

TWENTIETH CENTURY VIEWS

# SAUL BELLOW

*A Collection of Critical Essays*

*Edited by* **EARL ROVIT**



# SAUL BELLOW

A COLLECTION OF CRITICAL ESSAYS

Edited by  
*Earl Rovit*

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# Introduction

by *Earl Rovit*

When literary criticism concerns itself with the work of a contemporary—particularly a novelist with the craft and vitality of Saul Bellow—something very like a game of hide-and-seek often takes place. The writer gains a small reputation with his first publications; the critics (who, of course, are partly responsible for that reputation) seek to define or delimit the literary categories under which they think the writer can be subsumed. As the writer produces more work, the critics have a vested interest in defending their earlier judgments. They are likely to maintain that the writer hasn't really changed his position at all; that he's merely shifted his posture slightly. Or if the later work is quite radically different from the earlier, criticism is under some compulsion to insist that the change in direction was inevitable; that this apparent break in continuity was actually inherent in the writer's earlier work. And the game of hide-and-seek continues. The writer adds titles to his *oeuvre*, convinced that each fresh contribution is unique, and the critics pursue with their nets of accumulated definition. In this slippery conflict, the critic has several advantages. He speaks with the authority of an outsider, and he reads each new work through a filter of all that the writer has written previously. It is the rarest of critics who can maintain his focus on a single novel without blurring that focus with his experience of the writer's total work. Because the critic operates in terms of hindsight, he is likely to feel that he knows where the writer is and where he has to go. The writer, alas, hasn't been able to read his next book yet, and he is not only not sure exactly where he is, but he frequently hasn't the faintest idea of where he ought to, or even, *can* go. It is thus completely natural that there be an element of friction between the critics and the writer, between the professional hunters and the quarry who is equally loath to be caught or to be left entirely alone. The writer wants his work to be read, the critic wants to interpret and evaluate. Each needs the other, but their respective desires can never be wholly compatible.

Now approaching his sixtieth birthday, with over thirty years of active publication behind him, Saul Bellow has been more successful

than most writers in standing up to the rigors of the chase and in resisting the processes of marmoreal exegesis. On the basis of his first two novels, *Dangling Man* (1944) and *The Victim* (1947), he was categorized rather stringently as an academic, *Partisan-Review*-oriented, New Critical, Jewish novelist. However, the appearance of the free-swinging picaresque *The Adventures of Augie March* (1954) startlingly shattered this restrictive definition. The Jamesian "paleface" seemed to have broken out of his bookish tower in order to roam the literary prairies as a full-fledged "redskin." Undaunted, the critical cavalry laid chase, only to be ambushed by *Seize the Day* (1956). The wide open spaces of Augie's catch-as-catch-can world had been inverted into the claustral, introspective labyrinths of Tommy Wilhelm's upper Broadway. The critics were naturally wary. Was this move regressive or progressive? Had Bellow, like a fighting bull, returned to his *querencia* for a respite, or had he again eluded his pursuers with a brilliantly deceptive feint? *Henderson the Rain King* (1959) compounded the confusion: Bellow's high-spirited African romance was part spoof, part high jinks, part fantasy, and wholly serious in a comically open way. With the publication of *Herzog* (1964) and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), Bellow returned with a vengeance to the enclosed urban mindscapes of Joseph, Leventhal, and Tommy Wilhelm. In general, criticism has come to accept these latter as the most characteristic boundaries of Bellow's fiction. Perhaps the critics had become fatigued by the long pursuit and were now content to remain on the peripheries of Bellow's world; and perhaps the sheer quantity of his work had grown sufficiently large that it was impossible for him to do anything completely new and unprepared for in his earlier work. Whatever the reasons, the topographical contours of Bellow's fictional world have come to be considered more or less settled. Critics may dispute vigorously the comparative meanings and values of this world, but there seems to be a relatively satisfied consensus as to what it consists of.

It is dominantly urban in setting, Jewish middle-class intellectual in texture, gently or savagely ironic in tone. Its time span moves from a remembrance of immigrant communities shortly after World War I, through the years of the Depression and World War II, and up to the present. (Although the Holocaust is only infrequently referred to directly, its shadow hovers over the whole time period in foreboding or reminder.) This city-centered world shifts between Chicago and New York, and although there are sporadic interludes in the countryside and trips to Mexico, Europe, Africa, and Israel, Bellow's narrative seems most at home with subways rumbling underfoot and skyscrapers looming in the polluted air. Yet, for all the people who throng its streets, Bellow's world is a lonely one. His typical protagonists live their daily routines of work, play, and crisis so exclusively and intro-

spectively that when they do meet a friend or stranger, the encounter tends to be charged with a passion that the meeting hardly merits. Preeminently, it is an explosively comic world—frequently grotesque, sometimes poignant, occasionally maudlin or bitter. Bellow consistently aims his ridicule at both the absurdly deficient culture within which his protagonist strives to live a meaningful life, and the pathetic illusions and self-deceptions that his protagonist brings to this desperate struggle. In a statement that might serve as a thematic emblem of much of his work, Bellow once wrote: "It is obvious that modern comedy has to do with the disintegrating outline of the worthy and humane Self, the bourgeois hero of an earlier age." Bellow has tried to guard against the varied temptations that this statement implies. He has tried to resist a sentimental nostalgia for the unrecoverable values of that earlier age; he has insisted intently that the new is not necessarily good just because it is new, nor is it even inevitably better than what may be left of the old. His is fundamentally an uncomfortable middle-of-the-road position, the tense stance of the rationalist who despairs of rational solutions to human frustration but who is constrained to accept no guide superior to rationality—crippled, incomplete, and irresolute as it may be.

I think that it is the inherent ambivalence of this posture—indelibly manifest in his style and in the structures and thematic concerns of his fiction—that has made Bellow vulnerable to attack from the two extremes on either side of him. To the traditionalists, he appears to be surrendering too much to the assaults of history and change; through their eyes, he may seem fashionably cynical, pessimistic, or irresponsible. From the opposite camp, he has been subject to harsher charges: naïveté, sentimentality, and, ultimately, compromising his ideals: being willing to accept the tepid principle of "making do" rather than daring to leap beyond rationality. In the increasing furor of the late 1960s, when—as with so much else in American culture—literary criticism became severely polarized, Bellow's work was particularly susceptible to attacks from both the New Left and the Old Right. The characterizations of Moses Herzog and Artur Sammler were often fused and confused with the person of Bellow himself, and the understandable but unjust demand that the artist find solutions that his society could not was laid upon him and his works as a measure of their fatal deficiency. This particular furor appears to have abated, at least temporarily, and Bellow is now on the verge of being regarded as an elder statesman of American letters—a position of eminence subject to even greater dangers, I believe, than the political exacerbations of the late '60s.

At any rate, the general stature of Bellow's work must assuredly be beyond serious cavil today. Along with the poet, Robert Lowell, he is one of the three or four writers of his generation whose name and



accomplishments come first to mind as the legitimate heirs of the giants of the '20s who dramatically launched American letters into international significance. Thrice a recipient of the National Book Award for Fiction, he has been generously honored as one of our foremost contemporary novelists. A resounding commercial success since his publication of *Augie March*, he has been far from neglected by the academic critics. Doctoral dissertations, theses, monographs, book-length studies, and a host of learned essays attest to the widespread concern that his novels have generated in the scholarly community. Almost every critic occasionally concerned with modern literature has found the time to focus his attention on Bellow, and there is an abundance of interesting and relevant material readily available to the Bellow student.

In this volume of critical essays on Bellow's work, my intentions have been modest and, I hope, honorable. In the space afforded to me, I have tried to achieve certain limited ends. I have attempted to include essays or parts of longer works that, collectively, treat as full a sampling of Bellow's ample production as possible. Although there are no detailed studies directed exclusively at *Dangling Man* or *The Adventures of Augie March* here, I offer in compensation Irving Malin's examination of Bellow's only full-length play, *The Last Analysis*—a work that is frequently ignored by Bellow's critics. Cognizant of the rich variety of manners and modes in contemporary literary criticism, I have also tried to select essays that represent widely different critical perspectives, methodologies, and thematic interests. Further, I have aimed, in general, not to reduplicate valuable material that is easily accessible to the serious student of Bellow's work. Toward these ends, I have been especially fortunate in securing the generous cooperation of many hands. Professors Denis Donoghue and Marcus Klein, whose earlier published essays on Bellow are well established in the canon of Bellow criticism, were gracious enough to extend their thoughts in appenda to their original pieces for inclusion in this volume. Professor Poirier has revised his original review of *Herzog*. And my editorial chores were considerably lightened by my being the recipient of new essays by Professors Malin, Pearce, Porter, Siegel, and Sullivan, which appear for the first time in this anthology.

In the end, of course, the critics and their criticism fall away as they must, and all that is left are the works themselves—to thrive or to slumber or to disappear. Ultimately, in the continuing dialectic between novelist and critic the novelist does manage to secure the last word, but only after the critics have collectively established the intellectual context within which that word will be heard. It is my hope that this collection of essays will give a just representation of what that context now is for the work of Saul Bellow.

# Saul Bellow

by Gordon Lloyd Harper

The interview "took place" over a period of several weeks. Beginning with some exploratory discussions during May of 1965, it was shelved during the summer, and actually accomplished during September and October. Two recording sessions were held, totaling about an hour and a half, but this was only a small part of the effort Mr. Bellow gave to this interview. A series of meetings, for over five weeks, was devoted to the most careful revision of the original material. Recognizing at the outset the effort he would make for such an interview, he had real reluctance about beginning it at all. Once his decision had been reached, however, he gave a remarkable amount of his time freely to the task—up to two hours a day, at least twice and often three times a week throughout the entire five-week period. It had become an opportunity, as he put it, to say some things which were important but which weren't being said.

Certain types of questions were ruled out in early discussions. Mr. Bellow was not interested in responding to criticisms of his work which he found trivial or stupid. He quoted the Jewish proverb that a fool can throw a stone into the water which ten wise men cannot recover. Nor did he wish to discuss what he considered his personal writing habits, whether he used a pen or typewriter, how hard he pressed on the page. For the artist to give such loving attention to his own shoelaces was dangerous, even immoral. Finally, there were certain questions that led into too "wide spaces" for this interview, subjects for fuller treatment on other occasions.

The two tapes were made in Bellow's University of Chicago office on the fifth floor of the Social Sciences Building. The office, though large, is fairly typical of those on the main quadrangles: much of it rather dark with one brightly lighted area, occupied by his desk, immediately before a set of three dormer windows; dark-green metal bookcases line the walls, casually used as storage for a miscellany of books, magazines, and correspondence. A set of *The Complete Works*

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of *Rudyard Kipling* ("it was given to me") shares space with examination copies of new novels and with a few of Bellow's own books, including recent French and Italian translations of *Herzog*. A table, a couple of typing stands, and various decrepit and mismatched chairs are scattered in apparently haphazard fashion throughout the room. A wall rack just inside the door holds his jaunty black felt hat and his walking cane. There is a general sense of disarray, with stacks of papers, books, and letters lying everywhere. When one comes to the door, Bellow is frequently at his typing stand, rapidly pounding out on a portable machine responses to some of the many letters he gets daily. Occasionally a secretary enters and proceeds to type away on some project at the far end of the room.

During the two sessions with the tape recorder, Bellow sat at his desk, between the eaves which project prominently into the room, backlit by the dormer windows which let in the bright afternoon sun from the south. Four stories below lie Fifty-ninth Street and Chicago's Midway, their automobile and human noises continually penetrating the office. As the questions were asked, Bellow listened carefully and often developed an answer slowly, pausing frequently to think out the exact phrasing he sought. His answers were serious, but full of his special quality of humor. He took obvious pleasure in the amusing turns of thought with which he often concluded an answer. Throughout, he was at great pains to make his ideas transparent to the interviewer, asking repeatedly if this was clear or if he should say more on the subject. His concentration during these sessions was intense enough to be tiring, and both tapes were brought to a close with his confessing to some exhaustion.

Following each taping session, a typescript of his remarks was prepared. Bellow worked over these typed sheets extensively with pen and ink, taking as many as three separate meetings to do a complete revision. Then another typescript was made, and the process started over. This work was done when the interviewer could be present, and again the changes were frequently tested on him. Generally these sessions occurred at Bellow's office or at his apartment, overlooking the Outer Drive and Lake Michigan. Once, however, revisions were made while he and the interviewer sat on a Jackson Park bench on a fine October afternoon, and one typescript was worked on along with beer and hamburgers at a local bar.

Revisions were of various sorts. Frequently there were slight changes in meaning: "That's what I really meant to say." Other alterations tightened up his language or were in the nature of stylistic improvements. Any sections which he judged to be excursions from the main topic were deleted. Most regretted by the interviewer were prunings

that eliminated certain samples of the characteristic Bellow wit: in a few places he came to feel he was simply "exhibiting" himself, and these were scratched out. On the other hand, whenever he could substitute for conventional literary diction an unexpected colloquial turn of phrase—which often proved humorous in context—he did so.

*Interviewer.* Some critics have felt that your work falls within the tradition of American naturalism, possibly because of some things you've said about Dreiser. I was wondering if you saw yourself in a particular literary tradition?

*Bellow.* Well, I think that the development of realism in the nineteenth century is still the major event of modern literature. Dreiser, a realist of course, had elements of genius. He was clumsy, cumbersome, and in some respects a poor thinker. But he was rich in a kind of feeling which has been ruled off the grounds by many contemporary writers—the kind of feeling that every human being intuitively recognizes as primary. Dreiser has more open access to primary feelings than any American writer of the twentieth century. It makes a good many people uncomfortable that his emotion has not found a more developed literary form. It's true his art may be too "natural." He sometimes conveys his understanding by masses of words, verbal approximations. He blunders, but generally in the direction of truth. The result is that we are moved in an unmediated way by his characters, as by life, and then we say that his novels are simply torn from the side of life, and therefore not novels. But we can't escape reading them. He somehow conveys, without much refinement, depths of feeling that we usually associate with Balzac or Shakespeare.

*Interviewer.* This realism, then, is a particular kind of sensibility, rather than a technique?

*Bellow.* Realism specializes in *apparently* unmediated experiences. What stirred Dreiser was simply the idea that you could bring unmediated feeling to the novel. He took it up naively without going to the trouble of mastering an art. We don't see this because he makes so many familiar "art" gestures, borrowed from the art-fashions of his day, and even from the slick magazines, but he is really a natural, a primitive. I have great respect for his simplicities and I think they are worth more than much that has been praised as high art in the American novel.

*Interviewer.* Could you give me an example of what you mean?

*Bellow.* In a book like *Jennie Gerhardt* the delicacy with which Jennie allows Lester Kane to pursue his conventional life while she herself lives unrecognized with her illegitimate daughter, the depth of her understanding, and the depth of her sympathy and of her truthfulness impress me. She is not a sentimental figure. She has a natural sort of honor.

*Interviewer.* Has recent American fiction pretty much followed this direction?

*Bellow.* Well, among his heirs there are those who believe that clumsy-

ness and truthfulness go together. But clumsiness does not necessarily imply a sincere heart. Most of the "Dreiserians" lack talent. On the other hand, people who put Dreiser down, adhering to a "high art" standard for the novel, miss the point.

*Interviewer.* Aside from Dreiser, what other American writers do you find particularly of interest?

*Bellow.* I like Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald. I think of Hemingway as a man who developed a significant manner as an artist, a life-style which is important. For his generation, his language created a life-style, one which pathetic old gentlemen are still found clinging to. I don't think of Hemingway as a great novelist. I like Fitzgerald's novels better, but I often feel about Fitzgerald that he couldn't distinguish between innocence and social climbing. I am thinking of *The Great Gatsby*.

*Interviewer.* If we go outside American literature, you've mentioned that you read the nineteenth-century Russian writers with a good deal of interest. Is there anything particular about them that attracts you?

*Bellow.* Well, the Russians have an immediate charismatic appeal—excuse the Max Weberism. Their conventions allow them to express freely their feelings about nature and human beings. We have inherited a more restricted and imprisoning attitude toward the emotions. We have to work around puritanical and stoical restraints. We lack the Russian openness. Our path is narrower.

*Interviewer.* In what other writers do you take special interest?

*Bellow.* I have a special interest in Joyce; I have a special interest in Lawrence. I read certain poets over and over again. I can't say where they belong in my theoretical scheme; I only know that I have an attachment to them. Yeats is one such poet. Hart Crane is another. Hardy and Walter de la Mare. I don't know what these have in common—probably nothing. I know that I am drawn repeatedly to these men.

*Interviewer.* It's been said that one can't like *both* Lawrence and Joyce, that one has to choose between them. You don't feel this way?

*Bellow.* No. Because I really don't take Lawrence's sexual theories very seriously. I take his art seriously, not his doctrine. But he himself warned us repeatedly not to trust the artist. He said trust the work itself. So I have little use for the Lawrence who wrote *The Plumed Serpent* and great admiration for the Lawrence who wrote *The Lost Girl*.

*Interviewer.* Does Lawrence at all share the special feeling you find attractive in Dreiser?

*Bellow.* A certain openness to experience, yes. And a willingness to trust one's instinct, to follow it freely—that Lawrence has.

*Interviewer.* You mentioned before the interview that you would prefer not to talk about your early novels, that you feel you are a different person now from what you were then. I wonder if this is all you want to say, or if you can say something about how you have changed.

*Bellow.* I think that when I wrote those early books I was timid. I still felt the incredible effrontery of announcing myself to the world (in

part I mean the WASP world) as a writer and an artist. I had to touch a great many bases, demonstrate my abilities, pay my respects to formal requirements. In short, I was afraid to let myself go.

*Interviewer.* When do you find a significant change occurring?

*Bellow.* When I began to write *Augie March*. I took off many of these restraints. I think I took off too many, and went too far, but I was feeling the excitement of discovery. I had just increased my freedom, and like any emancipated plebeian I abused it at once.

*Interviewer.* What were these restraints that you took off in *Augie March*?

*Bellow.* My first two books are well made. I wrote the first quickly but took great pains with it. I labored with the second and tried to make it letter-perfect. In writing *The Victim* I accepted a Flaubertian standard. Not a bad standard, to be sure, but one which, in the end, I found repressive—repressive because of the circumstances of my life and because of my upbringing in Chicago as the son of immigrants. I could not, with such an instrument as I developed in the first two books, express a variety of things I knew intimately. Those books, though useful, did not give me a form in which I felt comfortable. A writer should be able to express himself easily, naturally, copiously in a form which frees his mind, his energies. Why should he hobble himself with formalities? With a borrowed sensibility? With the desire to be “correct”? Why should I force myself to write like an Englishman or a contributor to *The New Yorker*? I soon saw that it was simply not in me to be a mandarin. I should add that for a young man in my position there were social inhibitions, too. I had good reason to fear that I would be put down as a foreigner, an interloper. It was made clear to me when I studied literature in the university that as a Jew and the son of Russian Jews I would probably never have the right *feeling* for Anglo-Saxon traditions, for English words. I realized even in college that the people who told me this were not necessarily disinterested friends. But they had an effect on me, nevertheless. This was something from which I had to free myself. I fought free because I had to.

*Interviewer.* Are these social inhibitors as powerful today as they were when you wrote *Dangling Man*?

*Bellow.* I think I was lucky to have grown up in the Middle West, where such influences are less strong. If I'd grown up in the East and attended an Ivy League university, I might have been damaged more badly. Puritan and Protestant America carries less weight in Illinois than in Massachusetts. But I don't bother much with such things now.

*Interviewer.* Did another change in your writing occur between *Augie March* and *Herzog*? You've mentioned writing *Augie March* with a great sense of freedom, but I take it that *Herzog* was a very difficult book to write.

*Bellow.* It was. I had to tame and restrain the style I developed in *Augie March* in order to write *Henderson* and *Herzog*. I think both those books reflect that change in style. I wouldn't really know how to describe it. I don't care to trouble my mind to find an exact description for it, but it has something to do with a kind of readiness to record

impressions arising from a source of which we know little. I suppose that all of us have a primitive prompter or commentator within, who from earliest years has been advising us, telling us what the real world is. There is such a commentator in me. I have to prepare the ground for him. From this source come words, phrases, syllables; sometimes only sounds, which I try to interpret, sometimes whole paragraphs, fully punctuated. When E. M. Forster said, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" he was perhaps referring to his own prompter. There is that observing instrument in us—in childhood at any rate. At the sight of a man's face, his shoes, the color of light, a woman's mouth or perhaps her ear, one receives a word, a phrase, at times nothing but a nonsense syllable from the primitive commentator.

*Interviewer.* So this change in your writing—

*Bellow.* —was an attempt to get nearer to that primitive commentator.

*Interviewer.* How do you go about getting nearer to him, preparing the way for him?

*Bellow.* When I say the commentator is primitive, I don't mean that he's crude; God knows, he's often fastidious. But he won't talk until the situation's right. And if you prepare the ground for him with too many difficulties underfoot, he won't say anything. I must be terribly given to fraud and deceit because I sometimes have great difficulty preparing a suitable ground. This is why I've had so much trouble with my last two novels. I appealed directly to my prompter. The prompter, however, has to find the occasion perfect—that is to say, truthful, and necessary. If there is any superfluity or inner falsehood in the preparations, he is aware of it. I have to stop. Often I have to begin again, with the first word. I can't remember how many times I wrote *Herzog*. But at last I did find the acceptable ground for it.

*Interviewer.* Do these preparations include your coming to some general conception of the work?

*Bellow.* Well, I don't know exactly how it's done. I let it alone a good deal. I try to avoid common forms of strain and distortion. For a long time, perhaps from the middle of the nineteenth century, writers have not been satisfied to regard themselves simply as writers. They have required also a theoretical framework. Most often they have been their own theoreticians, have created their own ground as artists, and have provided an exegesis for their own works. They have found it necessary to take a position, not merely to write novels. In bed last night I was reading a collection of articles by Stendhal. One of them amused me very much, touched me. Stendhal was saying how lucky writers were in the age of Louis XIV not to have anyone take them very seriously. Their obscurity was very valuable. Corneille had been dead for several days before anyone at court considered the fact important enough to mention. In the nineteenth century, says Stendhal, there would have been several public orations, Corneille's funeral covered by all the papers. There are great advantages in not being taken *too* seriously. Some writers are excessively serious about themselves. They accept the ideas of the "cultivated public." There is such a thing as overcapitalizing the

A in artist. Certain writers and musicians understand this. Stravinsky says the composer should practice his trade exactly as a shoemaker does. Mozart and Haydn accepted commissions—wrote to order. In the nineteenth century, the artist loftily waited for Inspiration. Once you elevate yourself to the rank of a cultural institution, you're in for a lot of trouble.

Then there is a minor modern disorder—the disease of people who live by an image of themselves created by papers, television, Broadway, Sardi's, gossip, or the public need for celebrities. Even buffoons, prize fighters, and movie stars have caught the bug. I avoid these "images." I have a longing, not for downright obscurity—I'm too egotistical for that—but for peace, and freedom from meddling.

*Interviewer.* In line with this, the enthusiastic response to *Herzog* must have affected your life considerably. Do you have any thoughts as to why this book became and remained the bestseller it did?

*Bellow.* I don't like to agree with the going view that if you write a bestseller it's because you betrayed an important principle or sold your soul. I know that sophisticated opinion believes this. And although I don't take much stock in sophisticated opinion, I have examined my conscience. I've tried to find out whether I had unwittingly done wrong. But I haven't yet discovered the sin. I do think that a book like *Herzog*, which ought to have been an obscure book with a total sale of eight thousand, has such a reception because it appeals to the unconscious sympathies of many people. I know from the mail I've received that the book described a common predicament. *Herzog* appealed to Jewish readers, to those who have been divorced, to those who talk to themselves, to college graduates, readers of paperbacks, autodidacts, to those who yet hope to live awhile, etc.

*Interviewer.* Do you feel there were deliberate attempts at lionizing by the literary tastemakers? I was thinking that the recent deaths of Faulkner and Hemingway have been seen as creating a vacuum in American letters, which we all know is abhorrent.

*Bellow.* Well, I don't know whether I would say a vacuum. Perhaps a pigeonhole. I agree that there is a need to keep the pigeonholes filled and that people are uneasy when there are vacancies. Also the mass media demand material—grist—and literary journalists have to create a major-league atmosphere in literature. The writers don't offer to fill the pigeonholes. It's the critics who want figures in the Pantheon. But there are many people who assume that every writer must be bucking for the niche. Why should writers wish to be rated—seeded—like tennis players? Handicapped like racehorses? What an epitaph for a novelist: "He won all the polls"!

*Interviewer.* How much are you conscious of the reader when you write? Is there an ideal audience that you write for?

*Bellow.* I have in mind another human being who will understand me. I count on this. Not on perfect understanding, which is Cartesian, but on approximate understanding, which is Jewish. And on a meeting of sympathies, which is human. But I have no ideal reader in my head, no.



Let me just say this, too. I seem to have the blind self-acceptance of the eccentric who can't conceive that his eccentricities are not clearly understood.

*Interviewer.* So there isn't a great deal of calculation about rhetoric?

*Bellow.* These are things that can't really be contrived. People who talk about contrivance must think that a novelist is a man capable of building a skyscraper to conceal a dead mouse. Skyscrapers are not raised simply to conceal mice.

*Interviewer.* It's been said that contemporary fiction sees man as a victim. You gave this title to one of your early novels, yet there seems to be very strong opposition in your fiction to seeing man as simply determined or futile. Do you see any truth to this claim about contemporary fiction?

*Bellow.* Oh, I think that realistic literature from the first has been a victim literature. Pit any ordinary individual—and realistic literature concerns itself with ordinary individuals—against the external world, and the external world will conquer him, of course. Everything that people believed in the nineteenth century about determinism, about man's place in nature, about the power of productive forces in society, made it inevitable that the hero of the realistic novel should not be a hero but a sufferer who is eventually overcome. So I was doing nothing very original by writing another realistic novel about a common man and calling it *The Victim*. I suppose I was discovering independently the essence of much of modern realism. In my innocence, I put my finger on it. Serious realism also contrasts the common man with aristocratic greatness. He is overborne by fate, just as the great are in Shakespeare or Sophocles. But this contrast, inherent in literary tradition, always damages him. In the end the force of tradition carries realism into parody, satire, mock-epic—Leopold Bloom.

*Interviewer.* Haven't you yourself moved away from the suggestion of plebeian tragedy toward a treatment of the sufferer that has greater comic elements? Although the concerns and difficulties are still fundamentally serious, the comic elements in *Henderson*, in *Herzog*, even in *Seize the Day* seem much more prominent than in *Dangling Man* or *The Victim*.

*Bellow.* Yes, because I got very tired of the solemnity of complaint, altogether impatient with complaint. Obligated to choose between complaint and comedy, I choose comedy, as more energetic, wiser, and manlier. This is really one reason why I dislike my own early novels. I find them plaintive, sometimes querulous. *Herzog* makes comic use of complaint.

*Interviewer.* When you say that you are obliged to choose between complaint and comedy, does it mean this is the only choice—that you are limited to choosing between just these two alternatives?

*Bellow.* I'm not inclined to predict what will happen. I may feel drawn to comedy again, I may not. But modern literature was dominated by a tone of elegy from the twenties to the fifties, the atmosphere of Eliot in "The Waste Land" and that of Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Sensibility absorbed this sadness, this view of the artist