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SAUL BELLOW'S FICTION

Irving Malin

Preface by Harry T. Moore

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WITH A PREFACE BY
Harry T. Moore

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for my mother

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Preface

The appearance of Dangling Man *in 1944 marked the advent of an important new novelist. As Irving Malin says in the present book,* Dangling Man *echoed Dostoevsky and Kafka. At the same time, however, there was something highly original in Saul Bellow's vision of alienation, a vision which has manifested itself in his five succeeding novels.*

In the first of them, the man was dangling because he was caught in the suspense of time between the moment when his draft board told him to stand by and the moment when they would call him up. But, in spite of all these familiarities and derivations, Joseph was a highly individualized and living young man. And most of Bellow's subsequent characters have also been highly individualized and living.

That is one of his great successes as a writer. But he also has control of a style that is moderately cool, intellectually resourceful, and always flexible. In addition, Bellow has something which Hemingway had in quite a different way: a compelling sense of the moods of the time. If his work is distinctively individual, it is also distinctively representative.

He is evidently a writer who takes his time, for he has produced only six novels over a span of two decades. Sometimes there have been five- or six-year intervals between the books. Bellow has filled the interim periods by accepting professorial and other academic assignments, and by writing stories and arti-

cles. In the latter he speaks with mature authority for the writer of today.

Among his novels, I care least for the two which tend toward "epic" dimensions, The Adventures of Augie March (1954) and Henderson the Rain King (1959), partly because they seem somewhat diffuse to me, lacking the concentrated intensity of The Victim (1947) and Seize the Day (1957). In caring less for Augie and Henderson I am not taking a lonely position; in the present book Irving Malin shows that he is among those commentators who hold it. Augie and Henderson are nevertheless full of fine things, including some excellent comedy. Augie March is usually spoken of as picaresque, and it is certainly in the tradition of that genre; Augie himself is very much the wandering rogue, but one who is essentially an innocent, one who is almost naïvely in quest of his identity. Henderson is quite different, far more fantastic-fabulous. The imaginary Africa is an interesting creative achievement by a man who received a university degree with honors in anthropology.

His most recent novel, Herzog (1964), is also spacious and diffuse, but it manages to compel one's attention more firmly than Augie March or Henderson. One reason may be that the Jewish Herzog is more "typical," even for non-Jewish readers, than Augie or the non-Jewish Henderson are. His very franticness has an appeal. It is profoundly representative of its time.

My own two favorites among Bellow's novels, however, remain The Victim and Seize the Day. The first of these, which really has two victims (Allbee as well as Leventhal is the victim of Allbee), is a notable dramatic diagnosis of anti-Semitism and in all ways a gripping story. The modern city, so important in The Victim, is a dominant actor in Seize the Day, with its portrait of the lost man in the upper Broadway residential hotel. These are two of the finest novels to come out of America since World War II, and they *give plausibility to Irving Malin's opening sentence, which by hedging a bit avoids being flatly dogmatic: "Saul Bellow is probably the most important living American novelist."*

Mr. Malin's detailed study of Bellow's work attempts to show why this might be. It is a highly sympathetic critical exposition, particularly in its investigations of Bellow's themes and characters. At the present stage of Saul Bellow's career, this is a valuable, even a necessary book.

HARRY T. MOORE

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August 16, 1968

Introduction

Saul Bellow is probably the most important living American novelist. Although he has not yet reached the limits of his talent, he has already produced six novels which deserve close study.

This book is arranged simply. In the first chapter I explore the world of Bellow as it appears in "Two Morning Monologues," his first published story. Then I discuss five themes—*moha,* madness, time, masquerade, and Jewishness—which seem to be his basic ideas. In the third chapter I limit my discussion to his characters. In the next two chapters I chart those images and styles which express or incarnate theme and character. And my final chapter, before the brief conclusion, is devoted to *Herzog* which exemplifies impressively his fictional achievement.

From the following chapters the reader can see that I am biased—I omit biography (using Bellow's nonfiction as my only "biographical" references); I limit my discussion of his relatively weak stories; I am "vertical" rather than "horizontal." But I hope that my approach is, despite these omissions or limitations, a valid one to Bellow's fictional kingdom.

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tures of Augie March. Quotations from "Dangling Man" are reprinted by permission of Laurence Pollinger, Ltd., Weidenfeld and Nicolson, Ltd., and the publishers, The Vanguard Press, from "Dangling Man" by Saul Bellow. Copyright, 1944, by the Vanguard Press, Inc.; quotations from "The Victim" are also reprinted by permission of the publishers, The Vanguard Press, from "The Victim" by Saul Bellow. Copyright, 1947, by Saul Bellow. And I thank *Partisan Review* for permission to quote from "Two Morning Monologues" © 1941 by *Partisan Review.*

Portions of this book have appeared in *Jewish Heritage, London Magazine,* my *Jews and Americans* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), and my *Saul Bellow and the Critics* (New York University Press, 1967). I wish to thank the Commission on Adult Jewish Education for the use of my article, "The Jewishness of Saul Bellow," reprinted with permission from *Jewish Heritage* (Summer, 1964), a publication of B'nai B'rith's Commission on Adult Jewish Education; thanks also to New York University Press for permission to reprint "Seven Images" © 1967 by New York University; and I wish to thank the editors of *London Magazine* for permission to reprint my article, "Saul Bellow," which appeared in January, 1965.

IRVING MALIN

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March 18, 1968

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Saul Bellow's Fiction

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The First Story

Perhaps the best introduction to Bellow's world—to its themes, characters, and images—is his first piece of fiction, "Two Morning Monologues," which appeared in the May–June, 1941 issue of *Partisan Review.*

Mandelbaum, the first speaker, tells us how he spends his day "without work." He disposes of this day —and, we assume, every day—by fruitlessly looking for a job, "pulling the marrow out of a cigarette," taking an "extravagant boat ride," or reading in the library. The second speaker muses about the "angles" of the day's race, the first cigarette, and breakfast. These men are less concerned with physical action than meditation and conversation.

What characteristic themes are stated? Mandelbaum and the gambler live in a completely alien society. In the opening paragraph we read that Mandelbaum, the unemployed son, is "driven": he cannot stay at home because he refuses to accept the compelling, self-centered designs of his parents, especially those of his father. He does not want to work just to earn money and please everybody. He wants more than the "fat gods." [1] The gambler, on the other hand, goes along with the system, but even he thinks it's a "sour loss"—the workaday routine is meaningless because it doesn't satisfy his soul: "The sucker scraping the griddle, turning the eggs, paddling the bread with wet butter. I couldn't put in his twelve hours."

Must such alert men accept the patterns of society?

Must they be mere worshippers of fact and figures? Must they love money? Mandelbaum thinks: "Total it any way, top to bottom, reverse the order, it makes no difference, the sum is always *sunk*." The gambler agrees with him: "To get around it counts. Slipping through." They both rebel against the fundamentally destructive system; at the same time they find that they have no values of their own. Thus they feel guilty or depressed. Although "Two Morning Monologues" stresses the "literal" social fact, it is almost "metaphysical." The system is, after all, the world we know—the world we did not make but adopted. The speakers are concerned with more than functions of money; they want to *know themselves in relation to universals*—the gambler asks: "Who picks us out?" The world itself is presented as the necessary, inescapable design which challenges individual identity: "Here we are. What'll it be today, the library? museum? the courthouse? a convention?"

Bellow emphasizes painful irresolution: rebellion versus submission; narcissism versus communion; and fear versus courage. Because the speakers are torn by such "double" values, they are, in the end, on the "edge of being." The gambler knows that even this edge may be an illusion, another appearance which hides reality. He counsels himself: "Walk on the edge without falling." At the same time he knows that he *can* fall. He wants, at times, to close his eyes. So does Mandelbaum: "Eventually it will be settled, but the space between eventually and the present is long enough to stretch my legs in."

Bellow suggests that "time is of the essence." This day must be confronted, understood, and mastered. The speakers have to seize it, knowing that it carries the burdens of past and future. Again there is ambivalence: this day resembles other days, but it is unique. How can they live in the *system* of time? How can they be *in* and *out* of history? I take these questions to be crucial in both monologues. Mandelbaum knows that his father bought the house—the symbolic burden—long ago. The gambler also thinks of the past he carries—not of his father's house but of his childhood: "When you come to it there's a lot that has to do with what remains of it from childhood." Gambling is a fitting symbol of time's ways: we are handed cards; we must act now; but we don't know what cards we will choose.

Bellow gives us family relationships as he does in his novels. Mandelbaum's father is not a "monster," but he does seem to be full of self-love. When he says that his son is a "good boy, a smart boy," he demonstrates that he is proud of him, yet he also feels that he is better than this smart boy: *he*, after all, is working. The father creates an atmosphere of competition; he proclaims by all of his deeds—by advertising for a job, by making him feel "wrong and guilty," by mentioning the other smart boys—that he commands his son.

Mandelbaum gets little help from his mother. Although she is "much gentler" than the father, she is clumsy in her affection,

> Ordinarily she is as strange to me as though she were dead or nonexistent. But then, when I recognize that she is alive—not only that she lives, but that she prepares my orange juice before I leave and hands me my lunch—it gives me an extraordinary twist. I am the only son.

The mother offers orange juice—little else. It is characteristic that Bellow's speaker regards her with more love than he does his father—at least she won't scold him! But I think she is as "dangerous" as her husband. The family ties—muted though they are—suggest that Mandelbaum learns to dangle at home.

And his view of the "outside" world is corrupted. He knows that society resembles—or projects—his father's absurd conceptions, and he reacts toward the people he encounters, especially prospective employers, in the same immature way. He is a son unsure of his identity; he is treated as such by those who have "purpose and money and influence."

The gambler also regards society as a "conventional" parent, but unlike his alter ego, he reacts as a "mean" boy. He is a hostile name-caller: the others are "fall guys," "suckers," enemies. It is interesting that he is superstitious:

> When you come to it there's a lot that has to do with what remains of it from childhood. . . . Kids think they can control the world. Walk from one side of the room to the other and a bell will ring; throw a stone at the sky and wait for it to rain. Next time it will rain. I remember that.

The gambler, like "uncivilized" natives, is awed by worldly tricks. He sees many mysterious strangers.

Both speakers are more concerned with their conflicts, with ideas of power, than with sex. We don't see much of Mandelbaum's mind, but it is safe to say that he finds no comfort with women, who, perhaps, mirror his gentle, "dead" mother; he knows that they don't count—they can't help him assert his strength. He is a bachelor. The gambler, similarly, doesn't mention girls—not even Lady Luck. They are not important in his "will to power" because he probably thinks of them as conventional or honest. Men he can "fight back with a stick."

There are several images in "Two Morning Monologues" which recur in the novels: "rooms," voyages, and "mirrors." Bellow does not go far; he does not create exotic images to represent the plight of his heroes. The "room" is the prison of spirit. Mandelbaum continually finds himself *confined:* the "stairs have become darker, more buckled and gap-jointed"; he waits at the agency, "sitting on benches, crossing and recrossing [his] legs with the others, reading the signs forbidding smoking and stating the rates of the agency"; he thinks of the "closely curled leaves" of his identity; he hopes to strike "the secret panel of the sliding door." The gambler wants to "get around it"; he wants to open the door, to "slip through." He also is "squeezed" by the condition in which he finds himself.

Bellow opposes movement to confinement. But the movement is erratic, violent, or non-purposeful. The unemployed son is "driven" from the house. He takes a "long ride," paying "little attention" to the sights. He likes to "lounge several hours in one place," rather than take an "extravagant boat ride." The gambler's motion is more violent: the cigarette "dizzies" him; he wants to go "through the cracks"; he thinks of planes "colliding in all the room in the world," of skyscrapers toppling, of cards falling. He hears, finally, the "swishing in the heart like a deck riffled."

Bellow also uses often-inverted reflections to express the ambiguities of life. He characteristically gives us *two* monologues, juxtaposing the docility of Mandelbaum to the anger of the gambler. Indeed, these heroes—"good boy" and gambler, lounger and racer, innocent and con-man—prefigure the doubles in all of his novels. Nor does he neglect other kinds of reflection. Consider Mandelbaum thinking of Bobby Poland, the neighbor's son, who is the same age. This "brother" is an accountant. Earlier he sees himself in those who are out of work, but his father thinks that he is "different." The gambler refers to contrasts, inversions, reflections: "You have to be able to recognize them." He recognizes that he is unlike the fall guys; he is disturbed by those who don't look and step where they "shouldn't"; he glances at the eyes of the other players. But his vision of reality is as clouded as the mirror touched by his cigarette smoke.

The style of "Two Morning Monologues" prefigures later developments. Mandelbaum and the gambler speak. Immediately we feel that they are communicating directly to us; no "author" interrupts their monologues. Bellow suggests that "style is the man," that fiction embodies personal truth. We respond to sincerely expressed troubles. Listen to Mandelbaum: "It's my father's fault that I'm driven from the house all morning and most of the afternoon. I'm supposed to be looking for a job. I don't exaggerate when I say driven. That's what it is." He speaks urgently, simply, often uncontrollably. Rarely does he use imagery: "This morning [the descending sun] makes me think of nothing more important than a paper seal on a breakfast food box. Yank it and the box opens. You will find a toy prize on top; a toy plane, crossed snowshoes, a tiny loving cup." This typical image expresses his "practical," down-to-earth view of nature, his concern with food and prizes which await him. When Mandelbaum becomes poetic, he still remains close to home: he mentions the "closely curled leaves" of identity, but he juxtaposes this image to the sandwich he carries in his pocket. Bellow mediates between the literal and the symbolic, understanding that this linkage is often amusing. Consequently, Mandelbaum refers to finding "unusual resources"—learning to "suck a maximum from each straw and pull the marrow out of a cigarette."

The gambler speaks distinctively:

> What does it amount to? Close my eyes and pick, I may as well. It turns out the same; mostly sour loss. System is nothing and to try to dope them is just wasted. It isn't a matter you reach into yourself for, bringing it up and showing it to the eyes, open proof. The card is dark, always, the dice to the last roll.

His monologue is rapid, sincere, and practical, but it is more "poetic" than Mandelbaum's—almost visionary: "That's it, you see, the verge, the edge, the crumb of a minute before when any one of twelve, fifty, eight, thirty-seven comes out." The vision, however, is full of "crumbs." Again Bellow is able to show the doom of "money owing, rent postponed, hole in your glove, one egg, cheap tobacco." His lists convey the puzzling density of life.