

Approaches to Endings

Alpha and Omega, by Isaac Rosenfeld (Viking. 279 pp. \$5.95), contains short stories whose themes are divided between the "underground man" who despises himself and the abstract man who acts out the author's political despair. Emile Capouya's critiques of contemporary fiction appear frequently in *Saturday Review*.

By EMILE CAPOUYA

THE FIRST story in Isaac Rosenfeld's collection is called "The Hand That Fed Me." It is told in a series of letters, and in one letter the following passage occurs:

But one more thing. On your card you have written, "From Ellen. Do you remember me?" A pretty little disingenuous note! I assure you, your card was sent in the deepest conviction that I had not once ceased to think of you. I'm sure of it. If you thought I'd forgotten you, you wouldn't have dared send a card. What, a man should receive a card from a certain Ellen and wonder who she is? Any time you'd leave yourself open!

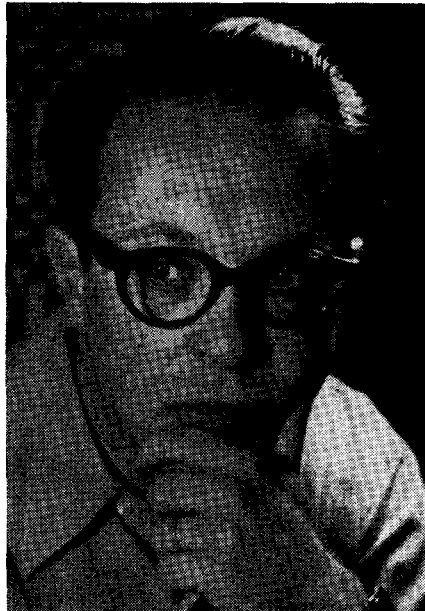
It is clear that the writer of the letter despises himself. He is like Dostoevsky's underground man, except that, a hundred years later, he cannot regard his situation as a horrible novelty.

Here is another passage, the first paragraph of the story "Alpha and Omega"; a postman presents himself:

They call me Little Giant. In the morning, when my work begins, the bag is heavy. I pull it onto my shoulder with a groan. All day it grows lighter and lighter; my head rises of its own accord. I take longer, quicker steps, my strength, courage, and good humor return to me. Late in the afternoon, when the burden is gone, I am a new man. But it is late in the afternoon, the day's work is done, and tomorrow begins a new day.

The speaker is not really speaking at all. He is being spoken, as it were, by the author, for he is an abstraction.

Isaac Rosenfeld's characters seem to fall mainly into one of two classes. The underground man speaks, in a variant of colloquial English, and we suffer with him through his recital of his peculiarities—as Baudelaire says, feeding our



Isaac Rosenfeld—a vision of the ultimate defeat of the human race.

pleasant remorse as beggars feed their fleas. Or else abstract man is presented to us, in language that is often a kind of strangled poetry, and we learn from him "how it is."

The two best stories in the collection—and I think they would be remarkable in any company—are "The Colony" and "The New Egypt." In both of these it is abstract man who acts and suffers, carrying the burden of Rosenfeld's political despair. In both, the language of the narrative is an invented English that, while easy enough to read, is strangely official, remote, and unechoing. What it most resembles is a translation of Kafka. At the same time it is lighted by flashes of curious poetry ("my head rises of its own accord").

"THE Colony" was first published in 1945. It is about a nationalist leader, vaguely East Indian, Nehru-esque, whose movement and party are tolerated by the colonial government up to the point where their opposition threatens to become effective. The population is poverty-stricken and weaponless; at a mass-meeting the leader announces a policy of radical noncooperation with the colonial government, passive resistance, non-violence, absolute boycott. Immediately, the movement is crushed and its chiefs imprisoned. After a long period of solitary confinement in an "experimental camp," the leader is allowed to see a

group of his former colleagues, prisoners like himself. He has been refusing food, and so, apparently, have they. Scarcely able to stand, they crowd around him, full of love and admiration. Then the leader is presented to a second group of his imprisoned followers. They look well fed; they have not been abused. The mere sight of him stirs them to fury and they fall upon him. The leader begins to understand the nature of the "experiment."

The story seems endlessly suggestive as a political parable—for example, it tells us something about Big Labor's endorsement of the war against Vietnam. But it is nevertheless historically specific, dating from a period in which we had not yet become accustomed to the spectacle of dark-skinned men armed with automatic weapons. Rosenfeld's vision is of the ultimate defeat of the human race. That may come about, of course, but it no longer appears that it will be effected by landing-parties dispatched from Western strongholds.

"THE New Egypt" was written in 1946. Its central idea is that our necrophiliac society, and the industrial landscape that captures all the grace and gaiety of Karnak, is thoroughly Egyptoid in inspiration. The notion no longer seems as original as it once did, perhaps because it strikes us as more gallingly accurate than it appeared to be a generation ago. In any case, Rosenfeld's legend of a time when men are immortal and enslaved is a gloss on Thoreau's comment on the Egyptian pyramids—"built for some ambitious booby whom it would have been cheaper and manlier to drown in the Nile." Well, Rosenfeld suggests, that is not what men do with their ambitious boobies. Instead they labor under taskmasters, on a diet of garlic and encouraged with the whip. It would be pleasant to be able to suggest that this tale, too, suffers somewhat from historical provincialism, hailing as it does from the dark ages before the dawn of automation, with its promise to bring about the New Jerusalem and in general make everything nice. Is it superstition only that warns us against basing our criticism of Rosenfeld on so flattering an estimate of our future?

Isaac Rosenfeld died in 1956. A teacher and critic as well as the author of stories and one novel, he appears to have inspired during his lifetime affectionate admiration such as few literary men are accorded. It seems strange that his strength as a writer should lie in dealing with the public thing. Most of his contemporaries, and himself much of the time, confine themselves to the personal subjects they believe they can control. "The Colony" and "The New Egypt" suggest what we may be missing because of that common resolution.

Two Tickets to Tomorrow

"The Railway Police" and "The Last Trolley Ride," by Hortense Calisher (Little, Brown. 248 pp. \$5), both short novels, concern, respectively, the rebellion of a bald woman and a streetcar named Fate. Joan Joffe Hall teaches English at the University of Connecticut.

By JOAN JOFFE HALL

SOMEWHERE between one of her earlier novels, *Textures of Life*, and *Journal from Ellipsia*, published last year, Hortense Calisher moved from a stylized view of the actual world to fantasy, from the very terrestrial, even mundane, love of a young couple into outer space. In these two new short novels, *The Railway Police* and *The Last Trolley Ride*, this planet is turned into a backdrop for very strange, occasionally otherworldly, events. Both are highly idiosyncratic narratives, the one of a bald lady who decides to proclaim her baldness, the other of an elderly man named Jim who has a friend named Jim and who tells the story of youthful love and a mythical trolley line.

It's hard to avoid comparisons: *The Railway Police* is the better of the two. There's something too archly coy about *The Last Trolley Ride*. The convolutions of the sentences, the fake suspense about who is telling the story and about what finally did happen, falsify, it seems to me, the essential simplicity of the story itself. Jim and his friend return to a small town after World War I and court the Pardee girls, who live neglected on the outskirts of town, selling fritters. On the remarkable day when the trolley line, a folly from its inception, is retired, everyone goes on a picnic last ride. When the return ride is temporarily stalled, Jim and Emily sneak off into the bushes, but the friend and Lottie stay on the trolley. It later turns out that plump and sexy Lottie is frigid, that the mate has to starve her to get his sex, that she leaves him after conceiving the child whom Jim and Emily bring up with their own. The trolley itself is a symbol of fate, of the past, of a simpler life; and also of an unruly universe, the universe of folly (its inventor has a miniature replica of the system, which functions perfectly—in his basement). All this is clear enough, except that Hortense Calisher for some reason feels obliged to jazz things up, to ob-

scure the narrative line, to turn the characters and events into enigmas, to make the inventor fabulously rich and cultivated; in short, to create mystery where there is none.

Miss Calisher's style is, at its best, witty and ripe with insights; words melt in her mouth like the Pardee girls' fritters. But she has such an appetite for language, for seasoning in every sentence, that at its worst her style can become opaque, no medium for discovery and elucidation, a risky idiom for narrating events, dangerous for long fiction. Perhaps the brevity of *The Railway Police* is crucial to its success.

There's plenty of suspect mystery and

initial obscurity in *The Railway Police*, but the story is finally compelling. A social worker of thirty-nine who wears wigs because she is absolutely bald decides, after seeing a vagrant thrown off a train by the railway police, to announce her baldness, to give up her pretense of hair, to obliterate all evidence of her place in the world, her home and job, to become a vagrant. She begins by leaving her girdle and stockings in the train lavatory and ends by monkishly carrying a bowl and watching from under a viaduct as the sun comes up. In one wonderful scene she throws all eighteen of her wigs off their wig blocks in what she believes is a gesture of farewell, but comes to acknowledge as a salute—hello wig blocks, the essence of the human head.

The intricacies, the subtleties, the cerebrations of Miss Calisher's style work better here, partly because the woman, who narrates the story, is herself involuted and complicated (as Grandfather Jim is not), and partly be-

Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich and David M. Glixon

A I N ' T S H E S W E E T ?

Elizabeth Mills of Springfield, Mo., asks you to identify these poetic ladies from her unpoetic descriptions. Just give the name of each; take an extra bow if you also know the title of the work she adorns. Introductions on page 52.

1. She sang through her nose and spoke French with a London accent. (Chaucer)
2. How come her beaux were all so complimentary? Overwhelmed by her saintliness, beauty, and intelligence? (Shakespeare)
3. Not many walked that way, and she had the springs pretty much to herself. (Wordsworth)
4. The susurruration of her skirts was not necessarily due to a taffeta petticoat. (Herrick)
5. She was passing fair, this one. (Browning)
6. Believe it or not, she had every virtue and every grace—in addition to that gorgeous figure. (Landor)
7. This maid of sixteen, above average in height and dignified of mien, is invited out, a certain somber creature having departed. (Tennyson)
8. She had not come to pay a ghostly call, but that's what her lover thought when he asked who was knocking at his door. (Poe)
9. A figurative kiss is what he wanted, surely, and not a lipstick outline on the rim of that winecup. (Jonson)
10. Probably because she needed some material for a hair-brooch, she waved her deadly bodkin and demanded the return of what had been swiped. (Pope)
11. Would she have had that midnight feast if she had been living in, say, a college dorm? (Keats)
12. Clutching his ring, she swooned prettily at the feet of one she had thought a truthful James of lower rank. (Scott)