfeld, he said, the decision must have more to do with you than with him. Then, once again, he turned the conversation back to himself, his work and his achievements, and I left as soon as I could. Not long afterward, I was lecturing in France and took a trip to see Eleni at her Buddhist nunnery. When she made much the same observation as Abel had, it stuck with me. I had met Eleni before, while she was visiting her bedridden mother, Vasiliki, in Hawaii, and we had spent a couple of days walking around Waikiki talking at first uneasily but then quite freely, it seemed to me. A shy, bone-thin, and tense former nurse, she described her mother as frustrating, grasping. Her father, long gone, was a distant, august presence. We talked about Judaism (about which she knew very little), Buddhism, and what led her away from nursing. We browsed in a

INTRODUCTION

bookstore where I purchased a few books for her Buddhist enclave. We ate meals together. Our time was mostly pleasant, intermittently awkward and intimate. It felt as if we shared the same exasperating relatives.

And then, a couple of years later, I saw her at Thich Nhat Hanh's Plum Village, a remote spot a few dozen miles from Bordeaux in breathtakingly beautiful countryside but where Eleni lived in a compound stony and silent, surrounded by signs cautioning appropriate deportment, a chilly place. It was filled with a retinue of visitors who offered wide smiles and long monotonous tales of how they found peace and happiness in the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh. Most, it seemed, bore the unease, the twitches, the palpable darkness of former lives that felt, despite their fervent pronouncements, close at hand. It was hard to find anywhere to speak privately with Eleni since she wasn't permitted to sit with me alone in a room with its door shut. Her speech here was stilted; she now claimed that she was unable to recall much about her father, even her brother. "The killing of the Jews during the Second World War was bad," she said at one particularly low point in the conversation. The sentiment seemed so distant, so childishly off-kilter, especially coming from the daughter of a writer who had written so movingly about the horrors of Nazism, that I remember turning away from her with something close to disgust. I can't imagine she didn't notice.

As the conversation grew ever more strained and the room got colder (I recall leaning my body against the radiator for relief), she glared at me and said: "You must decide what this book means to you if you're to get it right." This was by far the most direct, assertive thing she said all evening. I found the remark unkind, and no doubt it was meant to be. I left soon afterward, probably too abruptly, and spent an uncomfortable night at a nearby hotel, unable to sleep. The next day

ROSENFELD'S LIVES

on the train back to Paris I realized that Eleni was, of course, right. Abel and Eleni, two people as different from one another as any might be, had responded to our conversations about Rosenfeld in essentially the same way.

This, I knew, had come to feel like a story that I had to understand. Rosenfeld, a child of Chicago's (just barely Americanized) Jews, like my own West Side Chicago parents, pondered harder and more courageously than anyone I had encountered before what it meant to live with ideas. Written off by many of those who knew him best, he deserved better. When I read the first lines of *Passage from Home* ("and it seemed to me that I towered over the family. Life meant the family."), I felt that I knew what he meant. Rosenfeld saw ideas as intimate and familial. He was forever the prodigal son intricately meshed, even in his rebellion, with his own people. Much like Sholem Aleichem and the other Yiddish writers he admired, he felt he knew his own people's foibles, tics, and obsessions—which were also, of course, his own. He was certain that his intense, often combative relationship to Jewish life gave him access to just the sort of marginal perspective essential to seeing things clearly. He felt so intimate a relationship with Jewish matters that, as he saw it, he didn't need to think about himself as a Jewish writer.

True, some of his more radical notions scandalized many Jewish readers (he was in the late 1940s probably the most controversial of all writers on Jewish themes in the English language) and intellectuals closest to him often saw his Jewish interests as too pronounced. Anticipating the ethnically inflected 1960s, Rosenfeld denied that these were parochial or, for that matter, any less worldly or interesting or important than any of his other concerns, and asserted that he better understood the world because of—not despite—them.

INTRODUCTION

He thought with honesty, with few evasions of human frailty. His willingness to acknowledge his own failures made him an unusually humane guide to life, work, and their complex, uneasy, and—in his mind—essential intersection. He yearned for fame, and believed that he deserved it. But Rosenfeld believed no less in the purity of art, and as messy as his life was, he remained uncompromising with his talents. He mused about cutting corners, about selling out, but he shunted these seductions aside and stayed true, much as he had been since his adolescence, to the belief that no real connection existed between artistic and worldly success. He knew, of course, that the reality was more complex, and he awaited the day when others would see that his writings were, indeed, masterpieces. Impatient and eager and ambitious as he was, he felt that there was no alternative but to wait for that day, and to continue to work much as he had done since his own passage from home.

There was still more that made it feel urgent to understand what Rosenfeld had understood, and especially what it was that had alternately crushed and animated his writing life. Few who write today, few who live amid books that they read so that they might write better, can overlook the assault on reading at the heart of contemporary culture—with its emphasis on the visual, its distrust of intellection, which itself is, arguably, among the more powerful legacies of the last century. Never, it seems, has the role of the writer felt so at odds with what is around us—despite superb writing that seems to speak to fewer and fewer. Other writers have in the past, of course, feared that theirs were times when the fate of literacy was at risk and such concerns have proven unfounded, off-kilter. No matter: now this sense of uncertainty feels warranted. For those, like myself, who early on found coherence in the world around us mostly through books, the uncertainty

ROSENFELD'S LIVES

surrounding their fate today, their increasing marginality, feels ominous, one more way in which the earth is heating up right under our feet.

Books were for Rosenfeld a way out, the only credible way in which to clarify the dissonance, the incoherence, the furies of life. But he knew well how they could help one to hide. He insisted on confronting the limitations of a life spent with them; he refused to see books as the only way life might be understood, while, at the same time, acknowledging his undying reliance on them. I found myself wanting to speak with him about how he negotiated these tensions, what he did with them on—and off—the page. It was a long, open-ended conversation that I sought and this book is, in some measure, its byproduct. The impulses behind biographical work are many, but one abiding feature is, as often as not, the desire to meet one's subject, to hear the voice, especially when this is impossible. A. S. Byatt writes in her fictional meditation *A Biographer's Tale*: "I didn't want to hunt or penetrate Destry-Scholes. I wanted more simply to get to know him, to meet him, maybe to make a kind of friend of him. A collaborator. A colleague. I saw immediately that 'getting to know' Destry-Scholes was a much harder, more anxious task than hunting, or penetrating him would have been."⁹

Literary critic Theodore Solotaroff went to the University of Chicago shortly before Rosenfeld's death hoping to study with him but was too timid to meet him. Solotaroff recalled what reading Rosenfeld meant for him during a particularly rough, fallow period: "I spotted a copy of the *Chicago Review* that contained a posthumous essay by Isaac Rosenfeld on the experience of writing. I picked it up, began rereading it, and came to a passage in which he talked about feeling 'uncertain, alone, and much of the time afraid' when he began

INTRODUCTION

to write something. It was as though he had walked into the room, and sat down to counsel me in this terrible time.”¹⁰

This book seeks to capture the immediacy, the stringency, of this voice. The writer, Rosenfeld explained in the essay that impressed Solotaroff, “will have to play the role that is not a role; to be the living man, the one left alone at three o’clock in the morning, when it’s always the dark night of the soul; to be the man whom one encounters when there is no longer any uniform to wear . . . to be the man who is naked, who is alone, and the man who pretty much of the time is afraid.”¹¹ He wrote these words soon before his death, at a time when his life—at least his writing life—seemed on the rebound. He was writing better, more fluently, with greater clarity than he had for many years and about themes that he himself knew best: about Chicago, about a King Solomon modeled after his old, ever more regal friend “Sol” Bellow, about the confounding demands of literature in a commercial age. Bellow, too, noticed that “during the last years of his life all the quaintness . . . was set aside. His wit was clearer and sharper.”¹²

In this book I examine Rosenfeld’s pained, circular quest as a writer, beginning with his essays and stories and continuing with *Passage from Home*, his odd, remarkable novel about fathers and sons. His fictional writing soon became more abstract. He sought to meld philosophy and fiction, trying to move beyond realism, to probe imagination, somehow, from within. But in the last couple of years of his life, he turned his back on such writing, it seems, and returned to themes he was arguably better equipped to write about: How to escape, and not escape home? How to embrace childhood and adulthood without turning one’s back on either? How to embrace thought as well as instinct; mind and body; the rigors

ROSENFELD'S LIVES

of intellection and the delicious abandon of sex; the purity, the innocence, of childhood, and the rest of life?

Rosenfeld wrote in his journals: "I feel this urge now—strongly, to discover, now at last in my 30th year, myself, the person, the living man, not the worried, over-anxious abstraction . . . I'm dying to write about myself, Vasiliki, the kids, the Village, my family . . . enough psychological abstractions—people, flesh and blood, reality!" He knew that he could write searchingly, perhaps brilliantly, about the details of life around him but he wrestled for many years as to whether this was what he wanted to do—and if this was the most accurate way of seeing the world: "Vasiliki's symptom of falling in love: sighs, distractions, unaccountable smiles, a clouded look in the eyes, the face full of embarrassment. All day long she hums one song: 'I'm as corny as Kansas in August . . . ' but stops short of the punch line, 'I'm in love with a wonderful guy.' Something guarded about her manner, as though she wanted to keep it sacred from any outsiders prying. The way she was brushing her teeth, her back slightly turned to the door, as if, even though I'm presumably asleep, she wanted to keep her feelings inviolate. Her voice when she talks with him on the telephone is soft, it has a depth in it. Her symptoms—exactly the same as mine."¹³

There is no way to know what he might have done had he lived, what his writing life might have turned out to be. How would his best work sound today if freed from the weight, the teleology, that has been imposed onto it? True, by his mid-thirties he hadn't lived up to his potential: he had been stunningly brilliant as a boy, a child-genius, and he stumbled, but then again, many do and get over rough patches. They overcome the disappointment of temporary failure, novels half-written, afternoons spent in dissipation, the fact that books written by their closest friends have done

INTRODUCTION

better than their own. If Rosenfeld's writing life weren't seen as a simple, steady decline, as a march into the abyss, how might it be viewed?

This question seems all the more crucial since much of Rosenfeld's work remains fresh, pertinent in its candid wrestling with the impact of books and the interplay between what it is that books give and what they take away. How, then, might his voice sound without the din of that tale of unsteady work, of a sudden death having sealed a graying, dimming fate?