Saul Bellow and Modern American Fiction

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Abstract: Saul Bellow has been America’s leading novelist for nearly 40 years. This essay has three chief aims: 1) to define Bellow’s idiosyncratic genius as a writer; and 2) to place him in the context of the modern American novel. In aid of the latter goal I offer some generalizations about the tradition of American prose fiction. 3) My third aim is to provide some bibliographical guidance to literary criticism and interpretation of modern American fiction.

With the publication of Herzog in 1964, Saul Bellow became America’s leading novelist. Even though he has slowed down in the last two decades, Bellow has continued to be regarded as the best living novelist not in the United States alone but in the English-speaking world. But the publication in 2000 of a big new biography of the Bellow by James Atlas has raised the question: What kind of novelist has he been? And, by extension, how does Bellow’s success reflect on the American novel in general during the past century?

James Atlas is a literary journalist who first attracted attention over 20 years ago with his superb biography of the late poet Delmore Schwartz. Schwartz had been a friend of Bellow when they were both young and starting out in the 1940s. In those years Schwartz had been one of America’s most promising poets; later he descended into psychosis culminating in an early, miserable death. When, many years later, Bellow decided to write a novel about the difficulties of being an artist in America, he drew on details of Schwartz’s career.
The result was one of Bellow’s best novels, *Humboldt’s Gift* (1975). So the novelist and his future biographer had in common books they had written about this colorful, ill-fated poet. Bellow had liked Atlas’s book, and that seems to have been one major reason for his allowing him access to his personal papers.

Atlas spent 11 years researching and writing this jumbo “life”, which runs nearly 700 pages. It is full of fresh information about Bellow’s many wives and lovers; his complicated friendships with publishers and male friends; and the practical side of his career, such as how much his books earned and the ever-changing value of his stock in the literary marketplace. In short, this is a book that is less concerned with Bellow’s high-minded themes, e.g., the place of the artist in a commercial society, than it is with the vicissitudes of Bellow’s own daily life as a man and author.

But in writing the kind of book he wrote Atlas stirred up a storm of criticism. Several reviewers claimed not to be able to find in Atlas’s pages the writer they admired. Instead of Bellow as they viewed him, as an artist with a profoundly spiritual consciousness, Atlas, the literary journalist, had served up tons of gossip. Atlas, his opponents said, had emphasized the matrimonial and material side of Bellow’s life but paid no attention to the spiritual striving of Bellow’s heroes and of their creator. Bellow’s most salient quality as a writer has been his “firm metaphysical intelligence”, as one of Atlas’s fiercest critics wrote. In his view the appropriate kind of biography for so great a novelist could only be a biography of his imagination.

Bellow would most likely agree with that assessment. He has consistently aspired to a profound philosophic-religious consciousness. The question is whether his self-conception is apt, whether it accords with what we find in the novels. One incident adduced by Atlas is revelatory in this regard. In the late 1950s, when
Bellow was writing his novel *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), he experienced new accesses of creative power that inspired moments of ecstatic confidence. On one occasion he burst out to a fellow novelist: “Pretty soon I’ll be unassailable, and I can write philosophy like Tolstoy.” The connection between the two clauses in that statement is not clear. Perhaps Bellow meant that he would be unassailable if he could write philosophy like Tolstoy. Unfortunately, his notion that he had a philosophic mind comparable with Tolstoy’s seems a delusion. Isaiah Berlin, the great British historian of ideas, wrote his most famous essay, “The Hedgehog and the Fox”, about Tolstoy’s philosophy of history in *War and Peace*. It is impossible to imagine Berlin or anyone else writing a comparable study of Bellow’s philosophy, whether it be his metaphysics or social thought or his ideas about human consciousness.

I do not mean to suggest that Bellow has been allergic to ideas. His relation to intellect has been far more complicated than that. It is clear that Bellow has looked to ideas to orient his life and structure his fiction. But most of the ideas to which he has, at one time or another, subscribed, have been slightly outlandish. For instance, in his early phase, most obviously in *Henderson the Rain King*, he looked to the heterodox psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich and his eccentric theories about the armored body and the need to liberate orgastic energy. In later years, Bellow offered himself as a spokesman for anthroposophy, a philosophy devised by the Swiss writer Rudolph Steiner that bears some similarity to theosophy. Steiner’s transcendental theorizing, which nearly gets out of hand in the latter part of *Humboldt’s Gift*, provided Bellow with a metaphysics that spoke to his belief in a “higher consciousness” and “higher soul”. It also provided him with meditative exercises that he practiced daily.
The uses to which Bellow was able to put anthroposophy do not make the fundamental tenets any more believable. However, in marking Bellow’s susceptibility to eccentric systems of thought we need to keep in mind that he has hardly been the only modern writer attracted to ideas most readers find fanciful. William Butler Yeats had many self-invented theories that, strange as they seem, nevertheless provided a scaffolding for some of his greatest poems. For an artist the objective truth of his philosophic outlook may be far less important than that outlook’s usefulness as a source of images and tropes.

There was a great hunger in the post-World War II years for a kind of writing that would help dislocated and disoriented people find a new basis for their lives. And if the writer did not have the solutions, he might help people feel more justified in their confusions if he shared their condition. Bellow, I would say, helped his muddled readers accept themselves by himself appearing as one of them, if slightly less muddled. He consistently assured his readers that help was on the way and that humankind would prevail. Here was a writer himself deeply affected by the crisis of belief, who nevertheless believed that there were grounds for hope. This affirmation of human possibility itself inspired loyalty in Bellow’s readers.

Also, he had the great good fortune of being taken up by prominent non-novelist intellectuals who identified themselves with his aspiration to break out of his parochial origins and enter the mainstream of American writing. Bellow was the great hope in the 1950s and Sixties of the so-called New York Intellectuals, a coterie of mainly Jewish intellectuals who gathered about the quarterly journal Partisan Review. Bellow’s New York contemporaries, including the literary critics Philip Rahv and Irving Howe, tended to see him as the creative fulfillment of their own and their generation’s experience. He
seemed to speak for them as children of impoverished immigrants from East Europe, as victims of the Depression, and perhaps above all as former political radicals who had been deprived during the Cold War of a public existence. This public existence is what Bellow’s *Herzog* rather pretentiously refers to as “a politics in the Aristotelian sense”.

In *Herzog* the anguish of the eponymous hero was the anguish of a whole intellectual generation for whom the discrediting of left-wing politics had meant having to find one’s fulfillment exclusively in domestic life. In the 1930s many of the *Partisan Reviewers* had lived off make-work jobs provided by Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. It was a bad time economically but a good time for young intellectuals to the degree that, without any realistic prospect of finding jobs, they had plenty of time to read and to sit in cafeterias on Broadway arguing about world-historical issues. To a greater or lesser extent, they all conceived of their lives in political terms. Then in the Fifties came the effective disappearance of ideological politics, and these public intellectuals suddenly found their roles and orientations irrelevant. No men proved to be as little equipped as they to make their happiness exclusively out of “personal relationships”, a phrase they invoked, often with disdain. What ensued for many of them during the early Cold War years was a descent into sexual affairs and messy divorces that had nothing of the dignity and historical pertinence of the arguments of their youth about the fate of capitalism.

Bellow was praised by his *Partisan Review* admirers as a novelist of ideas. Conversely, he was attacked by detractors as “the novelist of the intellectuals”. These detractors were sometimes unreconstructed old-left critics who championed “the real” and considered that this category necessarily excluded general ideas, theories of value, and delicate moral discriminations. They preferred
Theodore Dreiser to Henry James, the latter of whom was felt to be effete. They praised Walt Whitman for his celebration of the common man and ordinary experience, and they attacked Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose guilt-haunted romances they found lacking in substance. Lionel Trilling, a penetrating critic of this old-left sensibility, objected to this blinkered view of "reality" as an undifferentiated materiality that excluded ideas, imagination, and moral sensibility. The old-left critics found their model novelists in early-twentieth-century figures such as Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, and John Steinbeck, all of whom Trilling attacked in influential essays published during the late Thirties and early Forties.

In the same years Philip Rahv, one of the founding editors of *Partisan Review*, proposed a similar critique of the dominant left-liberal type of American fiction. He summed up the most salient tendency of the American Twenties and Thirties as "the cult of experience". That cult appeared, Rahv said, in a "singular pattern consisting, on the one hand, of a disinclination to thought and, on the other, of an intense predilection for the real". The latter, "the real", appeared as "a vast phenomenology swept by waves of sensation and feeling". Writing in 1940, Rahv urged writers to the literary traditions of France, Germany, and Russia, in which writers were moved to convert their experience into conscious thought, rather than to affirm experience as an end in itself.

So, when Bellow began publishing in the Forties, his work seemed like an answer to this critic's prayer. Had the Russian-born Rahv pined for a fiction of ideas on the European model? Bellow seemed at first an unlikely messiah. He was a Chicago-raised American who, in his breakthrough novel, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), would revel in a colloquial style formed after the example of *Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Yet
at the same time Bellow was no midwestern provincial. His models were Continental Europeans: Dostoevsky, Kafka, Sartre. Quite unlike muddle-headed naturalists like Dreiser, Eugene O'Neill, and James T. Farrell, Bellow was capable of reflecting on the larger crises of modernity.

When Herzog appeared in the mid-Sixties, Rahv, a literary critic not much given to celebration, abandoned all restraint in praising Bellow's "intellectual mastery". In particular he celebrated Herzog's letters. These are the unsent, unsendable letters which, as Bellow says, Herzog "writes endlessly, fantastically, 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". Bellow's revival of the old-fashioned epistolary mode works beautifully in this novel and has influenced his most talented successor, Philip Rahv. But we need to ask: What are these letters about, and in what relationship does Bellow stand to the ideas contained in them?

Many of the letters are directed against the received wisdom of modern thought, what we might call cultural correctness as it existed in the early Cold War years. Herzog directs his spleen particularly against the then-fashionable cultural pessimism derived from Nietzsche and Heidegger. Indeed, two of his blusteringly comic letters are addressed to these masters of modern thought. Some of the letters are directed against the ideas of Hannah Arendt, who had been a colleague of Bellow at the University of Chicago, a one-time lover of Heidegger, and one of Heidegger's most influential exponents in the United States. I quote at length from a letter that Rahv himself quoted in order to illustrate the way these letters "teem with ideas". I will, however, come to different conclusions starting out from this passage than did Rahv.

The following is from Herzog's letter to a fellow scholar, a man
named Shapiro. Herzog writes: "we must not forget how quickly the visions of genius become the canned goods of the intellectuals. The canned sauerkraut of Spengler's Prussian socialism, the cheap mental stimulants of Alienation, the cant and rant of the pipsqueaks about Inauthenticity and Forlornness. I can't accept this foolish dreariness. We are talking about the whole life of mankind. The subject is too great, too deep, for such weakness, cowardice.... A merely aesthetic critique of modern history! After the wars and mass killings! You are too intelligent for this. You inherited rich blood. Your father peddled apples."

Rahv notes approvingly how Bellow's polemic is directed against the complacency of fashionable modern theories of pain and anguish. Here, as throughout his fiction, Bellow takes aim against the intellectualizing of the intellectuals, the inadequacy of their ideas to experienced reality. The implication is that Herzog, from his own recent experience, could teach a thing or two to these German philosophers who only pontificate about pain and anguish. Despite his own personal suffering, Herzog repudiates the satisfactions of German cultural pessimism, as it has expressed itself in a powerful intellectual tradition running from Spengler to Heidegger to Arendt and Adorno.

As a polemicist and satirist, Bellow's intelligence is basically reactive. Herzog's letters are like the short Op-Ed pieces that appear in American newspapers on the page across opposite the formal editorial page. It is here, on the opposite-editorial page, that non-journalist contributors make their points and contribute their opinions on topical matters. It is worthwhile underlining the topicality of these ideas that engage Herzog. It may be that his mini-essays are less about ideas than about opinions, which tend always to have a brief life. Admittedly these letters are intended as a clue to Herzog's
personality and an index to the exacerbated state of his nerves. Still, I would say, Bellow hopes his readers will admire Herzog's intellectual perspicacity, enlisted though it be in his madness.

A problem an old admirer of Herzog finds in teaching the book is that the ideas and attitudes have become dated. Present-day American readers need footnotes to understand the cultural crisis to which Herzog addresses himself in his letters. The "political correctness" of the present is quite different from the conventional wisdom that Bellow was attacking in 1964. In his influential post-structuralist literary study *S/Z*, the French literary theorist and semiologist Roland Barthes identified several "codes" that run through every sustained narrative. The one he valued least was the "cultural code", by which he had in mind every allusion in an old novel to the cultural assumptions and debates that belong to the time in which it was written. Barthes found an immense amount of such "junk" in the classic novels of the nineteenth century. Bellow for his part has always wanted to write a kind of fiction that is juicy and lyrical, but his dependence on now-worn-out ideas, together with his forced optimism, deprives novels like Herzog of the eloquence and narrative freedom a novel needs to assure its long-term survival. *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), the novel in which Bellow's forced optimism gives way to deep anger over the counter-culture of the later Sixties, is another, more politicized instance of will doing the work of rhetoric.

Bellow has been one of the most intelligent of modern American writers with regard to the unique stresses of modern life. Moreover, his awareness of the major trends of modern thought makes him far more incisive as a guide to the crisis of modernity than, say, John Updike. But does this make Bellow a novelist of ideas, a philosophic novelist on the order of Dostoevsky or Thomas Mann? No, as with
the letters of Herzog, he remains primarily a kibitzer, a commentator from the sidelines. His ideas come in very short takes so that the letters in Herzog are as effective as they are because Bellow can fire off his mini-satires, his fragments, without taking on responsibility to develop any idea at length.

His major sustained idea is that the fashionable cant is wrong, that an affirmation of life is still possible. Except in Mr. Sammler’s Planet and The Dean’s December (1982), in which Bellow’s affirmative humanism was overcome by rage and despair, he has generally insisted that there are grounds for hope, though he has never precisely defined those grounds. He has stood for the kind of vague humanistic affirmation that has always appealed to the Swedish judges for the Nobel Prize in literature, which Bellow in fact won in 1976. It is possible to agree that Bellow has been America’s greatest novelist since William Faulkner while still feeling that his vague humanist affirmations represent the weak side of his writing. For in these vague declarations of hope, Bellow descends to the bland cliches of valedictory addresses at university commencements. Bellow’s optimism points to the soft underbelly of his tough-minded intellectual satire and comic turns.

The function of ideas in Bellow’s novels is to make up the Sargasso Sea in which his emotionally distraught, unmoored heroes are drowning. Ideas are the environment, the medium, in which these characters have their being. But when they are in emotional trouble, their much-loved ideas do not usually buoy them up. On the contrary, ideas then become objects of considerable suspicion. Consider the letter to Shapiro quoted by Philip Rahv. Herzog closes with a reminder of their shared ethnic origins, as the sons of poor East-European immigrants. The implicit admonition, to trust your origins not the abstractions of philosophic thought, is of a piece with
a central admonition of the tradition of the American novel: Trust experience not ideas; trust your heart not your head.

Bellow had been praised by the New York Intellectuals as an exception to the "redskin" tradition of the American novel, the tradition of unlettered roughnecks. Here he was, a serious man who was also an intellectual, and to that extent a successor to the "paleface" line of Hawthorne and Henry James. Yet, looked at closely, Bellow turns out to be quite as anti-intellectual as the redskins (Twain, Stephen Crane, Sherwood Anderson, Hemingway, etc.), who trust sensation and experience over abstract thought. Herzog urges Shapiro to remember the "rich blood" that flows in his Russian-Jewish veins. Obviously, as with Herzog and Shapiro, there is a difference between Bellow the redskin and the classic American redskins. The difference and I do not mean to minimize it—is that Bellow uses ideas to show the ultimate uselessness of ideas. But it is not abstract thought that leads Henderson to his vision at the end of the novel named after him, and it is not thought that enables Herzog to find his way back to clarity after his season of "madness" in the country. Indeed, it is the madness itself that, like a vision, allows him to come back to himself, transformed by his crisis.

Bellow's curious relation to ideas is mirrored by one repeated pattern of his non-literary life. He has often been dependent for his best ideas on a succession of mentors. They have usually been big-brother types who have respected Bellow's creative genius and allowed him to hitch onto their own talents for discursiveness. As Saul had been the youngest and dreamiest of the several non-dreamy men in his immediate family, so did he go on to become the self-consciously naive outsider/beginner in later life. He has been deeply dependent on others for his ideas of the world, yet always insisting (in the words of his early hero, Augie March) that he is not "a
candidate for adoption”.

One thinks of Bellow’s “reality instructors”. These are his fictional characters, men of the worldly world, who are always ready to instruct a Bellow naif as to just how things are. Such instructors are usually lawyers, criminals, and other shady types who have got their own education in the streets. They are often skeptics if not out-and-out nihilists. But there is another class of instructors, real-life figures who Bellow turned to as gurus at one time or another. One group is composed of teachers he knew only from books. I have mentioned Wilhelm Reich and Rudolph Steiner. To those names could be added that of Owen Barfield, an English barrister and the major English-language exponent of Steiner’s thought. Bellow frequently contacted Barfield with questions about difficult passages in the Steiner’s writings.

Another group of intellectual mentors consisted of colleagues-friends in the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago: the sociologist Edward Shils, who advised Bellow at great length regarding Mr. Sammler’s Planet; the art critic Harold Rosenberg, whom Bellow memorialized as Victor Wulpy in his novella “What Kind of Day Did you Have?”, and the philosopher Allen Bloom, the author of the best-seller The Closing of the American Mind. Bellow co-taught with Bloom up to the time of the latter’s death and later memorialized him in his superb novel Ravelstein (2000). Bellow was deeply dependent on such strong-minded friends as characters in his fiction, but he was no less dependent on them for ideas that he could draw on for his novels.

In his fiction of the past two decades, Bellow has seemed more and more to want to escape from the disorder of daily life. His characters are happier when they leave behind the great world for the sake of gazing up at the moon through a telescope. But they are
always drawn back into daily reality, and when they do so, almost always they bring with them the highfalutin ideas that in one novel after another prove themselves to be so useless in helping them sort things out. The inadequacy of ideas is the basis of Bellow’s comic stance. As I have been suggesting, Bellow is not remarkable for his ideas as such, in the way that George Eliot and Tolstoy, in their very different ways, were remarkable for their ideas. His specialty has been rather different—and equally valuable. Bellow’s genius has been for showing how we moderns live with our ideas. His subject is our relation to our ideas.

What he has demonstrated, in novel after novel, is the asymmetry between the high-tone ideas available to us and the undignified actuality of our lives. James Wood, a youngish British admirer of Bellow, has published a collection of essays entitled The Broken Estate. His subject is the question of belief in modern fiction. That, in one of its aspects, is the preoccupation of Bellow’s novels. And whether you define the modern situation in terms of a “broken estate” or “abandoned colonnade” or similar terms, Bellow has been concerned with the loss of traditional enabling myths and belief systems, and the shards and fragments they have left behind. One consequence of the loss of faith has been the marketing of a great smorgasbord of proposed surrogate-religions. These have usually been met only with notional rather than real assent, to cite a distinction proposed by Henry Cardinal Newman, the nineteenth-century British theologian.

At times, most notably in Mr. Sammler’s Planet and The Dean’s December, Bellow has been goaded by the sometime ugliness and violence of American urban life to a bitterness that borders on despair. In Sammler, in particular, he turned to a form that is recurrent in American writing but that does not show him at his best.
That is the jeremiad, the hellfire-and-damnation sermon that once emanated from seventeenth-century New England divines and was later adapted for secular purposes by Melville, Twain, and others. But at his best, as in Herzog and Humboldt's Gift, Bellow has been a comic writer who has been as alert to his own foibles as to those of his enemies. Some idealistic admirers of Bellow's work want to think of his career as a Hegelian study in the progress of consciousness, as exclusively an affair of the Spirit. But Bellow himself has known better and his novels tell a different story, of the tension between spirit, imagination, and intellect on the one hand and the comedy of actuality on the other. Bellow's Chicago has been better known for its animal slaughter-yards and as a center for trading in futures on commodities than as a temple of artistic or spiritual creativity. Bellow is its laureate, and his noble, often comic, Nobel-winning fiction has always depicted the difficult struggle that the higher consciousness has had to wage with the grit, even the sewage, of materiality.

**Suggested Readings**

In 1974 Irving Howe edited an edition of Herzog that includes the novel itself, some related essays by Bellow, and essays by English and American critics including Frank Kermode, Alfred Kazin, and Howe himself. These essays and Howe's "Introduction" make clear to what a degree Herzog was, as Howe says, "a novel which many readers felt they could identify with in some intensely personal way". Howe's edition of Herzog (New York; Viking Press, 1974) has long been out of print, but it remains a monument to Bellow's prestige in the 1970s, the decade in which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. Howe wrote full-length studies of Sherwood Anderson and William Faulkner. His essays on modern American fiction are included in a collection of his lifetime's work, *Selected Writings, 1950-1990* (1990).
I have drawn on some ideas of Philip Rahv, especially from his early essays “The Cult of Experience in American Writing” and “Paleface and Redskin”. Rahv’s essays on American literature are to be found in two collections of his work that overlap to some degree. These are Literature and the Sixth Sense (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969) and Essays on Literature and Politics, 1932-1972 (Houghton Mifflin, 1978).

Lionel Trilling, the most influential of the literary intellectuals associated with Partisan Review, wrote a number of important essays on the American novel that were collected in The Liberal Imagination (1950) and The Opposing Self (1955). The most important of these essays have been reprinted in a recent selection of Trilling’s work: The Moral Obligation To Be Intelligent (2000).

Perry Miller taught a famous course on American Romanticism at Harvard for many years. Some of the harvest of his research on nineteenth-century American literature and thought appears in his book Nature’s Nation (1967). One of the best essays in that collection, “The Romance and the Novel”, argues that the romance, rather than the novel, has been and remains the dominant tradition in American prose fiction. The difference, as Sir Walter Scott had defined it, is that the novel is “a fictitious narrative (in which) the events are accommodated to the ordinary train of human events, and the modern state of society”. The romance, on the other hand, is “a fictitious narrative in prose or verse; the interest of which turns upon marvelous and uncommon incidents”. The novel values fidelity to experience and probability of motive, whereas the romance seeks to transcend the commonplace in favor of the sublime. Bellow clearly has written in the tradition of the nineteenth-century realistic novel. However, he has never believed that “the ordinary train of human events” is all there is. That is, he has been a romancer to the degree
that he has aspired to the sublime.

Certain antitheses became staples of romantic fiction. One was the contrast between the conventional heroine, who was always blonde, and the exotic dark lady, as in Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun*. The dark lady arouses temptation but is feared as a threat to the dominant social and religious order. Another great opposition was that of the head and the heart. Romancers like Herman Melville came down unambivalently on the side of feeling (the heart) as against the rigidity and aridity of abstract thought (the head). Bellow’s sympathy with those who live by the heart emerges clearly in a character like Eugene Henderson, who sums up his non-negotiable claim on life in his repeated cry, “I want, I want!”

Some years after Perry Miller’s essay, Richard Chase published a critical study, *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, which argued that, even in our own age of realistic fiction, the American novel has continued to show its indebtedness to the older tradition of romance. Joel Porte’s *The Romance in America: Studies in Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, and James* is another valuable study. Porte sketches out a paradigm of the essential conventions of the romance as a literary form.

Finally, there is another book, by a distinguished historian of ideas, which illuminates Bellow’s work in relation to American social-cultural history. I refer to Richard Hofstadter’s authoritative treatment of *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963). Hofstadter traces the American preference for the heart as against the head to the nation’s Protestant-evangelical beginnings. But whatever the source, Bellow has been hardly been alone among American writers in making use of a good deal of intellectual artillery in contending against modern intellectualism.
About the author

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Mr. Krupnick has taught many summer seminars sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities that have included students from Europe and Asia. He has taught full-time at seven universities in England and America and has pursued research on fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Fulbright Commission, and the American Council of Learned Societies.