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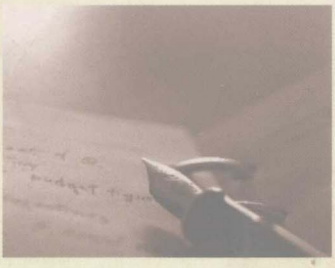
夕阳尽处是长安

——索尔·贝娄早期小说研究

PASSOVER FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT —A STUDY OF SAUL BELLOW'S EARLY FICTION



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Books by Saul Bellow

Dangling Man (1944)

The Victim (1947)

The Adventures of Augie March (1953)

Seize the Day (1956)

Henderson the Rain King (1959)

Herzog (1964)

Mosby's Memoirs and Other Stories (1968)

Mr. Sammler's Planet (1969)

Technology and the Frontiers of Knowledge (1974)

Humboldt's Gift (1975)

To Jerusalem and Back (1976)

The Dean's December (1982)

Him With His Foot in His Mouth (1984)

More Die of Heartbreak (1986)

A Theft (1989)

The Bellarosa Connection (1989)

Something to Remember Me By: Three Tales (1991)

Occasional Pieces (1993)

It All Adds Up: From the Dim Past to the Uncertain Future (1994)

The Actual (1997)

Ravelstein (2000)

Collected Stories (2001)

Preface

This book began as a dissertation in the late 1990s when I was doing my Ph. D. in Shanghai International Studies University under the supervision of Professor Hou Weirui and Professor Yu Jianhua, to whom I would like to express my deepest gratitude for their kind encouragement and academic guidance. It has gone through a long-interrupted revision to make it a concise explanation of Saul Bellow's success as a post-war American novelist with a detailed examination of his literary career as illustrated by his early novels from *Dangling Man* to *Herzog*. With the currently-not-so-honoured humanist critical tradition as the referential framework, the book focuses on the significance of Bellow's consistent thematic concerns and his growth as a conscientious artist characterized by a constant quest for an artistic form appropriate to incorporate his vision of contemporary culture and genuine humanity.

I choose Bellow's six early novels for the study because I obstinately believe that they form an integrated unit of Bellow's artistic development which clearly reveals his effort to re-channel the mainstream American literature represented at that time by Earnest Hemingway and his passionate quest for a proper form and style to communicate his vision of life and humanity. Each of these novels is a fascinating account of the protagonist's strenuous campaign to come to terms with himself during a severe emotional or intellectual crisis, and an exploration of Bellow's fictional world constituted by the six novels surely helps us to get acquainted with the writer's belief in the immortal

human spirit and his intention to revolutionize our consciousness against a horrible modern world of distractions where, according to Bellow, a positivistic, rationalistic world view and modern technocratic civilization are enthusiastically endorsed while tender human feelings and the wisdom of the heart are contemptuously dismissed. Attentive readers can discern Bellow's acute consciousness of this dichotomy between the head and the heart in his six early novels which lucidly demonstrate his search for its reconciliation as is repeatedly suggested by a vision of union and equilibrium at the ends of all these stories. Bellow, in my mind, is a writer with whom we do not have much difficulty falling in love because, throughout his literary creation, he has been encouraging us to brood over a serious question: "What are we truly?" or, to borrow his own summary of the question from his *Herzog*, " [how] to be a man. In a city. In a century of transition. In a mass. Transformed by science. Under organized power. Subject to tremendous control." It is an intensely intriguing essential question although it resists any definite or conclusive answer, and it is beneficial for us to stop our "egg race" occasionally for a while to think about it and to laugh a bit. As Joe Scotchie said in a memoriam to Bellow, " [w]hat Saul Bellow had to say was of great significance. And his wide-ranging works, mixing comedy, high seriousness, and deep reflection among a colourful and full-blooded cast of character will always be an inspiration to those who read them."① Bellow died, but the questing spirit that characterizes his literary creation over such an extensive period of time lives on in his works and will keep on inspiring his readers. This is certainly Bellow's extraordinary gift to all of us.

Writing the book over quite a few years, I have become indebted,

① Joe Scotchie, "Saul Bellow: An Appreciation," *The South Carolina Review* 38. 1 (Fall 2005), p. 61.

in one way or another, to so many people that I do not want to provide a list of names with their specific contributions. Thank you all for all that you have done for me, my teachers, students, friends and family. All of you have done more than I can remember now. But I especially want to thank my teachers and schoolmates in Shanghai International Studies University and my friends and colleagues in Northeast Normal University for their ever-present help and cordial encouragement over all these years. Finally, I want to thank The Fulbright Foundation for the research grant which enabled me to study at University of Chicago for one year and the Northeast Normal University Press for its generosity to publish my crude study as a book.

Content

Introduction

Saul Bellow died. He died at his home in Brookline, Massachusetts, at the age of 89 on April 5, 2005, leaving the world marvelling forever at his talents, energy and numerous enigmas concerning his life and works.

Saul Bellow was born Solomon Bellows in Lachine, Quebec, a working-class town on the outskirts of Montreal. His original birth certificate was lost when Lachine's city hall burned down in the 1920s, but Bellow customarily celebrated his birth date on June 10. Bellow's parents fled Russia in 1913 and settled with relatives in Canada. His boyhood was marked by his family's transient existence and struggle for economic survival. In St. Petersburg Bellow's father, Abraham (Abram), was an importer of Turkish figs and Egyptian onions—a "produce broker"; he spent his Canadian days baking, peddling, jobbing, matchmaking, doing various such stuff and all failed; he was even bootlegging for a time. The family owed their landlord in Montreal ten dollars when they left in 1924 for Chicago, the centre of his fictional universe, where he was to spend most of his life. Saul Bellow was nine years old then.

In Chicago, the future novelist came into his own self, discovered his unique voice and encountered many of the women, the writers and intellectuals, who were to populate his life and novels. With four children to support, Abram worked hard to raise his family, calculating all the time and fancying how much he could have made if only ... But in

his Canadian days, he was never rich enough to release himself from the worries of brooding about whom to pay first: the landlord or their coal supplier. Bellow's mother, Lescha (Liza), was very religious and a devout believer in the gospel of self-improvement. Her husband's frequent failures had only intensified her aspiration for her children, especially her youngest son. She wanted Saul to be a rabbi, like her own father, or a concert violinist, always nagging him to practice. This, to some extent, exemplified the dedication to culture and education of the Jews, poor or rich, and Bellow was a bookish boy who read tremendously when he was not running after his brothers in the street. He read *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, *The Possessed*, *the Encyclopedia Americana*, *Jean Christophe*, the short stories of O'Henry and Maupassant, *The Decameron*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and above all, he read *The Decline of the West*, one of his formative books. In a way, we can say that Bellow committed himself to a life of the mind. In his third novel, *The Adventures of Augie March*, we can notice a record of the progress of his reading although Augie, unlike his creator, did not receive much formal schooling.

Bellow spent much of his life at schools. It was in the schools, according to Bellow himself, that he first met real Americans because he realized that all the kids in the class were treated as Americans, not Jews, not immigrants, not aliens. He remembered all the schools he attended — the Lafayette School, Columbus Elementary School, Sabin Junior High, Tuley High, and delighted in recalling his school experiences, especially his life at Tuley which was intensely literary. He had a group of book-obsessed friends there, Oscar Tarkov, Sam Freifeld, Sidney Harris, Studs Terkel, Dave Peltz, and Isaac Rosenfeld, a Tuley literary star.

In 1933, after high school, the two close friends Bellow and Rosenfeld entered the University of Chicago together but Bellow stayed

there only for two years because he did not enjoy the study of literature as it was taught there and in 1935, he transferred to Northwestern University to work in anthropology and graduated with honours in June, 1937. However, literature was always his primary passion, having innocently made up his mind to be a writer at the age of ten, so he decided to switch to the Department of English at Northwestern for graduate study. But fortunately or unfortunately, he was refused by William Frank Bryan, chairman of the department, who told him that as a Jew and the son of Russian Jews, he might never have the right feeling for Anglo-Saxon traditions and for English words. Much discouraged, he applied for a fellowship in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin and, with the help of his supervisor in anthropology at Northwestern, Melwille J. Herskovitz, he got it and in the fall of 1937, he was off to Wisconsin. But by the end of the first semester, he was convinced that he was not cut out for science. "Every time I worked on my thesis, it turned out to be a story."① His writing had too much style for standard scientific papers. During the Christmas holidays, he went back home to Chicago and never returned to the university.

Besides abandoning his graduate studies, Bellow got married on the afternoon before New Year's Eve 1937. He married Anita Goshkin, the first of his five wives, and moved into his mother-in-law's flat and decided to undertake a hard and risky enterprise — to become a writer, and it took years before he published his first successful book, *Dangling Man*. Bellow's father did not approve of his literary aspirations. He was contemptuous of his son's choice. Bellow's in-laws also regarded him as a "crazy scribbler". His mother must have been

① James Atlas: *Saul Bellow: A Biography* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2000), p. 57.

very supportive but she died when Bellow was 17. In the fall of 1938, Bellow and Anita found an apartment in Hyde Park, and Anita had given up her graduate studies and got a job with the Chicago Relief Administration, delivering welfare checks. Money was scarce and jobs were in short supply. Bellow was lucky to find a part-time job, teaching anthropology and English composition at the Pestalozzi-Froebel Teachers College. In that difficult time, he was a beneficiary of Franklin D. Roosevelt's domestic policies: he was assigned to the Federal Writers' Project, earning 24 dollars a week.

But with the rise of Nazism, the civil war in Spain and a worldwide depression, the 1930s was a time of trouble and conflict, and like most young intellectuals in the 1930s, Bellow was also engaged in "revolutionary politics" of his day, sincerely or perfunctorily. In college, he was a Trotskyist. "We belong the movement, we were faithful to Leninism and could expound its historical lessons and describe Stalin's crimes. My closest friends and I were not, however, activists; we were writers."① What really mattered to them, according to Bellow himself, was the personal nourishment they took from their readings of Dostoyevsky, Herman Melville, Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos and William Faulkner. Edmund Wilson was the most respected literary and intellectual figure of the time in America and his *To the Finland Station*, in which he characterized the revolution Trotsky hoped to bring about, was a most influential book of the period. But besides revolutionary thought, Wilson also introduced young American intellectuals and college students to James Joyce and

① Saul Bellow: "Writers, Intellectuals, Politics: Mainly Reminiscence," *It All Adds Up: From the Dim Past to the Uncertain Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 100.

Marcel Proust. ①

Bellow gradually drifted away from Marxist politics. Being not at all interested in collectivism, he found that politics poorly satisfied his hunger for life's experiences, the intellectual, aesthetic, and sensual pleasures life has to offer. He had his own singular destiny to follow: to be a writer. In 1940, he unexpectedly came into some money: five hundred dollars, the payout of his mother's insurance company seven years after her death. Even in grave, the mother did her youngest son a favour: the policy was in Bellow's name. Propelled by his reading of D. H. Lawrence's works and his desire to meet his revolutionary hero, Trotsky, who was living in Mexico City then in exile, Bellow and Anita quit their jobs and left Chicago in June. In New York, the couple boarded a Greyhound bus for a long journey south. They visited Mexico and stayed there the whole summer. Bellow wrote but did not really get anywhere. He went to Mexico City to meet Trotsky, but when a friend finally arranged for him to visit Trotsky's residence on August 21, he read that afternoon in the newspaper that Trotsky had been murdered the day before. When the summer was over, Bellow and Anita went back to Chicago.

After his return to Chicago, his economic conditions were worse and he was desperate to sell a story and get recognized as a writer. He worked hard and sent his stories out to magazines, only to have them returned, but he kept trying. His first published story, "Two Morning Monologues" appeared in the May-June 1941 issue of *Partisan Review*, a magazine of fairly small circulation, but Bellow was its faithful reader. One year later, there appeared "The Mexican General", which

① Bellow met Wilson in July 1939 when the latter taught for the summer term at the invitation of the University of Chicago English department. Bellow attended his Dickens seminar and admired him very much.

recounts the story of Trotsky's murder, and in the same year, he published another story "Mr. Katz, Mr. Cohen, and Cosmology" in an obscure quarterly. The year after that, *Partisan Review* printed a long excerpt of *Dangling Man*, his first real success as a novelist. From then on, Bellow set out to become a great American writer and was to write a dozen novels and numerous stories.

His first novel *Dangling Man* earned him a name as a writer: it had been reviewed by eminent critics such as Diana Trilling, Irving Kristol, Delmore Schwartz and Edmund Wilson, and even today, many people still regards the "dangling man" as the prototype of the Bellow hero, but the novel did not change his financial situation and he had to support himself by teaching and doing other odd jobs. In April 16, 1944, Anita gave birth to a boy: a son of Bellow's first marriage, Gregory. By the summer of 1944, the tide of World War II had turned in the Allies' favour but men of Bellow's age were still being drafted in America. Bellow was hard at work on his second book *The Victim* while awaiting his fate, or dangling.

In 1947, *The Victim* was published and since then, Bellow has always been identified as a Jewish writer in spite of his protests against and denials to this Jewish label, claiming that he is an American writer who happens to be a Jew. For Bellow, the fact of his being a Jew was both limiting and inspiring as we can notice in what he told Chirantan Kulshresha in an interview: "Your mind takes its color from this and it is one of the great gifts of your life. ... It's part of the power of your imagination by now and so you should cherish it as such. Not as belief, not to defend against rational argument or by rational argument, but simply as a fact of your life. For it is a fact of your life. That's how I view my own Jewishness. That's where the great power of it comes from. It doesn't come from the fact that I studied the *Talmud*, or anything of that sort. I never belonged to an orthodox congregation. It

simply comes from the fact at a most susceptible time of my life I was wholly Jewish. That's a gift, a piece of good fortune with which one doesn't quarrel. It is what exists in feeling that matters. But what people ascribe to you — well, they ascribe all kinds of strange things to you. One might just as well forget about that."①

His Jewishness is doubtlessly "a piece of good fortune," and another piece of good fortune is the fact that he was born in an immigrant family and grew up in Chicago, the rising youthful, wild giant at the beginning of the 20th century, the hog butcher of the world, a magic circus with its opulent railroads, hard-boiled magnates, fun politicians, enterprising criminals, and what not. For Bellow, Chicago "stands for something in American life, but what that something is has never been altogether clear."② Above all, Chicago is the setting of many of Augie's adventures.

Bellow started work on his hall-marked and fully-American novel *The Adventures of Augie March* in Paris, the classically beautiful city. In April 1948, Bellow finally got the Guggenheim fellowship at his third try, and in the fall he brought his family there and he travelled a lot over Europe. Living abroad as an outsider tends to be liberating for everybody and the same might be also true of Saul Bellow. Anyway, Bellow started to let himself loose in his third novel and created a most exciting book that is still delightfully attractive today. Bellow is not considered an autobiographical writer, but most of his leading characters bear a distinct resemblance to their creator. From the very beginning, his novels construct their own picture of their creator, and

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① Chirantan Kulshrestha: "A Conversation with Saul Bellow," in Gloria L. Cronin and Ben Siegel (eds.) *Conversations with Saul Bellow* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), p. 92.

② Saul Bellow: "Chicago: the City that Was, the City that Is," *It All Adds Up: From the Dim Past to the Uncertain Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 240.

his Jewish heritage, his several divorces and his preoccupations are shared by many of his characters, and the eponymous hero of *The Adventures of Augie March* is, without any doubt, the most explicitly autobiographical one, mingling fiction with many facts and experiences in the author's early life. It confirmed Bellow's own claim that fiction was higher autobiography. Bellow returned to the USA in 1950 and lived in New York City, teaching evening courses at New York University, reviewing books, writing articles and working on his fiction.

The beginning years of the 1950s were a trying time for Bellow. He was approaching forty, still a threadbare artist virtually unknown to the general public and always short of cash. To make things worse, his first marriage was breaking up. Separated from Anita and Gregory, he lived a bachelor's life: staying sometimes at friends' houses or sharing apartments with others. He said he longed for a home and family but it seemed that he really could not tolerate the marital bond. There was always an inexorable need in him to go off and explore the world on his own. It is probably no exaggeration to say that he was actually pursuing his fantasy of perfect marriage and perfect wife. His five marriages and four divorces might help to convince us about that. All the same, Bellow was a happy soul, and it never took him long to find someone else. He was divorced from Anita in 1954; in 1956, he married Alexandra Tsachacbasov, his second wife, and by 1960, they were divorced; he married Susan Glassman, his third wife, in 1961, but the third marriage lasted even shorter, three years only. A decade later after his third divorce, he met Alexandra Ionescu Tulcea, a mathematics professor at Northwestern University, and they got married in November 1974. All hoped this marriage would endure, but unfortunately, his fourth marriage also ended bitterly in 1985. But for all that, Bellow did not give up his pursuit for perfect marriage and