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剑桥美国小说新论·19
(英文影印版)

New Essays on

Seize the Day

《只争朝夕》新论

Michael P. Kramer 编



北京大学出版社
PEKING UNIVERSITY PRESS

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重庆师大图书馆



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS



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著作权合同登记 图字: 01-2006-7210 号

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

《只争朝夕》新论 = New Essays on *Seize the Day* / 克雷默
(Kramer, M. P.) 编. — 北京: 北京大学出版社, 2007. 1

(剑桥美国文学新论 · 19)

ISBN 978-7-301-11359-2

I. 只… II. 克… III. 长篇小说—文学研究—美国—现代—英文 IV. 1712.074

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2006)第 148609 号

Originally published by Cambridge University Press in (1998)

This reprint edition is published with the permission of the Syndicate of the Press of the University of Cambridge, Cambridge, England.

THIS EDITION IS LICENSED FOR DISTRIBUTION AND SALE IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA ONLY, EXCLUDING HONG KONG, TAIWAN AND MACAO AND MAY NOT BE DISTRIBUTED AND SOLD ELSEWHERE.

书 名: *New Essays on Seize the Day*

《只争朝夕》新论

著作责任者: Michael P. Kramer 编

组稿编辑: 张 冰

责任编辑: 胡 娜

标准书号: ISBN 978-7-301-11359-2/I · 0843

出版发行: 北京大学出版社

地 址: 北京市海淀区成府路 205 号 100871

网 址: <http://www.pup.cn> 电子信箱: zbing@pup.pku.edu.cn

电 话: 邮购部 62752015 发行部 62750672 编辑部 62767347

出版部 62754962

印 刷 者: 三河市新世纪印务有限公司

经 销 者: 新华书店

650 毫米×980 毫米 16 开本 8.75 印张 145 千字

2007 年 1 月第 1 版 2007 年 12 月第 2 次印刷

定 价: 20.00 元

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举报电话: (010)62752024 电子信箱: fd@pup.pku.edu.cn

导 读

北京大学英语系教授 陶洁

近年来,美国文学在我国很受欢迎。大专院校英语系纷纷开设美国文学选读和专题课,学生从中学到的大部分内容是美国小说。不仅如此,在本科毕业论文、硕士论文或博士论文方面,学生所选题材也大多为关于某部美国小说或某个美国小说家。然而,我们的学生往往热衷理论而对作品或作家缺乏深入细致的了解和分析。他们往往先大谈理论规则,然后罗列一些例证,不能很好地把理论和文本融会贯通,恰如其分地结合在一起。在这种情况下,我们需要一些好的参考资料来帮助学生更好地认识和理解他们在阅读或研究的作品和作家。《剑桥美国小说新论》正是这样一套优秀的参考书。

这套丛书的负责人是曾经主编过《哥伦比亚美国文学史》的艾默里·埃利奥特教授,并且由英国剑桥大学出版社在上世纪80年代中期开始陆续出书,至今仍在发行并出版新书,目前已有五十多种,不仅出平装本还有精装本。一套书发行二十多年还有生命力,估计还会继续发行,主要因为它确实从学生的需要出发,深受他们和教师的喜爱。

《剑桥美国小说新论》的编排方式比较统一。根据主编制定的原则,每本书针对一部美国文学历史上有名望的大作家的一本经典小说,论述者都是研究这位作家的知名学者。开篇是一位权威专家的论述,主要论及作品的创作过程、出版历史、当年的评价以及小说发表以来不同时期的主要评论和阅读倾向。随后是四到五篇论述从不同角度用不同的批评方法对作品进行分析和阐释。这些文章并非信手拈来,而是专门为这套丛书撰写的,运用的理论都比较新,其中不乏颇有



新意的真知灼见。书的最后是为学生进一步学习和研究而提供的参考书目。由此可见,编书的学者们为了帮助学生确实煞费苦心,努力做到尽善尽美。

这五十多种书有早期美国文学家库珀的《最后的莫希干人》,也有当代试验小说大师品钦的《拍卖第49号》和厄普代克那曾被《时代》杂志评为1923年以来100部最佳小说之一的《兔子,跑吧!》;有我们比较熟悉的麦尔维尔的《白鲸》,也有我们还不太了解的他的《漂亮水手》;有中国学生很喜欢的海明威的长篇小说《永别了,武器》,令人想不到的是还有一本论述他所有的短篇小说的集子。有些大作家如亨利·詹姆斯、威廉·福克纳等都有两三部作品入选,但它们都分别有专门的集子。丛书当然涉及已有定论的大作家,包括黑人和白人作家(可惜还没有华裔作家的作品),但也包括20世纪70年代妇女运动中发掘出来的如凯特·肖邦的《觉醒》和佐拉·尼尔·赫斯顿的《他们眼望上苍》,甚至还有我国读者很熟悉的斯托夫人的《汤姆叔叔的小屋》。当年这部小说曾经风靡美国,在全世界都有一定的影响,后来被贬为“政治宣传”作品,从此在美国文学史上销声匿迹。70年代后随着要求扩大文学经典中女性和少数族裔作家的呼声日益高涨,人们才开始重新评价这部作品,分析它对日后妇女作家的影响、对黑人形象的塑造,甚至它在美国文学的哥特式传统中的地位等等。

这样的例子还有很多,例如威廉·迪恩·豪威尔斯和他的《赛拉斯·拉帕姆的发迹》。以前人们只肯定他在发展现实主义文学和理论方面的贡献,对他的作品除了《赛拉斯·拉帕姆的发迹史》评价都不太高。但在这本新论文集子里编者对已有定论进行挑战,强调豪威尔斯的小说、他的现实主义跟当时的社会经济文化现状有很大的关系。他的小说既有其文学形式,又是一种社会力量。另外一位19世纪新英格兰作家萨拉·奥尼·裘威特过去一向被看成是乡土作家,现在学者们用女性主义观点强调她的《尖枞树之乡》对美国文学的贡献,分析当年的种族、民族主义和文学市场对她写作的影响。用封底宣传语言来说,这本集子对美国文学研究、女性主义批评理论和美国研究等方面都会引起很大的兴趣。

还有一本书似乎在我们国家很少有人提起过——亨利·罗思的《就说是睡着了》。此书在 20 世纪 30 年代曾经风靡一时,此后长期销声匿迹,60 年代又再度受到推崇。现在这部小说则是上面提到的《时代》杂志 100 部优秀小说中的一部,被认为是上个世纪头 50 年里最为出色的美国犹太小说、最优秀的现代主义小说之一。评论家认为集子里的文章采用心理分析、社会历史主义等批评方法探讨了有关移民、族裔和文化归属等多方面的问题。

这套集子里还出现了令人信服的新论点。很长时间内海明威一直被认为是讨厌女人的大男子主义者。但在关于他的短篇小说的集子里,作者通过分析《在密执安北部》,令人信服地证明海明威其实对妇女充满同情。不仅如此,这一论断还瓦解了海明威在《太阳照样升起》中充分暴露他的厌女症的定论。

然而,作者们并不侈谈理论或玩弄理论名词,所有的论断都是既以一定的理论为基础,又对文本进行深入的分析;既把理论阐述得深入浅出,又把作品分析得丝丝入扣,让人不由得信服。他们能够做到这一点完全是因为他们了解学生的水平和需要。

我认为《剑桥美国小说新论》是一套很好的参考书。北京大学出版社购买版权,出版这套书是个有益于外国文学研究教学的决定。

Series Editor's Preface

In literary criticism the last twenty-five years have been particularly fruitful. Since the rise of the New Criticism in the 1950s, which focused attention of critics and readers upon the text itself – apart from history, biography, and society – there has emerged a wide variety of critical methods which have brought to literary works a rich diversity of perspectives: social, historical, political, psychological, economic, ideological, and philosophical. While attention to the text itself, as taught by the New Critics, remains at the core of contemporary interpretation, the widely shared assumption that works of art generate many different kinds of interpretations has opened up possibilities for new readings and new meanings.

Before this critical revolution, many works of American literature had come to be taken for granted by earlier generations of readers as having an established set of recognized interpretations. There was a sense among many students that the canon was established and that the larger thematic and interpretative issues had been decided. The task of the new reader was to examine the ways in which elements such as structure, style, and imagery contributed to each novel's acknowledged purpose. But recent criticism has brought these old assumptions into question and has thereby generated a wide variety of original, and often quite surprising, interpretations of the classics, as well as of rediscovered works such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, which has only recently entered the canon of works that scholars and critics study and that teachers assign their students.

The aim of The American Novel Series is to provide students of American literature and culture with introductory critical

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New Essays on Seize the Day

guides to American novels and other important texts now widely read and studied. Usually devoted to a single work, each volume begins with an introduction by the volume editor, a distinguished authority on the text. The introduction presents details of the work's composition, publication history, and contemporary reception, as well as a survey of the major critical trends and readings from first publication to the present. This overview is followed by four or five original essays, specifically commissioned from senior scholars of established reputation and from outstanding younger critics. Each essay presents a distinct point of view, and together they constitute a forum of interpretative methods and of the best contemporary ideas on each text.

It is our hope that these volumes will convey the vitality of current critical work in American literature, generate new insights and excitement for students of American literature, and inspire new respect for and new perspectives upon these major literary texts.

Emory Elliott
University of California, Riverside

剑桥美国小说新论

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I

Introduction

The Vanishing Jew: On Teaching Bellow's *Seize the Day* as Ethnic Fiction

MICHAEL P. KRAMER

The secular Jew is a figment; when a Jew becomes a secular person he is no longer a Jew. This is especially true for makers of literature.

– Cynthia Ozick¹

Even when he succeeds in detaching himself fairly completely from Jewish life, [the Jewish writer] continues to exhibit all of the restless, agonizing rootlessness that is the Jew's birthmark.

– Irving Howe²

This whole Jewish writer business is sheer invention – by the media, by critics and by “scholars.”

– Saul Bellow³

A FEW YEARS AGO, visiting at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, I taught *Seize the Day* in an introductory undergraduate course on “The American Novel.” The students, mostly native and immigrant Israeli Jews, had already read a number of “standard” American works – Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* – and we were closing the course with two “ethnic” texts, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (which we had just finished) and Bellow's short novel. The idea was to acquaint these Israeli students not only with selected works of American fiction but also with the culture of the American academy, to recreate for them the multiculturalist challenge that has invigorated American literary study in recent years, leading us to reformulate canons and, even more important, to re-examine critical assumptions about the relationship between culture and imagination. The strategy for discussing *Seize the Day* was to begin with the series of familiar Americanist oppositions



that we had already raised in relation to the other novels – romance and realism, past and present, success and failure, material and spiritual, alienation and commitment, individual and community – and then to proceed to the “Jewish” question, to see if and how it changed our view of the novel.

I have to admit that I recall very little about the first part of the discussion. I suppose it went predictably. No doubt we compared Tommy Wilhelm’s spiritual struggle to that of Hemingway’s Jake Barnes, his financial fall to that of Howells’ Lapham, his “drowning” to that of Melville’s Pip. And so on. A lively discussion with a group of bright and interested students, locating Tommy in a history of American literary characters and *Seize the Day* in “the great tradition” of American novels.⁴

But I do remember well what happened when I asked, “Is this a work of ethnic literature? Is this a *Jewish* as well as an American novel?” The students were uniformly, resolutely skeptical. Some even seemed surprised at the question. They knew, to be sure, that Bellow himself was Jewish. They realized as well that all the characters in the story were nominally Jewish – Adler, Rubin, Perls, Rappaport, Tamkin. Most noticed the passing reference to Yom Kippur and caught the few allusions to the Holocaust. And yes, Tommy’s grandfather called him by the Yiddish name Velvel. Still, they judged, *Seize the Day* was not a Jewish novel, at least not in the way *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was African American. Hurston plunges the reader into a fictional world in which ethnicity is palpable, a world rich in Black dialect and folkways. But the ethnicity of *Seize the Day* seemed to them at most incidental.

Perhaps I should not have been surprised at the response. After all, most students (and teachers, too) judge the ethnicity of literary works in a straightforward, no-nonsense way. They usually employ two simple criteria. First, the author must belong to the ethnic group in question. Second, the work must display recognizable ethnic content: most important, the ethnic identity of the characters should be clear. Saul Bellow’s Jewishness is a genealogical fact. And so, in a fictional sense, is Tommy Wilhelm’s. However, Tommy doesn’t look Jewish or sound Jewish. He doesn’t speak Hebrew or Yiddish. He doesn’t eat Jewish food,

and he has a non-Jewish girlfriend. (It's unclear whether his wife is Jewish.) He *forgets* Yom Kippur and recalls the Holocaust only in passing. He only vaguely recalls the Jewish prayer for the dead. And he never mentions Israel. The first time a substantive Jewish issue is raised in relation to Tommy – a full two-thirds of the way into the novel, Dr. Tamkin asks him whether he has experienced antisemitism as a traveling salesman – he responds, “I can’t afford to notice.”⁵ A vague sense of longing (or belonging) remains, but one would be pressed even to call it nostalgia. He does not even actively *reject* Judaism. The reason he drops his Jewish family name is not so much to escape Jewishness as a father “who has no religion” (86). “By definition,” writes Sam Girgus, and my students would certainly agree, “the ethnic novel dramatizes group identity and connection.”⁶ But Tommy’s Jewishness doesn’t even seem to be at issue. It is only – emphatically *only* – a genealogical fact. So from the students’ point of view, the novel had no ethnic content. Hence, it could not be considered Jewish.

Yet I was taken aback by the students’ reaction. Bellow, after all, is *supposed* to be a Jewish novelist. He’s *supposed* to write Jewish fiction. Since his first appearance on the American literary scene in the mid-forties, Bellow has been labeled and celebrated as such. (Much to his chagrin: “People who make labels,” he has commented, “should be in the gumming business.”⁷) Critic after critic has commented – often with unbridled enthusiasm – on the Jewish influences on Bellow’s work, the Jewishness of his characters and settings, of his language, of his thought and vision. Indeed, for many, he is the quintessential Jewish-American novelist. Alfred Kazin, Bellow’s contemporary and long-time admirer, assures us that Bellow is “fascinated and held by the texture of Jewish experience,” that the fascination “follow[s] from some deep cut in [his] mind,” and that he thus “has been able to personify the Jew in all his *mental* existence, to fit ancient preconceptions to our urban landscape, to create the suffering, reaching, grasping, struggling mind of contemporary Jews.”⁸ L. H. Goldman, co-editor of the *Saul Bellow Journal*, even asks us to believe, not only that “Saul Bellow’s perspective is unmistakably Jewish,” but that “the philosophy of Judaism is

part and parcel of [Bellow's] very being and manifests itself in the kind of writing he produces."⁹

Certainly there are other approaches to Bellow's work. Scholars have hardly restricted themselves to questions of Bellow's Jewishness – as evidenced in this volume by Sam Girgus, a scholar with impressive Jewish-ist and ethnicist credentials, who nevertheless contributes an ethnicity-neutral, psycho-cinematic reading of *Seize the Day*. (Intriguingly, however, Girgus does turn at the end of his essay to a description of elderly *Jewish* bodies in "an uptown New York Auschwitz.") And some who do deal with the ethnic question – from Maxwell Geismar writing in 1958 to Emily Budick in these pages – find his Jewishness (such as it is) neither impressive nor appealing.¹⁰ Still, I found the chasm between critical claims and student perceptions puzzling, to say the least. How could *Seize the Day* be both "a powerful Jewish work" and hardly Jewish at all?¹¹

I decided to press the issue of palpable ethnicity, choosing one of the scenes toward the end of the novella in which Jewishness is presented clearly and directly. "What, then," I asked, "do you make of this passage?" I picked up my well-thumbed copy of the book and read aloud:

But Tamkin was gone. Or rather, it was he himself who was carried from the street into the chapel. The pressure ended inside, where it was dark and cool. The flow of fan-driven air dried his face, which he wiped hard with his handkerchief to stop the slight salt itch. He gave a sigh when he heard the organ notes that stirred and breathed from the pipes and he saw people in the pews. Men in formal clothes and black Homburgs strode softly back and forth on the cork floor, up and down the center aisle. The white of the stained glass was like mother-of-pearl, the blue of the Star of David like velvet ribbon.¹²

Why, I asked, at this crucial, dramatic moment in the narrative, as Wilhelm is about to undergo *something* – catharsis, revelation, communion, breakdown – does Bellow insist on placing that Star of David in full view of hero and reader?

Silence. I noticed the students looking at each other, puzzled. Had they missed the reference? Were they rethinking their assumptions? Finally, one student raised her hand and said, "My

book doesn't say that. My last line is different." Murmuring, heads shaking in assent. I asked her to read her version. "The white of the stained glass was like mother-of-pearl, *with the blue of a great star fluid*, like velvet ribbon" (116, emphasis added).

Serendipity. A quick flip to copyright pages, and, in bare outline, a textual history emerged. My edition – the only one I had ever used – contained the original *Partisan Review* version of 1956, theirs, a version "with author's corrections," first published in 1975. Bellow, we discovered, had revised the text of *Seize the Day*. And he had muted the presence of what is arguably the most recognizable and powerful emblem of Jewishness in modern times.

It was *as if* the Star of David had disappeared before our very eyes. At that pedagogic moment it *seemed* that the students' initial impression had been confirmed by literary-historical fact. (Both Hana Wirth-Nesher and Emily Budick offer in their essays in this volume strong, substantive readings of Bellow's revision. I deal here only with impressions and classroom dynamics.) We might try to explain Bellow's modification in simple aesthetic terms – considering Tommy's confused, anxious state of mind at this point in the narrative, the substitution of subtle description for direct naming makes psychological sense – but it nevertheless *seemed* at the moment that when he revised the text Bellow made a not particularly Jewish story even *less* particularly Jewish, less palpably ethnic.

I realize that these students were not typical in their attitudes toward Jewishness, that they were, in the eighteenth-century sense of the term, *interested*. After all, "Jewish" was the fabric out of which the national life of these students was woven – their language, their sense of history, their calendar. *They* could not forget Yom Kippur because, whether or not they personally fast or go to synagogue, the State officially recognizes Yom Kippur as a national holiday: Schools, businesses, public transportation, all shut down. They couldn't help but recall the Holocaust when, every year on Holocaust and Heroism Memorial Day, sirens sound throughout the country and millions of people stand for a moment in solemn silence, mourning the six million dead. Moreover, this was a group of students keenly sensitive to the appear-

ance – and disappearance – of the Star of David. For them, it was not only a religious but a potent political symbol. Most had served under it, in defense of a state whose very existence was an emphatic expression of unembarrassed, uncontingent Jewishness. Whatever their political or religious beliefs, they were (most of them) Jews in a Jewish state. They understood, to be sure, that “Jewish” could have many different meanings, that it could be – that it *was* – a matter of debate, of confrontation: Israeli society is entrenched in a culture war, not against its Arab neighbors but an internecine war, Jew against Jew. Indeed, in Jerusalem in particular, they were confronted daily with many contending versions of “Jewish,” religious, cultural, political. But in Israel, all Jews – secular and religious, hawks and doves, Ashkenazi and Sepharadi – identify themselves *deliberately* as Jews. Tommy Wilhelm’s secularity was another story, however: His evanescent Jewishness, his attenuated relationship to religious ritual and national fate, just didn’t seem Jewish to them in any substantial way. “Jewish” could not be its absence. From an Israeli point of view, Tommy seemed rather to exemplify the antithesis of Jewishness. He was the assimilated American Jew, a familiar, quasi-mythic figure of Jewish demographic studies – disaffected, intermarrying, disappearing. (“There are probably few more assimilated Jewish characters in American literature,” writes Emily Budick, “than Tommy Wilhelm.”) He was Jewishly, to borrow Cynthia Ozick’s term, a “figment.” The disappearance of the Star of David seemed to symbolize for them the sociological phenomenon of the vanishing American Jew.¹³

To ask Israeli Jews to evaluate the Jewishness of a fictional American character or author is to risk blurring the distinction between nationality and ethnicity. The truth is, however, that student reactions to *Seize the Day* are similarly skeptical in the United States. In California, students have wondered about, and even challenged, my inclusion of the novel in courses on Jewish-American literature, not because they share the Israeli sense of Jewishness, but because they also believe that ethnicity should be palpable. In our multiculturalist times, we tend to prefer our ethnic fare well-seasoned with definitive markers of cultural difference: the ghetto, the barrio, the reservation; Yiddish, Spanish,

Black English; a yarmulke, a kimono; klezmer, jazz, salsa; knishes, black-eyed peas, fried rice – markers that distinguish ethnic characters from their nonethnic “American” compatriots. We read ethnic literature, we have revised our canons, because we recognize, respect, and value the differences among peoples. We *expect* group differences and want them to be clearly manifest in the texts produced by group members. Why else study ethnic literature *as* ethnic literature? So when those expectations are not met, we are frustrated, perhaps a bit offended. And *Seize the Day* seems to offer very little of these sorts of otherness. Bellow does not cater to these tastes.

Indeed, he actively discourages them, both in general and, especially, in regard to himself. He bemoans the “ethnic protectionism” of the contemporary academy, regarding it as inhibiting freedom of thought and constraining freedom of expression. (He has written an adulatory preface to Allan Bloom’s controversial, anti-multiculturalist critique of the academy, *The Closing of the American Mind*.) And he has always been rather edgy about being considered a Jewish writer, calling the label “an implied put down.”¹⁴ Not that he denies or belittles either cultural differences or the *fact* of his Jewishness. “I’m well aware,” he has announced time and again, “of being Jewish.”¹⁵ He claims that he is painfully conscious of what that identity brings with it, particularly in the twentieth century. “Many have tried to rid themselves in one way or another of this dreadful historic load, by assimilation or other means,” he has said, “but I myself have not been tempted.”¹⁶ Still, he refuses to accept ethnicity as a sufficient definition. His soul, he has written, “does not feel comfortably accommodated” in “the Jewish-writer category.” To be sure, most of his characters, as in *Seize the Day*, are at least nominally Jewish, and many others, as in *Herzog* (1964) and “The Old System” (1967), more palpably so. He has written one book explicitly concerning antisemitism (*The Victim*, 1947) and one about the Holocaust (*Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, 1970). He has translated stories from Yiddish (Sholom Aleichem’s “Eternal Life” and Isaac Bashevis Singer’s “Gimpel the Fool,” both 1953) and edited *Great Jewish Short Stories* (1963). He has written journalistic accounts of the Six Day War and of the Begin-Sadat peace treaty