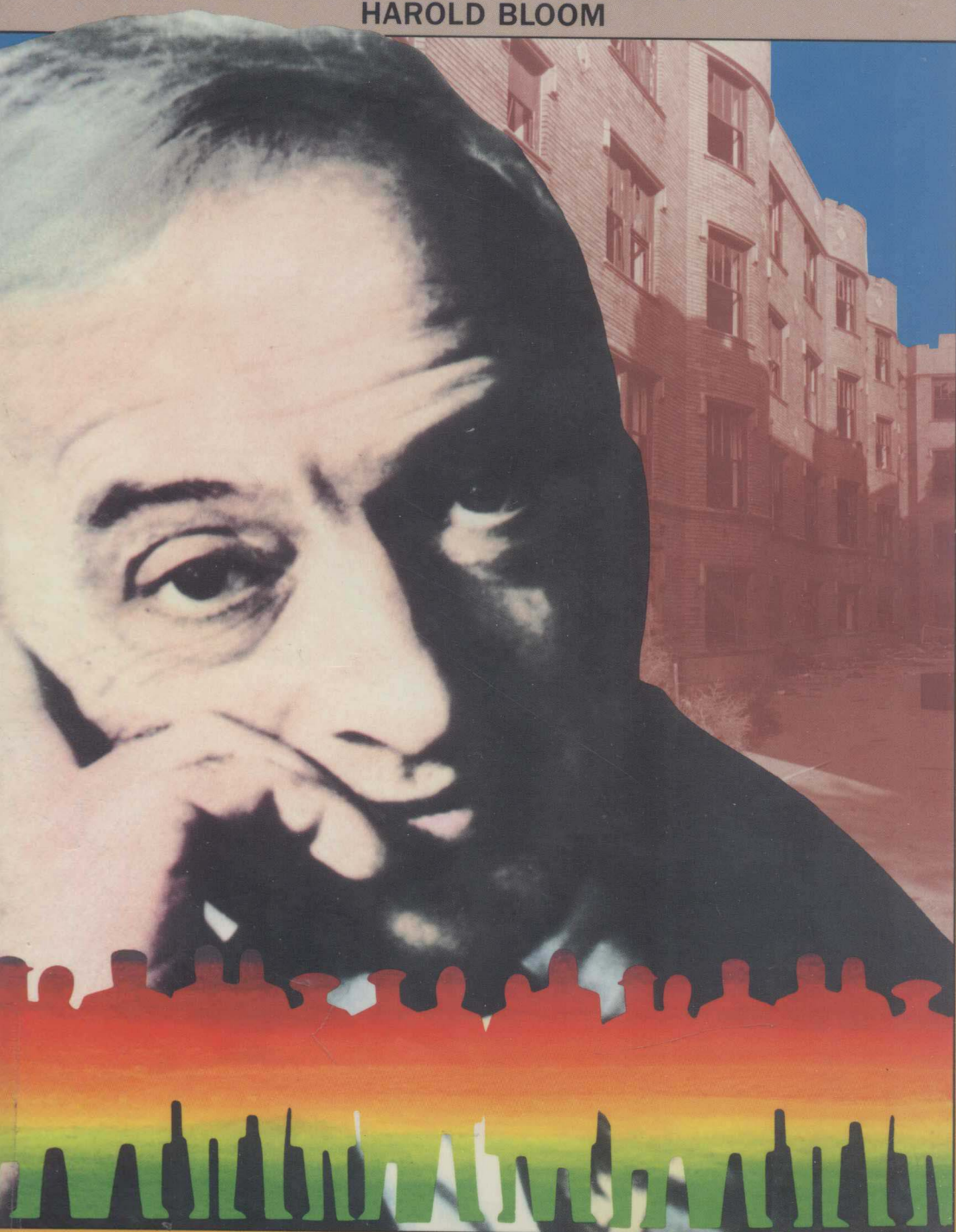


Modern Critical Views

SAUL BELLOW

Edited and with an introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



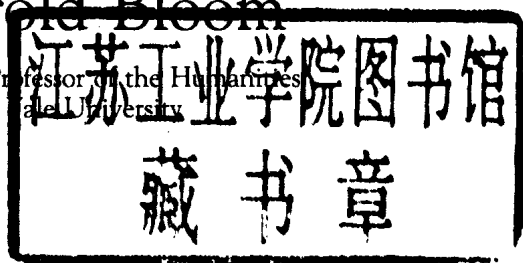
Modern Critical Views

SAUL BELLOW

Edited with an introduction by

Harold Bloom

Sterling Professor of the Humanities
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THE COVER:

Saul Bellow is depicted in the desolate urban context of his *The Dean's December*, which ambiguously compounds the darker aspects of Chicago and of Eastern European urban blight.—H.B.

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Editor's Note

This volume gathers together more than three decades of criticism devoted to the fiction of Saul Bellow. Because much of the best of that criticism has been in the form of book reviews, there are relatively brief reviews here by Robert Penn Warren, Irving Howe, John Bayley, John Hollander and Cynthia Ozick. There are also critical essays, or chapters of longer studies, by Richard Chase, Daniel Hughes, Tony Tanner, John Jacob Clayton, Earl Rovit, Gilead Morahg, David Kerner, Alvin B. Kernan, Jeanne Braham and Daniel Fuchs. I have also included excerpts from longer pieces by Frank McConnell and Malcolm Bradbury. Together with my "Introduction," they provide eighteen very varied perspectives upon the American novelist of most significance in the period between Faulkner and Pynchon.

This book is arranged chronologically, and thereby demonstrates something of the evolving shape of Bellow criticism, from early emphases upon the ideological stances of Bellow and the central figures of his novels, through an increasing preoccupation with his and their inner conflicts and dilemmas, on to a more recent series of attempts to contextualize his work in the traditions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature. Though no broad agreements have emerged in critical judgment, there does seem to be a common awareness both of Bellow's essential and possibly permanent place in those traditions, and of limitations in his work that make ultimate judgments problematic. What seems clearest is his achievement in comic invention and narrative force. What seems unsettled may have as much to do with his cultural polemics as with the aesthetic achievement of his fiction. Since he is very much still at work, even thirty years of criticism represents only an introductory exploration of his novels and stories.

Contents

Editor's Note.....	viii
Introduction..... <i>Harold Bloom</i>	1
The Man with No Commitments..... <i>Robert Penn Warren</i> ..	9
The Adventures of Saul Bellow..... <i>Richard Chase</i>	13
Reality and the Hero..... <i>Daniel Hughes</i>	25
Odysseus, Flat on His Back..... <i>Irving Howe</i>	45
The Prisoner of Perception..... <i>Tony Tanner</i>	53
Alienation and Masochism..... <i>John Jacob Clayton</i>	65
By Way of Mr. Sammler..... <i>John Bayley</i>	87
<i>To Jerusalem and Back</i> <i>John Hollander</i>	97
Saul Bellow and the Terms of Our Contract..... <i>Frank McConnell</i>	101
Saul Bellow and the Concept of the Survivor..... <i>Earl Rovit</i>	115
Saul Bellow and Changing History..... <i>Malcolm Bradbury</i> ...	129
The Art of Dr. Tamkin..... <i>Gilead Morahg</i>	147
The Incomplete Dialectic of <i>Humboldt's Gift</i> <i>David Kerner</i>	161
<i>Humboldt's Gift</i> <i>Alvin B. Kernan</i>	179
Reality Instructors..... <i>Jeanne Braham</i>	195
Saul Bellow and the Example of Dostoevsky..... <i>Daniel Fuchs</i>	211
Farcical Combat in a Busy World..... <i>Cynthia Ozick</i>	235
Chronology	243
Contributors	245
Bibliography	247
Acknowledgments	249
Index	251

Introduction

I

By general critical agreement, Saul Bellow is the strongest American novelist of his generation, presumably with Norman Mailer as his nearest rival. What makes this canonical judgment a touch problematic is that the indisputable achievement does not appear to reside in any single book. Bellow's principal works are: *The Adventures of Augie March*, *Herzog*, *Humboldt's Gift*, and in a briefer compass, *Seize the Day*. The earlier novels, *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, seem now to be period pieces, while *Henderson the Rain King* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* share the curious quality of not being quite worthy of two figures so memorable as Henderson and Mr. Sammler. *The Dean's December* is a drab book, its dreariness unredeemed by Bellow's nearly absent comic genius.

Herzog, still possessing the exuberance of *Augie March*, while anticipating the tragi-comic sophistication of *Humboldt's Gift*, as of now seems to be Bellow's best and most representative novel. And yet its central figure remains a wavering representation, compared to some of the subsidiary male characters, and its women seem the wish-fulfillments, negative as well as positive, of Herzog and his creator. This seems true of almost all of Bellow's fiction: a Dickensian gusto animates a fabulous array of secondary and minor personalities, while at the center a colorful but shadowy consciousness is hedged in by women who do not persuade us, though evidently once they persuaded him.

In some sense, the canonical status of Bellow is already assured, even if the indubitable book is still to come. Bellow's strengths may not have come together to form a masterwork, but he is hardly the first novelist of real eminence whose books may be weaker as aggregates than in their component parts or aspects. His stylistic achievement is beyond dispute, as are his humor, his narrative inventiveness, and his astonishing inner ear, whether for monologue or dialogue. (Perhaps his greatest gift is for creating subsidiary and minor characters of grotesque splendor, sublime in their vivacity, intensity and capacity to surprise.) They may be caricatures, yet their vitality seems permanent: Einhorn, Clem Tembow, Bateshaw, Valentine Gersbach, Sandor Himmelstein, Von Humboldt Fleisher, Can-

tabile, Alec Szathmar. Alas, compared to them, the narrator-heroes, Augie, Herzog, and Citrine, are diffuse beings, possibly because Bellow cannot disengage from them, despite heroic efforts and revisions. I remember *Augie March* for Einhorn, *Herzog* for Gersbach, *Humboldt's Gift* for Humboldt, and even that last preference tends to throw off-center an apprehension of the novel. Augie March and Herzog narrate and speak with tang and eloquence, yet they themselves are less memorable than what they say. Citrine, more subdued in his language, fades yet more quickly into the continuum of Bellow's urban cosmos. This helps compound the aesthetic mystery of Bellow's achievement. (His heroes are superb observers, worthy of their Whitmanian heritage.) What they lack is Whitman's Real Me or Me Myself, or else they are blocked from expressing it.

II

Few novelists have ever surpassed Bellow at openings and closings:

I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent. But a man's character is his fate, says Heraclitus, and in the end there isn't any way to disguise the nature of the knocks by acoustical work on the door or gloving the knuckles.

. . . Look at me, going everywhere! Why, I am a sort of Columbus of those near-at-hand and believe you come to them in this immediate *terra incognita* that spreads out in every gaze. I may well be a flop at this line of endeavor. Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America.

The end and the start cunningly interlace, very much in the mode of *Song of Myself*, or of the first and last chapters of Emerson's *Nature*. Augie too is an American Transcendentalist, a picaresque quester for the god within the self. *Ethos* is the *Daimon*, both passages say, with Augie as *ethos* and Columbus as the *daimon*. One remembers the aged Whitman's self-identification in his "Prayer of Columbus," and it seems right to rejoice, as Whitman would have rejoiced, when Augie comes full circle from going at things, self-taught and free-style, to discovering those near-at-hand, upon the shores of America. That is Bellow—at his most exuberant. When weathered, the exuberance remains, but lies in shadow:

If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me, thought Moses Herzog.

Some people thought he was cracked and for a time he himself had doubted that he was all there. But now, though he still behaved oddly, he felt confident, cheerful, clairvoyant, and strong. He had fallen under a spell and was writing letters to everyone under the sun . . . Hidden in the country, he wrote endlessly, fanatically, to the newspapers, to people in public life, to friends and relatives and at last to the dead, his own obscure dead, and finally the famous dead.

. . . Perhaps he'd stop writing letters. Yes, that was what was coming, in fact. The knowledge that he was done with these letters. Whatever had come over him during these last months, the spell, really seemed to be passing, really going. He set down his hat, with the roses and day lilies, on the half-painted piano, and went into his study, carrying the wine bottles in one hand like a pair of Indian clubs. Walking over notes and papers, he lay down on his Récamier couch. As he stretched out, he took a long breath, and then he lay, looking at the mesh of the screen, pulled loose by vines, and listening to the steady scratching of Mrs. Tuttle's broom. He wanted to tell her to sprinkle the floor. She was raising too much dust. In a few minutes he would call down to her, "Damp it down, Mrs. Tuttle. There's water in the sink." But not just yet. At this time he had no messages for anyone. Nothing. Not a single word.

Another *ritorno*, but this time the cycle has been broken. Augie March, like Emerson and Whitman, knows that there is no history, only biography. Moses Herzog has been a long time discovering this truth, which ends his profession, and Charlie Citrine also goes full-circle:

The book of ballads published by Von Humboldt Fleisher in the Thirties was an immediate hit. Humboldt was just what everyone had been waiting for. Out in the Midwest I had certainly been waiting eagerly, I can tell you that. An avant-garde writer, the first of a new generation, he was handsome, fair, large, serious, witty, he was learned. The guy had it all. All the papers reviewed his book. His picture appeared in *Time* without insult and in *Newsweek* with praise. I read *Harlequin Ballads* enthusiastically. I was a student at the University of Wisconsin and thought about nothing but literature day and night. Humboldt revealed to me new ways of doing things. I was ecstatic. I envied his luck, his talent, and his fame, and I went east in May to have a look at him—perhaps to get next to him. The Greyhound bus, taking the Scranton route, made the trip in about fifty hours. That didn't matter. The bus windows were open. I had never seen real mountains before. Trees were budding. It was like Beethoven's *Pastorale*. I felt showered by the green, within . . . Humboldt was very kind. He introduced me to people in the Village and got me books to review. I always loved him.

. . . Within the grave was an open concrete case. The coffins went down and then the yellow machine moved forward and the little crane, making a throaty whir, picked up a concrete slab and laid it atop the concrete case. So the coffin was enclosed and the soil did not come directly upon it. But then, how did one get out? One didn't, didn't, didn't! You stayed, you stayed! There was a dry light grating as of crockery when contact was made, a sort of sugarbowl sound. Thus, the condensation of collective intelligences and combined ingenuities, its cables silently spinning, dealt with the individual poet . . .

Menasha and I went toward the limousine. The side of his foot brushed away some of last autumn's leaves and he said, looking through his goggles, "What this, Charlie, a spring flower?"

"It is. I guess it's going to happen after all. On a warm day like this everything looks ten times deader."

"So it's a little flower," Menasha said. "They used to tell one about a kid asking his grumpy old man when they were walking in the park, 'What's the name of this flower, Papa?' and the old guy is peevish and he yells, 'How should I know? Am I in the millinery business?' Here's another, but what do you suppose they're called, Charlie?"

"Search me," I said. "I'm a city boy myself. They must be crocuses."

The cycle is from *Citrine's* early: "I felt showered by the green, within" to his late, toneless, "They must be crocuses," removed from all affect not because he has stopped loving Humboldt, but because he is chilled preternaturally by the effective if unfair trope Bellow has found for the workings of canonical criticism: "Thus, the condensation of collective intelligences and combined ingenuities, its cables silently spinning, dealt with the individual poet." There is no history, and now there is also no biography, but only the terrible dehumanizing machine of a technocratic intelligentsia, destroying individuality and poetry, and stealing from the spring of the year the green that no longer is to be internalized.

III

Bellow's endless war against each fresh wave of literary and intellectual modernism is both an aesthetic resource and an aesthetic liability in his fiction. As resource, it becomes a drive for an older freedom, an energy of humane protest against over-determination. As liability, it threatens to become repetition, or a merely personal bitterness, even blending into Bellow's acerbic judgments upon the psychology of women. When it is most adroitly balanced, in *Herzog*, the polemic against modernism embraces the subtle infiltrations of dubious ideologies into the protesting

Moses Herzog himself. When it is least balanced, we receive the narrative rant that intrudes into Mr. Sammler's cosmos, or, the darkness that pervades both Chicago and Bucharest in *The Dean's December*. Like Ruskin lamenting that the water in Lake Como was no longer blue, Bellow's Alexander Corde tells us that "Chicago wasn't Chicago anymore." What *The Dean's December* truly tells us is that "Bellow wasn't Bellow anymore," in this book anyway. The creator of Einhorn and Gersbach and Von Humboldt Fleisher gives us no such figure this time around, almost as though momentarily he resents his own genius for the high comedy of the grotesque.

Yet Bellow's lifelong polemic against the aestheticism of Flaubert and his followers is itself the exuberant myth that made *Augie March*, *Herzog* and *Humboldt's Gift* possible. In an act of critical shrewdness, Bellow once associated his mode of anti-modernist comedy with Svevo's *Confessions of Zeno* and Nabokov's *Lolita*, two masterpieces of ironic parody that actually surpass Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* in portraying the modernist consciousness as stand-up comic. Parody tends to negate outrage, and Bellow is too vigorous to be comfortable at masking his own outrage. When restrained, Bellow is too visibly restrained, unlike the mordant Svevo or the Nabokov who excels at deadpan mockery. Henderson may be more of a self-portrait, but Herzog, scholar of High Romanticism, better conveys Bellow's vitalistic version of an anti-modernistic comic stance. Bellow is closest to Svevo and to Nabokov in the grand parody of Herzog-Hamlet declining to shoot Gersbach-Claudius when he finds the outrageous adulterer scouring the bathtub after bathing Herzog's little daughter. Daniel Fuchs, certainly Bellow's most careful and informed scholar, reads this scene rather too idealistically by evading the parodic implications of "Moses might have killed him now." Bathing a child is our sentimental version of prayer, and poor Herzog, unlike Hamlet, is a sentimentalist, rather than a triumphant rejecter of nihilism, as Fuchs insists.

Bellow, though carefully distanced from Herzog, is himself something of a sentimentalist, which in itself need not be an aesthetic disability for a novelist. Witness Samuel Richardson and Dickens, but their sentimentalism is so titanic as to become something different in kind, a sensibility of excess larger than even Bellow can hope to display. In seeking to oppose an earlier Romanticism (Blake, Wordsworth, Whitman) to the belated Romanticism of literary modernism (Gide, Eliot, Hemingway), Bellow had the peculiar difficulty of needing to avoid the heroic vitalism that he regards as an involuntary parody of High Romanticism (Rimbaud, D. H. Lawrence, and in a lesser register, Norman Mailer).

Henderson, Bellow's Gentile surrogate, is representative of just how that difficulty constricts Bellow's imagination. The Blakean dialectic of Innocence and Experience, clearly overt in the scheme of the novel, is at odds with Henderson's characteristically Bellovian need for punishment or unconscious sense of guilt, which prevails in spite of Bellow's attempts to evade Freudian over-determination. Though he wants and indeed needs a psychology of the will, Bellow is much more Freudian than he can bear to know. Henderson is a superbly regressive personality, very much at one with the orphan child he holds at the end of the novel. Dahfu, of whom Norman Mailer strongly approved, is about as persuasive a representation as are his opposites in Bellow, all of those sadistic and compelling fatal ladies, pipe-dreams of a male vision of otherness as a castrating force. Bellow disdains apocalypse as a mode, but perhaps the Bellovian apocalypse would be one in which all of the darkly attractive women of these novels converged upon poor Dahfu, Blakean vitalist, and divested him of the emblem of his therapeutic vitalism.

Without his polemic, Bellow never seems able to get started, even in *Humboldt's Gift*, where the comedy is purest. Unfortunately, Bellow cannot match the modernist masters of the novel. In American fiction, his chronological location between, say, Faulkner and Pynchon exposes him to comparisons he does not seek yet also cannot sustain. Literary polemic within a novel is dangerous because it directs the critical reader into the areas where canonical judgments must be made, as part of the legitimate activity of reading. Bellow's polemic is normative, almost Judaic in its moral emphases, its passions for justice and for more life. The polemic sometimes becomes more attractive than its aesthetic embodiments. Would we be so charmed by Herzog if he did not speak for so many of us? I become wary when someone tells me that she or he "loves" *Gravity's Rainbow*. The grand Pynchonian doctrine of sado-anarchism scarcely should evoke *affection* in anyone, as opposed to the shudder of recognition that the book's extraordinary aesthetic dignity demands from us. It is the *aesthetic* failure of Bellow's polemic, oddly combined with its moral success, that increasingly drives Bellow's central figures into dubious mysticisms. Citrine's devotion to Rudolf Steiner is rather less impressive, intellectually and aesthetically, than the obsessive Kabbalism of *Gravity's Rainbow*. If Steiner is the ultimate answer to literary modernism, then Flaubert may rest easy in his tomb.

IV

And yet Bellow remains a humane comic novelist of superb gifts, almost unique in American fiction since Mark Twain. I give the last words here to what moves me as the most beautiful sequence in Bellow, Herzog's final week of letters, starting with his triumphant overcoming of his obsession with Madeleine and Gersbach. On his betraying wife, Herzog is content to end with a celebration now at last beyond masochism: "To put on lipstick, after dinner in a restaurant, she would look at her reflection in a knife blade. He recalled this with delight." On Gersbach, with his indubitable, latently homosexual need to cuckold his best friend, Herzog is just and definitive: "*Enjoy her—rejoice in her. You will not reach me through her, however. I know you sought me in her flesh. But I am no longer there.*" The unmailed messages go on, generously assuring Nietzsche of Herzog's admiration while telling the philosopher: "*Your immoralists also eat meat. They ride the bus. They are only the most bus-sick travelers.*" The sequence magnificently includes an epistle to Dr. Morgenfruh, doubtless a Yiddish version of the Nietzschean Dawn of Day, of whom Herzog wisely remarks: "He was a splendid old man, only partly fraudulent, and what more can you ask of anyone?" Addressing Dr. Morgenfruh, Herzog speculates darkly "that the territorial instinct is stronger than the sexual." But then, with exquisite grace, Herzog signs off: "*Abide in light, Morgenfruh. I will keep you posted from time to time.*" This benign farewell is made not by an over-determined bundle of territorial and sexual instincts, but by a persuasive representative of the oldest ongoing Western tradition of moral wisdom and familial compassion.

ROBERT PENN WARREN

The Man with No Commitments

The *Adventures of Augie March* is the third of Saul Bellow's novels, and by far the best one. It is, in my opinion, a rich, various, fascinating, and important book, and from now on any discussion of fiction in America in our time will have to take account of it. To praise this novel should not, however, be to speak in derogation of the two earlier ones, *The Dangling Man* and *The Victim*. Both of these novels clearly indicated Saul Bellow's talent, his sense of character, structure, and style. Though *The Dangling Man* did lack narrative drive, it was constantly interesting in other departments, in flashes of characterization, in social and psychological comment. In *The Victim*, however, Bellow developed a high degree of narrative power and suspense in dealing with materials that in less skillful hands would have invited an analytic and static treatment. These were not merely books of promise. They represented—especially *The Victim*—a solid achievement, a truly distinguished achievement, and should have been enough to win the author a public far larger than became his. They did win the attention of critics and of a hard core of discriminating readers, but they were not popular.

The Dangling Man and *The Victim* were finely wrought novels of what we may, for lack of a more accurate term, call the Flaubert-James tradition. Especially *The Victim* depended much on intensification of effect by tightness of structure, by limitations on time, by rigid economy in structure of scene, by placement and juxtaposition of scenes, by the unsaid and withheld, by a muting of action, by a scrupulous reserved style. The novel proved that the author had a masterful control of the method, not

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merely fictional good manners, the meticulous good breeding which we ordinarily damn by the praise "intelligent."

It would be interesting to know what led Saul Bellow to turn suddenly from a method in which he was expert and in which, certainly, he would have scored triumphs. It would be easy to say that it had been from the beginning a mistake for him to cultivate this method, to say that he was a victim of the critical self-consciousness of the novel in our time, to say that in his youthful innocence he had fallen among the thieves of promise, the theorizers. Or it would be easy to say that the method of the earlier books did not accommodate his real self, his deepest inspiration, and that as soon as he liberated himself from the restriction of the method he discovered his own best talent.

These things would be easy to say but hard to prove. It would be equally easy to say that the long self-discipline in the more obviously rigorous method had made it possible for Bellow now to score a triumph in the apparent formlessness of the autobiographical-picaresque novel, and to remember, as a parallel, that almost all the really good writers of free verse had cultivated an ear by practice in formal metrics. I should, as a matter of fact, be inclined to say that *The Adventures of Augie March* may be the profit on the investment of *The Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, and to add that in a novel of the present type we can't live merely in the hand-to-mouth way of incidental interests in scene and character, that if such a novel is to be fully effective the sense of improvisation must be a dramatic illusion, the last sophistication of the writer, and that the improvisation is really a pseudo-improvisation, and that the random scene or casual character that imitates the accidental quality of life must really have a relevance, and that the discovery, usually belated, of this relevance is the characteristic excitement of the genre. That is, in this genre the relevance is deeper and more obscure, and there is, in the finest examples of the genre, a greater tension between the random life force of the materials and the shaping intuition of the writer.

It is the final distinction, I think, of *The Adventures of Augie March* that we do feel this tension, and that it is a meaningful fact. It is meaningful because it dramatizes the very central notion of the novel. The hero Augie March is a very special kind of adventurer, a kind of latter-day example of the Emersonian ideal Yankee who could do a little of this and a little of that, a Chicago pragmatist happily experimenting in all departments of life, work, pleasure, thought, a hero who is the very antithesis of one of the most famous heroes of our time, the Hemingway hero, in that his only code is codelessness and his relish for experience is instinctive and not programmatic. This character is, of course, the charac-

ter made for the random shocks and aimless corners of experience, but he is not merely irresponsible. If he wants freedom from commitment, he also wants wisdom, and in the end utters a philosophy, the philosophy embodied by the French serving maid Jacqueline, big-legged and red-nosed and ugly, standing in a snowy field in Normandy, hugging still her irrepressibly romantic dream of going to Mexico.

But is this comic and heroic philosophy quite enough, even for Augie? Augie himself, I hazard, scarcely thinks so. He is still a seeker, a hoper, but a seeker and hoper aware of the comedy of seeking and hoping. He is, in fact, a comic inversion of the modern stoic, and the comedy lies in the tautology of his wisdom—our best hope is hope. For there is a deep and undercutting irony in the wisdom and hope, and a sadness even in Augie's high-heartedness, as we leave him standing with Jacqueline in the winter field on the road toward Dunkerque and Ostend. But to return to the proposition with which this discussion opened: if Augie plunges into the aimless ruck of experience, in the end we see that Saul Bellow has led him through experience toward philosophy. That is, the aimless ruck had a shape, after all, and the shape is not that of Augie's life but of Saul Bellow's mind. Without that shape, and the shaping mind, we would have only the limited interest in the random incidents.

The interest in the individual incidents is, however, great. In *The Victim* the interest in any one episode was primarily an interest in the over-all pattern, but here most incidents, and incidental characters, appeal first because of their intrinsic qualities, and, as we have said, our awareness of their place in the overall pattern dawns late on us. In incident after incident, there is brilliant narrative pacing, expert atmospheric effect, a fine sense of structure of the individual scene. In other words, the lessons learned in writing the earlier books are here applied in another context.

As for characterization, we find the same local fascination. The mother, the grandmother, the feeble-minded brother, the brother drunk on success, the whole Einhorn family, Thea, the Greek girl—they are fully realized, they compel our faithful attention and, in the end, our sympathy. As a creator of character, Saul Bellow is in the great tradition of the English and American novel, he has the fine old relish of character for character's sake, and the sort of tolerance which Santayana commented on in Dickens by saying that it was the naturalistic understanding that is the nearest thing to Christian charity.

It is, in a way, a tribute, though a back-handed one, to point out the faults of Saul Bellow's novel, for the faults merely make the virtues more impressive. The novel is uneven. Toward the last third the inspira-

tion seems to flag now and then. Several episodes are not carried off with the characteristic elan, and do not, for me at least, take their place in the thematic pattern. For instance, the Trotsky episode or the whole Stella affair, especially in the earlier stages. And a few of the characters are stereotypes, for example, Stella again. In fact, it is hard to see how she got into the book at all except by auctorial fiat, and I am completely baffled to know what the author thought he was doing with her, a sort of vagrant from some literary province lying north-northeast of the *Cosmopolitan Magazine*. Furthermore, several critics have already said that the character of Augie himself is somewhat shadowy. This, I think, is true, and I think I know the reason: it is hard to give substance to a character who has no commitments, and by definition Augie is the man with no commitments. This fact is a consequence of Bellow's basic conception, but wouldn't the very conception have been stronger if Augie had been given the capacity for deeper commitments, for more joy and sorrow? He might, at least, have tried the adventurer's experiment in those things? That is, the character tends now to be static, and the lesson that Augie has learned in the end is not much different from the intuition with which he started out. He has merely learned to phrase it. There is one important reservation which, however, I should make in my criticism of Augie. His very style is a powerful device of characterization. It does give us a temper, a texture of mind, a perspective of feeling, and it is, by and large, carried off with a grand air. Which leads me to the last observation that the chief release Saul Bellow has found in this book may be the release of a style, for he has found, when he is at his best, humor and eloquence to add to his former virtues.