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Saul Bellow

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The Critical Response to Saul Bellow

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Series Foreword

Critical Responses in Arts and Letters is designed to present a documentary history of highlights in the critical reception to the body of work of writers and artists and to individual works that are generally considered to be of major importance. The focus of each volume in the series is basically historical. The introductions to each volume are themselves brief histories of the critical response an author, artist, or individual work has received. This response is then further illustrated by reprinting a strong representation of the major critical reviews and articles which collectively have produced the author's, artist's, or work's critical reputation.

The scope of *Critical Responses in Arts and Letters* knows no chronological or geographical boundaries. Volumes under preparation include studies of individuals from around the world and in both contemporary and historical periods.

Each volume is the work of an individual author, who surveys the entire body of criticism on a single author, artist, or work. The editor then selects the best material to depict the critical response received by an author or artist over his/her entire career. Documents produced by the author or artist may also be included when the editor finds that they are necessary to a full understanding of the materials at hand. In circumstances where previous, isolated volumes of criticism on a particular individual or work exist, the editor carefully selects material that better reflects the nature and directions of the critical response over time.

In addition to the introduction and the documentary section, the editor of each volume is free to solicit new essays on areas that may not have been adequately dealt with in previous criticism. Also, for volumes on living writers and artists, new interviews may be included, again at the discretion of the volume's editor. The volumes also provide a supplementary bibliography and are fully indexed.

While each volume in *Critical Responses in Arts and Letters* is unique, it is also hoped that in combination they form a useful

documentary history of the critical response to the arts, and one that can be easily and profitably employed by students and scholars.

Cameron Northouse

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Chronology

- 1915 Born June 10 (officially recorded as July 10) in Lachine, Quebec, a suburb of Montreal, the youngest of the four children of Abraham Bellow and Liza Gordon Bellow, immigrants from St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1913.
- 1924 Bellow family moves to Chicago.
- 1933 Graduates from Tuley High School and enrolls at University of Chicago.
- 1935 Transfers to Northwestern University.
- 1937 Graduates from Northwestern with B. A. in anthropology and sociology.
- 1938 Returns to Chicago; joins WPA Writers' Project. Teaches at Pestalozzi-Froebel Teachers College until 1942.
- 1941 "Two Morning Monologues," first publication.
- 1942 "The Mexican General"; joins the editorial department of the Encyclopedia Britannica to work on M. J. Adler's "Great Book" series (until 1946).
- 1944 *Dangling Man*, first novel.
- 1946-48 Teaches English at the University of Minnesota.
- 1947 *The Victim*.
- 1948 Guggenheim Fellowship; travels to Paris and Rome; begins work on *The Adventures of Augie March*, segments of which are published between 1948 and 1950 in various magazines.
- 1949 "Sermon by Dr. Pep."
- 1950 Returns to live in New York; teaches at New York University; writes book reviews and articles for *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, and other journals.
- 1951 "Looking for Mr. Green"; "By the Rock Wall"; "Address by Gooley MacDowell to the Hasbeens Club of Chicago."
- 1952 National Institute of Arts and Letters Award; joins faculty of Princeton as Creative Writing Fellow.

- 1953 *The Adventures of Augie March* (National Book Award); translates I. B. Singer's "Gimpel the Fool" from the Yiddish; joins faculty of Bard College.
- 1954 "The Gonzaga Manuscripts"; "The Wrecker" (one-act play).
- 1955 "A Father-to-be"; Guggenheim Fellowship; travels in Nevada and California.
- 1956 *Seize the Day*.
- 1958 "Leaving the Yellow House"; Ford Foundation grant.
- 1959 *Henderson the Rain King*.
- 1960-62 Co-editor of *The Noble Savage*; Friends of Literature Fiction Award.
- 1962 Moves to Chicago; Honorary Doctor of Letters, Northwestern University; joins Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago.
- 1963 Honorary Doctor of Letters, Bard College; edits *Great Jewish Short Stories*.
- 1964 *Herzog* (National Book Award, Fomenter Award, Prix International de Littérature); *The Last Analysis* premieres at the Belasco Theatre in New York City in October.
- 1965 "Out from Under," Orange Soufflé, "A Wen" (three one-act plays produced in 1966 as *Under the Weather* in London, Spoleto, and New York).
- 1967 "The Old System"; covers the Six-Day War for *Newsday*.
- 1968 *Mosby's Memoirs and Other Stories*; Jewish Heritage Award (B'nai B'rith); Croix de Chevalier des Arts et Lettres (France).
- 1970 *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (National Book Award).
- 1974 "Zetland: By a Character Witness."
- 1975 *Humboldt's Gift* (Pulitzer Prize).
- 1976 *To Jerusalem and Back: A Personal Account*; Nobel Prize for Literature; Neil Gunn Fellow (Scottish Arts Council).
- 1977 Gold Medal for the Novel (American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters); Jefferson Lecture for the National Endowment for the Humanities.
- 1978 "A Silver Dish"; National Arts Club Gold Medal of Honor; New York premiere of Leon Kirchner's *Lily* (opera adaptation of *Henderson the Rain King*).
- 1982 *The Dean's December*.
- 1984 *Him with His Foot in His Mouth and Other Stories*; Commander of the Legion of Honor (France).
- 1985 Lachine Public Library renamed "Bibliothèque Municipale Saul Bellow."

- 1986 Film adaptation of *Seize the Day* produced for PBS by Robert Geller (producer) and Fielder Cook (director), with Robin Williams in the role of Tommy Wilhelm.
- 1987 *More Die of Heartbreak*.
- 1988 National Medal of Arts.
- 1989 *A Theft; The Bellarosa Connection*.
- 1990 "Something to Remember Me By"; republished in 1991 together with the two novellas of the previous year as *Something to Remember Me By: Three Tales*.
- 1991 "A Half Life: An Autobiography in Ideas" (*Bostonia*).
- 1992 "Memoirs of a Bootlegger's Son" (from a 1954 manuscript).
- 1994 *It All Adds Up: From the Dim Past to the Uncertain Future* (nonfiction collection of previously published essays).
- 1995 "By the St. Lawrence" (story).

Introduction

"The artist labors in dreams."
Saul Bellow (1974)

The relationship between Saul Bellow and America has always been an ambiguous one. While he is respected as one of the finest writers of the twentieth century, he has neither enjoyed the status of fame of his Nobel predecessors Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck, nor has he become one of America's cult figures like Norman Mailer, with whom he is often compared in contrast. It seems as if Bellow has always resented the kind of publicity by which images are cultivated into icons, as though a too-close relationship with America, its political culture and intellectual milieu, would have imprisoning consequences. He disdains categorization, such as "Jewish-American" or "humanist." He has never cared to be a likable public figure; his public appearances have been rare, and when asked to address matters of public concerns he has invariably cut to the core of social adversities and needs. Thus, for five decades now, Saul Bellow has been a most persevering chronicler of America's restless search for a definable self, articulating more prominently and more consistently than any of his contemporaries the common needs and ills of American society at large. Each of his novels feels the pulse of its decade, exposing the social and intellectual issues at hand. None of his works allow for easy identification or rejection; as a consequence, none have gone uncontended — the controversies they address seem to beckon our response.

The numerous honors that have been bestowed upon Bellow suggest that, for many readers around the world, he is America's finest and most consistent writer of the present. Such prominence, again, has not come undisputed. Not in a single case has the critical response to Bellow's oeuvre been unanimous. Not even *Herzog*, which is generally considered his worthiest achievement, has gone unchallenged. While some have claimed in Bellow America's greatest writer of the twentieth century, others have discounted him as discouragingly redundant, tell-

ing the same story over and over again. While over the past decade revisions in critical theory have expanded the scope of Bellow criticism, as in new historicist or feminist approaches, many of the "old" questions persist: Is Bellow an "affirmativist" or a "negativist" writer? Which tradition is the more prominent for this "hyphenated American" — the Jewish or the American? To what extent is Bellow's voice identical with that of his narrators? Indeed, are their views of the contemporary world shared by their author? To these and other questions and challenges, when directed at his art, the author himself has generally responded with the same disinterestedness, mockery, and occasional disdain that make his characters so distinctive. However, when directed at the issues themselves — whether social, philosophical, ethical, or otherwise — Bellow has never been diffident to the public's response. Thus, to see Bellow engaged, since the 1950s, in an ongoing exchange of ideas with his readers, reviewers, and critics reveals to us a continuous narrative containing the author's views of America and his position on its most pressing concerns in the twentieth century. While Bellow has professed the convenience of self-protection in having his characters speak his mind, this protective veil has become transparent with time, so much so that what we "know" about Saul Bellow today is simultaneously fed from the two sources of fact and fiction. It is a condition Bellow himself appears to favor, as he usually refuses to respond to questions pertaining to personal convictions, saying in effect that there is nothing worth knowing about him that he hasn't already addressed in his books.

The glimpses of himself that Bellow has offered, through his fiction, essays, interviews, and public addresses, do reveal consistent patterns and specific recurring concerns. In summary, they disclose an artist highly sensitive to the erosion of the individual's *contrat social* in the twentieth century. Here is a writer and intellectual whose primary business has been to reveal, in fiction as well as in fact, the artist's struggle with the world's overvaluation of the material, and to champion the survival of art in an age that worships the dehumanizing forces of technology. As a result of such an ongoing dialogue with the public,¹ the Bellow-image that has developed is composed of facets partly created and partly self-created, and a relationship of artist and audience has emerged which befits Melville's observation about the interchange of reader and writer, when he claims:

No man can read a fine author, and relish him to his very bones, while he reads, without subsequently fancying to himself some ideal image of the man and his mind. And if you rightly look for it, you will almost always find that the author himself has somewhere furnished you with his own picture.²

These observations on the writer as artist *and* public figure provide, in part, a referential frame for the present collection of Bellow criticism. Individually, the reviews and essays will connect the reader

to the source of Bellow's own voice and the diverse modes of his artistic expression. Collectively, they serve a double purpose. On the one hand, they present a critical kaleidoscope of the prominent themes issuing from Bellow's art. On the other hand, they vividly reflect the changes in the field of criticism itself — its purpose, its responsibility to the author as well as to the reader, its perception of art and the artist, its function as an agent for social change, to name only a few. Criticism, as the diverse examples in this collection show, is as much a reader's self-definition and self-assertion as it is a critiquing of the authorial or narrative stance projecting from an individual work. In this panoramic view, the present collection also illustrates that, over time, Bellow's reviewers and critics have come to respond not only to Bellow but also to each other. Speaking to each other across the boundaries of critical theories, historical differences, and cultural diversifications, the community of Bellow readers, scholars, and critics continues to generate new questions and responses to Bellow's oeuvre. In many cases they keep returning to earlier fictions with questions provoked by the author's more recent work.

Bellow himself has his own way of dealing with the critics and scholars. His opinion of the critical profession at large has been consistently unfavorable. In *Humboldt's Gift*, the would-be artist Von Humboldt Fleisher expresses, in his usual venomous distrust of the world, what he thinks about the "educated": "For them the whole purpose of art is to suggest and inspire ideas and discourse. [They] are a thinking rabble at the stage of what Marx called primitive accumulation. Their business is to reduce masterpieces to discourse."³ While Bellow typically keeps a safe distance by putting this verdict into the mouth of an artist who utterly fails in his professed art, it reverberates the author's personal exasperation with the academic world and its propensity for self-adoration. To be sure, Bellow himself has always been part of the academic establishment, most prominently so in his lasting association with the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, which he joined in 1962 and where he served as chairman for a time. But his participation in the life of the university has always been that of the artist and intellectual in search of answers rather than that of the academic dispensing scientific "knowledge." Indeed, Bellow would flaunt the separation of science, intellect, and art as artificial differentiations counterproductive to the purpose and well-being of society. In the fifties, well before this became an issue in the universities themselves, and well before he would address these dichotomies in his fictions as he later does in *Humboldt's Gift*, *The Dean's December*, and *More Die of Heartbreak*, Bellow publicly clarified his vigilant position in such essays as "The University as Villain" (1957) and "Deep Readers of the World, Beware!" (1959). In both, he cautions against intellectual posturing, culture-idolatry, and the downgrading of the imagination. It is an issue surfacing almost regu-

larly throughout his career, culminating at the time he receives the Nobel Prize in the mid-seventies; here Bellow no longer considers the issue characteristic solely of American culture — it has become a world-wide phenomenon. In 1974, speaking at a conference in Italy, he accuses universities far and wide of breeding "educated philistinism" as "a new negative force."⁴ And in his Nobel acceptance speech at Stockholm in 1976 he startles the festive audience with his thoughts regarding the universal fetishes of knowledge, attitude, and opinion and the deep-rooted antagonism among intellectuals to re-investigate their cherished "inventory of attitudes" about society, politics, the human mind, and art. Where attitudes replace thought, Bellow reminds us, the stabilizing center is lost. "What is at the center now? At the moment, neither art nor science, but mankind determining, in confusion and obscurity, whether it will endure or go under." And he demands: "At such a time it is essential to lighten ourselves, to dump encumbrances, including the encumbrances of education and all organized platitudes, to make judgments of our own, to perform acts of our own."⁵

Since then Bellow's bleak view and his contempt for "puffy-headed academics and intellectuals"⁶ who have betrayed the arts has taken a slightly different turn. Today, Bellow asks more brazenly and directly how intellectual pursuits (the act of reading included) will affect our souls in a world that is attitude-ridden, fascinated by technological advancement, and bereft of spirituality. The human mind hovers in a void that has come to be the greater threat to humanity:

To congratulate ourselves, however, on our educated enlightenment is simply an evasion of the real truth. We the "educated" cannot even begin to explain the technologies of which we make daily use. . . . Face to face with the technological miracles without which we could not live our lives, we are as backward as any savage, though education helps us to conceal this from ourselves and others.⁷

While such admonitions have been successful in keeping the American scholarly community mildly annoyed about Bellow's equable stance of "anti-modernism," what has apparently been more irritating are the answers he has proposed to counteract the decline of the human in the contemporary world. Such answers generally point to the forgotten or neglected spiritual realm of the human sphere and to art as its sole guardian. In the foreword to Allan Bloom's widely debated book about the decline of higher education in America, *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), Bellow summarizes: "In the greatest confusion [of our age] there is still an open channel to the soul . . . and it is our business to keep it open, to have access to the deepest part of ourselves — to that part of us which is conscious of a higher consciousness, by means of which we make final judgments, and put everything together."⁸ The irritation caused among contemporary readers by statements such as this stems from Bellow's persistent assertion of the existence of a spiritual world. It is a world as real as the physical, and all of

Bellow's protagonists struggle with its demands, which are the more pressing the more it is denied or rejected. That is Bellow's intent when, in the Nobel address, he speaks of the world's intoxicated consumerism, whose gravitational force pulls us into a collective apathy, a state where "the individual struggles with dehumanization for the possession of his soul."⁹ A decade later, the argument is still the same, but the emphasis has become more focused, more openly defensive: "The soul has to find and hold its ground against hostile forces, sometimes embodied in ideas which frequently deny its very existence, and which indeed often seem to be trying to annul it altogether."¹⁰

The irritations Bellow seems to generate in America whenever he addresses matters of the soul are perhaps less a result of his alleged anti-intellectualism than of his allegation that (artists as much as academics neglect their responsibility to instruct, enlighten, and heal.) In effect Bellow says that the very beliefs of modernism run counter to the eminent spiritual needs of humanity.) Since the publication of *The Dean's December* (1982), Bellow has dealt with the issues concerning the artist's social responsibility in ways more consistent, assertive, and perceptive than ever before, detailing a position that projects beyond polemics and marginalizations. Consequently, in what amounts to the writer's credo, Bellow today offers a more synchronized view of the (artist as the voice of imagination and intellect:)

That poets — artists — should give new eyes to human beings, inducing them to view the world differently, converting them from fixed modes of experience, is ambition enough, if one must offer a purposive account of the artist's project.) What makes that project singularly difficult is the disheartening expansion of trained ignorance and bad thought. For to put the matter at its baldest, we live in a thought-world, and the thinking has gone very bad indeed. Therefore the artist, whether or not he views himself as an intellectual, is involved in thought-struggles. (Thinking alone will never cure what ails him, and any artist should be grateful for a naive grace which puts him beyond the need to reason elaborately.) For me, the university has been the place of divestiture where I am able to find help in the laborious task of discarding bad thought.¹¹

Throughout his career, Bellow has resorted to that "naive grace" as the condition which best defines — and protects — the artist's mind. It is a phrase inherited from Joseph Conrad, whose perception of the artistic process Bellow endorses. In fact, he builds his argument of the self as determined by spiritual forces largely on a Conradian notion when he observes that the artist appeals

to that part of our being which is a gift, not an acquisition, to the capacity for delight and wonder . . . our sense of pity and pain, to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation — and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts . . . which binds together all humanity — the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.¹²

This is the key to understanding Bellow and his protagonists — heroic in their "invincible conviction" of a common human bond, paranoid in their fear and pain of losing this connection, and comical or absurd in their pursuit of the "higher" worlds among the lower depths of urban America. It is also the key for many critical perceptions to unlock Bellow's technique of internal oppositions, of the intricate connections between the common and the extraordinary (*Mr. Sammler's Planet*), the quotidian and the eternal (*Herzog*), the material and the transcendent (*Humboldt's Gift*), memory and oblivion (*The Belarosa Connection*). It is the unresolvable dialectic of the marriage of heaven and hell, that unmistakable Blakean world, to which Bellow always takes recourse. The images are multifarious, but the axiom is constant: Joseph's attempt at balancing incompatible worlds in *Dangling Man*; Augie's search for the "axial lines" in *The Adventures of Augie March*; Henderson's inner voice calling "I want! I want!" in the African jungle of *Henderson the Rain King*; Wilhelm's romantic impulse to be united with humanity in *Seize the Day* (an impulse Herzog will experience in his own version of the romantic self and Mr. Sammler in his version of the disillusioned modern):

And in the dark tunnel, in the haste, heat, and darkness which disfigure and make freaks and fragments of nose and eyes and teeth, all of a sudden, unsought, a general love for all these imperfect and lurid-looking people burst out in Wilhelm's breast. He loved them. They were his brothers and his sisters. He was imperfect and disfigured himself, but what difference did that make if he was united with them by this blaze of love?¹³

And Bellow continues tapping the Conradian source of human frailty and compassion, albeit with stronger epistemological overtones, in *Humboldt's Gift* (Citrine's search for transcendence towards a higher self); *The Dean's December* (Corde's desire to resurrect truth from a world of "appearances"); and *More Die of Heartbreak* (Benn Crader's desire for purification of the soul and its consummation in Eros). While none of these passionate questers attain their objects of desire, their commitment to the contract they have established with their spiritual self remains intact; it is their perseverance against all odds — and consequently their dangling between states of self-aggrandizement and self-effacement — which renders Bellow's protagonists so absurdly heroic.

The parameters Bellow establishes with his major theme and his predominant mode of characterization have placed him squarely outside the major traditions and movements in the twentieth century. He writes against the grain of literary fashions and cultural dictum. As far as categorizations go, Bellow is unfashionably un-American — a novelist of ideas. His narrative patterns follow the models of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Conrad, and Thomas Mann. (For him, plot stories are unreal.) A reality created out of the imagination is more alive than factographic

accounts and perspectives "explaining" the world to itself. The epistemological weight of the issues he chooses to involve his characters in seems to always point in the direction of European philosophical traditions. In fact, it can be poignantly argued that Bellow is the only American writer of our century who has traversed the systems of thought that have shaped our age, taking on in each of his novels a particular school and its representatives, such as Romanticism and existentialism in *Herzog*, the Enlightenment in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, or Transcendentalism (in both its American and European versions) in *Humboldt's Gift*. In dealing so consistently with the values in the Western hemisphere as formulated in these philosophies, Bellow has often been accused of aloofness, a view he contests, noting that to be literate in the twentieth century the individual must be thoroughly exposed to modern ideologies, psychologies and philosophies. His own exposure to these schools of thought, Bellow maintains, has been that of the autodidact, and it is the nature of autodidacts to disregard intellectual boundaries and to open avenues of investigation where the "learned" would tend to close them. Writers therefore should not be expected to fashion their books to accepted thought and predominant approaches to learning, but rather write for the "ideal" reader: "It may well be that your true readers are not here as yet and that your books will cause them to materialize."¹⁴ As he does so often, Bellow takes recourse to Conrad's defense of the artist's "separateness" from the ordinary.

((Positioning Bellow as a connecting point between American and European traditions has been only one of the predominant critical approaches to his work over the past five decades.)) Surveying the field, the critical reader will find that the bases have been well covered, from neocritical, psychological, and archetypal to structuralist, feminist, and post-modern criticism. (It is evident that the "Bellow industry" thrived particularly in the 1970s, when canonical issues and the diversification of critical theory found ample food in Bellow's oeuvre. Underlying this multiplicity is a pattern which reveals that historically, Bellow criticism has developed in three "generations."¹⁵ The first of these, emerging in the later 1960s, identifies in Bellow the writer who breaks with modernist orthodoxy, the tradition dominating American literary minds and the critical profession since Eliot's "Wasteland"-projections and Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The first generation of Bellow critics thus investigates the author's response to this tradition, from *Dangling Man* to *Herzog*, using as a vantage point Bellow's own assessment of cultural nihilism, the "unearned bitterness" projected by the modernist position. Critiquing the post-war generation of writers, Bellow finds it oddly ironic "that often the writer automatically scorns contemporary life,"¹⁶ and he clearly disavows this trend of obsessive self-pitying and stylish negativism since it dodges the real issue at hand, which for the artist is to portray individuals struggling with the

need to resolve by and for themselves the "bitterness" clutching at their hearts and minds.

At odds with this stylized pessimism, Bellow offers a mellowed optimism and a noticeable compassion with his characters' struggling determination, a stance which has earned him the label "affirmative humanist" from the critics. Several early monographs concentrate on this angle. The British literary historian Tony Tanner first sketches this position in *Saul Bellow* (1965), contrasting the author's approach to the American modernist tradition and detailing his European connections. In more systematic detail, Bellow's affirmativist stance is outlined in Keith Opdahl's *The Novels of Saul Bellow: An Introduction* (1967) and John J. Clayton's *Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man* (1968). Clayton clarifies three assumptions the moderns have made about our age which Bellow opposes: cultural nihilism, alienation, and the devaluation of the individual. Retracing Clayton's outline twenty years later, Brigitte Scheer-Schaezler summarizes Bellow's affirmativist humanism:

Against cultural nihilism he posits that life is meaningful and that we can discover its meaning through art. Against alienation he holds the conviction of the brotherhood of human beings. Against the denigration of the individual he maintains that the individual is ennobled and dignified through pain and suffering, and that this is especially observable in our time.¹⁷

The second generation, largely of the 1970s and by now an international consortium of critics, broadens the critical spectrum to include investigations of individual issues arising from Bellow's humanist disposition, such as specific narrative devices and recurring thematic patterns. Sarah Blacher Cohen's *Saul Bellow's Enigmatic Laughter* (1974) explores humor as a rescuing device in the face of despair. Peter Bischoff, in *Saul Bellow's Romane: Entfremdung und Suche* [*Saul Bellow's Novels: Alienation and Exploration*] (1975), examines the polarity of marginalization and the search for a center as a framework for each of Bellow's protagonists in their exploration of the self. Chirantan Kulshresta focuses on affirmation as a source of persistent anxiety in *Saul Bellow: the Problem of Affirmation* (1978). Yuzaburo Shibuya, in *Kaishin no Kiseki* [*Saul Bellow: The Conversion of the Sick Soul*] (1978), describes the patterns of the spiritual conversion from existential despair to transcending hope. Despite new objectives and an expanded thematic range, these perspectives do not principally challenge the first generation's assessment of Bellow as an anti-modernist and an affirmative humanist.

A reconsideration of such classifications comes with the new critical voices of the 1980s. Malcolm Bradbury, in *Saul Bellow* (1982), reassesses Bellow's relationship to the European and American intellectual traditions and the burdensome heritage of Romanticism in the modern age, and he repositions Bellow as creating, indeed as envisioning, his own historical self to be independent of any of these

inherited traditions. Bradbury dispels the notion of the predominance of the transcendental in Bellow's works, as does Judie Newman in *Saul Bellow and History* (1984). Newman contests that Bellow's protagonists remain fully within a historical and experiential continuum, and that their inner tensions and anxieties reflect the outer tension created by the polarities of the temporal and the timeless. In *Les Romans de Saul Bellow: Tactiques Narratives et Strategies Oedipiennes* (1983), Claude Levy provides a structuralist interpretation of the narrative processes in Bellow's fiction, arguing for a clearer distinction between the narrational voice and the authorial voice. Liela Goldman, in *Saul Bellow's Moral Vision: A Critical Study of the Jewish Experience* (1983), reveals Bellow's debt to the Judaic tradition, arguing that this debt is more profound and functionally important in his novels than Bellow would concede. Daniel Fuchs sets a new standard in Bellow criticism with *Saul Bellow: Vision and Revision* (1984), which provides the first analysis of the writer's creative progress in a comparison of the different drafts of each work, thus displaying the process of artistic refinement of form, style, and idea. Jonathan Wilson, in a revisionist study titled *On Bellow's Planet: Readings from the Dark Side* (1985), addresses the dialectic nature of Bellow's "dangling" protagonists and the principle of indecision as characteristic of their/Bellow's contemporaneous attitudes, and thus provides a first energetic attempt to deconstruct the claims of the "affirmativists." Subsequently, Ellen Pifer has proposed a more moderate re-reading of Bellow in *Saul Bellow Against the Grain* (1990), although she does contend that Bellow's fictional stance is fundamentally radical in that he perpetually writes against the accepted notions of contemporary culture and, to the embarrassment of his trade, insists on the spiritual essence of the human being. Peter Hyland, in *Saul Bellow* (1992), espouses the idea that Bellow's eclecticism, his involvement in all the vagaries of twentieth-century traditions and intellectual ideas, is a positive signature of the writer's awareness of the polymorphous character of contemporary America. In a study based on Ken Wilber's theosophical model of transpersonal consciousness, Tetsuji Machida (*Saul Bellow's Transcendentalism*, 1993), disputes the notion that Bellow's transcendental stance replicates Emersonian transcendentalism.

With few exceptions, most of the summary readings of Bellow presuppose the existence of a common denominator by which to gauge his art. As singular perspectives, they represent individual approaches connecting Bellow's oeuvre as a unit to the (implied or expressed) unity of the critic's theoretical orbit. In contrast, this collection, in bringing together a multiplicity of voices over a historical distance of almost half a century, makes no attempt to present either Bellow's development or that of the critical responses as coherently connected. Instead, it presents Bellow criticism in all its divergence of thought and approach. The only parameters for selection applied here have been to

connect, in each individual case, reviews with critical essays, and where feasible, to combine immediate responses (early reviews) with more distanced critical perspectives and revisions. Thus, Bellow's works and the responses they have received chronicle a major segment of the literary and intellectual life of post-war twentieth-century America. Bellow's oeuvre is particularly suited to such an exchange, since it presents, in all its facets, a rich reworking of the controlling concerns of our age, always perceived with the steady eye of the artist for whom his heritage has always been a condition rather than a tradition.

Notes

1. For more recent examples see "Mozart," *Bostonia* (Spring 1992): 31-35; "Intellectuals and Writers Since the Thirties" [Proceedings of "Intellectuals and Social Change in Central and Eastern Europe," Rutgers University, Newark, April 9-11, 1992], *Partisan Review* 4 (1992): 531-558; "There Is Simply Too Much to Think About," *Forbes* (14 Sep. 1992): 98-106.
2. Qtd. in Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988), 157.
3. Saul Bellow, *Humboldt's Gift* (New York: Viking, 1975), 32.
4. Saul Bellow, "A Matter of the Soul," *Opera News* (11 Jan 1974): 28.
5. Saul Bellow, "The Nobel Lecture," *American Scholar* 46 (1977): 324.
6. "Saul Bellow: An Autobiography in Ideas," Part 1: "A Half Life," *Bostonia* (Nov./Dec. 1990): 39.
7. "Mozart," 32.
8. "Foreword," *The Closing of the American Mind*, by Allan Bloom (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 16-17.
9. "Nobel Lecture," 325.
10. "Foreword," 17.
11. *Ibid.*, 17.
12. "Nobel Lecture," 316.
13. Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 84-85.
14. "Foreword," 15.
15. For a detailed account of the developments in Bellow criticism see Gloria Cronin and Liela H. Goldman's definitive "Bibliographical Essay" on Bellow in *Contemporary Authors Bibliographical Series*, vol. 1 ["American Authors"] (Detroit: Gale, 1986), 116-55; see also Ellen Pifer, "If the Shoe Fits: Bellow and Recent Critics," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 29.4 (1987): 442-57.
16. Saul Bellow, "Some Notes on Recent American Fiction," *Encounter* (Nov. 1963): 26-27.
17. Brigitte Scheer-Schaezler, "Saul Bellow and the Values of the Western World," *Saul Bellow Journal* 8.2 (1989): 3.

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Dangling Man (1944)

Introducing an Important New Writer Nathan L. Rothman

This is the journal of a man dangling between two worlds, or, perhaps more accurately, between two moments of existence in the one world we know, a split second of non-being extended immeasurably like a fissure growing beneath his feet. There might be many accidents in life to produce just such a hiatus: that time, for example, when a love affair that has crowded everything else out of the earth and sky is over and gone, and one gropes tenderly with hand and toe to learn to walk again; or a time when one is cast up out of the world, upon a reef somewhere, a magic mountain, as was Thomas Mann's Hans Castorp. In Saul Bellow's book it is a very common, contemporary accident that throws his man into the air to dangle. He is in that period between registration and induction, a matter of months filled with investigation (he is a Canadian and there is data to produce, papers, tests, records) and waiting. But this does not matter; it is a device for setting free the mind of Joseph (whose second name we do not ever learn) from the pattern of orderly living, and keeping it suspended out of pattern.

He is born again, free of the weight of accumulated attitudes, free of the people who reach to hold him (he is apart now, lonely and questioning), free of the emotions that have hitherto thought for him. He begins to see with the dispassionate eye of the painter — the mole in the armhollow, the vein beneath the surface of the skin, a stove's light in a room. He begins to think with the dispassionate mind of the anthropologist, beholding his wife, his father, his niece, his friends, the people in his boarding-house, as though he had just landed upon their continent, having foreknowledge of them with the freedom to examine coldly what he knows. And he examines his knowledge of himself, his world, the events in it, with a rare and miraculous

From *Saturday Review of Literature* (15 Apr. 1944): 27.

honesty. Now, as never before and probably never again, he can say exactly what he ought to feel, subtracting what he ought not. These pages, brief and pungent, are filled with inspired perception, from that true statement I have never seen anywhere else save in Joyce ("The child feels that his parents are pretenders; his real father is elsewhere and will someday come to claim him"), to such moments of self-searching as the credo on page 84, which begins: "I would rather die in the war than consume its benefits. . . . I would rather be a victim than a beneficiary. . . ."

Here, as elsewhere in literature when the mind is subject to the pressure of examination, it splits and turns upon itself in question. Joseph holds dialogue with his other self, whom he terms Tu As Raison Aussi, and even when he is talking to others it is not the ordinary words of outer discussion that he addresses to them, but the searching words that only he himself can answer. He understands their distrust almost as though he can see through them to the back; they are like cards he can turn over. The fact is he has been endowed with an extra dimension, and so long as he has it he has the gift of prophecy. It will drop from him, we feel, when he is at last inducted, when the spell breaks and he falls back into the heat of action. It is only at this point of suspension, where Bellow has caught him, that Joseph possesses this rare, cold clarity of vision. In this sense his is an interesting war document, his judgment upon the war world before he plunges beneath its surface. We shall read many afterthoughts when the war is over; this is a last forethought.

I have been trying to say also, in all this, that Saul Bellow is a writer of great original powers. Quite apart from the pressing interest of the material he has chosen for his book (a first novel, incidentally), he writes with obvious style and mastery, with a sharp cutting to the quick of language, with a brilliance of thought. This is a successful piece of work everywhere you examine it, and ought to be the herald of a fine literary career.

* * *

A Man in His Time Delmore Schwartz

Here, for the first time I think, the experience of a new generation has been seized and recorded. It is one thing simply to have lost one's faith; it is quite another to begin with the sober and necessary lack of illusion afforded by Marxism, and then to land in what seems to be utter disillusion, only to be forced, stage by stage, to even greater

From *Partisan Review* 11.3 (1944): 348-50.

depths of disillusion. This is the experience of the generation that has come to maturity during the depression, the sanguine period of the New Deal, the days of the Popular Front and the days of Munich, and the slow, loud, ticking imminence of a new war. With the advent of war, every conceivable temptation not to be honest, not to look directly at experience, not to remember the essential vows of allegiance to the intelligence and to human possibility and dignity — every conceivable temptation and every plea of convenience, safety and casuistry has presented itself.

Joseph, the hero of *Dangling Man*, is remarkable because he has the strength (and it is his only strength) to keep his eyes open and his mind awake to the quality of his experience. He has been for a time a member of the Communist Party and he has been offered a business career by a successful older brother. He has rejected both. With the coming of the war, he undergoes the slow strangulation of being drafted but not inducted into the army because of various bureaucratic formalities. During this period in the inter-regnum between civilian and army life, he is gradually stripped of the few pretenses and protections left to him. A Communist refuses to speak to him; his brother attempts to lend him money; his niece taunts him as a beggar; his friends who have made their "meek adjustments" are repelled by his unwillingness to accept things as they are; he quarrels with his friends, his relatives, his wife who is supporting him and the people who live in the rooming house in which he spends his idle days. And finally, unable to endure the continuous emptiness and humiliation of his life, he sees to it that he is immediately taken into the army.

Is it necessary to emphasize the extent to which this experience is characteristic? Here are the typical objects of a generation's sensibility: the phonograph records, the studio couch, the reproductions of Van Gogh, the cafeteria; and the typical relationships: the small intellectual circle which gradually breaks up, the easy and meaningless love affair, the marriage which is neither important nor necessary, the party which ends in hysterical outbreaks or sickness of heart, the gulf separating this generation from the previous one and the family life from which it came.

What is not typical is Joseph's stubborn confrontation and evaluation of the character of his life. He insists on making explicit his dependency on his wife. He tells himself again and again that his days are wasted. He seizes the Communist party-member who tries to snub him, and insists that as a human being he has a right to be greeted. He tells himself and anyone who will listen that he does not like the kind of life his society has made possible. And he refuses to yield to the philistinism and the organized lack of imagination that consoles itself by saying: "It might be worse," "It is worse elsewhere," "It cannot be other than it is," "This is the lesser evil, hence it is good."