



JEWISH AND HUMAN SURVIVAL
ON BELLOW'S PLANET

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IN DISCUSSING HIS NOVEL *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Saul Bellow has said, "It's my first thoroughly non-apologetic venture into ideas. In *Herzog* and *Henderson the Rain King* I was kidding my way to Jesus, but here I'm baring myself nakedly."¹ Perhaps this accounts for the power of this moving book, for it appears that in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* Bellow is baring himself nakedly in two areas: it is his most Jewish novel, in that he uses a theme and characters from recent Jewish history, namely the Holocaust; and these Jewish protagonists and dilemmas become vehicles for Bellow's most forceful defense of humanism and denial of what he has repeatedly seen as the nihilistic, despairing vision of literary modernism. But unlike many other modern writers about Jewish themes, such as Malamud or Uris, Bellow refuses to offer sentimental portraits about the nobility or redemptive nature of suffering. His success rests mainly on his ability to undermine the expectations readers have developed about Jewish subjects like the Holocaust or the state of Israel.

Since the early '50s, a plethora of books by Jewish-American authors about Jewish life in America have brought about what some

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¹Jane Howard, "Bellow Considers His Planet," *Life*, 3 April 1970, p. 57.

critics have called an American Jewish literary renaissance. Reasons for the seeming appropriateness of the Jew as a symbol for modern man vary, but a prevailing theory is that in the aftermath of the Second World War, with its unparalleled human suffering and meaningless evil, modern man saw in the Jew the prototype of the victim, whose history of alienation and persecution seemed to match the spiritual state of all sensitive men in an age of madness.² Whether this picture adequately reflects Jewish life is less important than the satisfaction it appeared to give to American readers. "Issues that have long been intensely alive for the Jew—his search for identity. . . his daily struggle to be regarded as an individual—are coming more and more to occupy all mid-century Americans. . . ." wrote George Clay in 1957.³ Leslie Fiedler put it this way, "The Jew becomes a symbol of modern urban man, and the whole idea of exile. . . . Modern man is an outcast from his own Land of Israel and wanderer in the Diaspora."⁴ Further, Robert Alter, claiming that the sentimentalizing of Jews in American literature is partly due to the thinness of American Jewish culture, explained the phenomenon from the American point of view: "the general assent to the myth of the Jew reflects a decay of belief in the traditional American literary heroes—the eternal innocent, the tough guy, the man in quest of some romantic absolute—and a turning to the supposed aliens in our midst for an alternative image of the true Americans."⁵

By the time Saul Bellow wrote *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, published in 1970, the myth of the Jew as prototypical modern man was firmly established. And perhaps because Bellow's familiarity with Jewishness was not as thin as that of many of his contemporaries, as his fine translations from Yiddish and his readings in Jewish philosophy and literature demonstrate, he was more of a rebel against the prevailing myth than a contributor to it. This is most evident in his treatment of stereotypes, a technique he first used effectively in his second novel *The Victim* (1947), in which he deliberately draws on myths about Jews and Gentiles as victims and victimizers, only to reveal the psychological complexity of our need for an "other" and, by the end of the novel, to undermine the stock character types by revealing the human traits of each.

²For more information on this topic read Leslie Fiedler, "The Breakthrough: the American Jewish Novelist and the Fictional Image of the Jew," *Midstream*, 4 (Winter 1958), 15-35. See also "A Vocal Group: The Jewish Part in American Letters," *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 November 1959, p. xxxv; and Philip Roth, "Imagining Jews," in his *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Bantam Book, 1977).

³George Clay, "Jewish Hero in American Fiction," *The Reporter*, 19 September 1957, p. 46.

⁴Herbert Feinstein, "Interview with Leslie Fiedler and Harvey Swados," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, 1 (Winter 1960), 88.

⁵Robert Alter, "Sentimentalizing the Jews," in his *After the Tradition: Essays on Modern Jewish Writing* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1969), p. 39.

In his exploration of stereotypes in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Bellow turned away from the Jewish milieu that dominated his earlier fiction and American Jewish writing generally—Jewish immigrant life in the ghettos of America's large cities or the second and third generation move to the suburbs and assimilation. Instead, he chose a painful "other" for the Americanized Jewish community—the life of a survivor of Nazi atrocity, a man returned from the dead and the madness of the Holocaust and deposited in the insane landscape of urban America in the '60s. If the flight to the suburbs is in part a flight away from the visibility of human failure and suffering in cities, then a novel about a survivor of genocide living on the deteriorating upper West Side of New York City is bound to be disturbing to many Jewish readers, seeking more obvious images from their own lives. But more importantly, a novel about several Jewish survivors of Nazi persecution that does not present suffering as ennobling, but rather as crippling, undercuts any sentimental myths about hard won moral lessons or the spiritual rewards of tragedy. Instead, Bellow does present a vision of human community and moral accountability, but *despite* suffering, not because of it.

Mr. Sammler's Planet is Bellow's most Jewish novel because it deals directly with the most important events of Jewish history in this century—the Holocaust, the state of Israel, and American Jewry's relation to both. Moreover, the major values embodied in the novel are basic tenets of Jewish life, although they are not exclusively Jewish: a reverence for life and an unwavering belief in human survival under any circumstances; an emphasis on reason and human intellect, part of a long tradition of interpretation and commentary on scripture; a preference for good deed and actions over contemplation, the concept of *mitzvot*. These values—which constitute a rejection of despair, irrationalism, or madness as illuminating and consciousness for its own sake—are the components of Saul Bellow's humanistic vision of the world and run counter to what he has defined as literary modernism.

Bellow has used these general tenets of Jewish life in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* in three major areas:

1. By creating a protagonist who is a survivor of the worst catastrophe of recent Jewish history and by making him a man of reason, a believer in human survival by which he means a rational human community in which men are accountable to each other. And also by making him representative of some of the basic conflicts within Jewish life in this century.

2. By drawing on Jewish stereotypes that are already well established and undermining them, thereby attacking two-dimensional and sentimental portraits in fiction generally. This he does by the skillful presentation of city life and urban perceptions, the city being theoret-

ically the product of rational human organization and also the backdrop for most recent Jewish experience.

3. By demonstrating, through his unsentimental characterization and by his choice of survivor protagonists, that suffering does not ennoble while indifference to human pain dehumanizes. "Jews, by and large, did not revel in suffering," Robert Alter writes. "But—in contrast to fashionably modern views of *Angst*, existential despair, and the like—suffering was not generally thought of as a means of fulfillment, as a condition indispensable to human life."⁶ Bellow has made his most human character in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Elya Gruner, a man sensitive to the sufferings of others even on his deathbed, but not a victim of extreme suffering himself.

Artur Sammler, Bellow's central protagonist, is a septuagenarian come back from the dead, the sole survivor of a Nazi mass shooting and burial in the Second World War, who knows himself as others have reduced him and as he is when alone. The two are inseparable, however, since his sense of self is constantly being formed by the role others have assigned to him. "He, personally, was a symbol. His friends and family had made him a judge and priest. And of what was he a symbol? He didn't even know. Was it because he had survived? He hadn't even done that, since so much of the earlier person had disappeared. It wasn't surviving, it was only lasting. He had lasted" (p. 91).⁷ His nephew Elya Gruner, who brought him to the United States from a displaced persons' camp in Europe after the war, sees him

... as the last of a marvelous old generation. Mama's own brother, Uncle Artur, with big pale tufts over the eyes, with thin wrinkles augustly flowing under the big-brimmed perhaps romantically British hat. Sammler understood from his "nephew's" face with the grand smile and conspicuous ears that his historical significance for Gruner was considerable. Also his *experiences* were respected. The war. Holocaust. Suffering. (p. 77)

And although Sammler sometimes acts out these roles because they facilitate socializing with others—"Hadn't he lent himself, played the game, acted the ripe old refugee?"—he also observes:

Well, he was not what Shula believed him to be. Moreover, he was not what Feffer thought. How could he satisfy the needs of these imaginations? Feffer in the furious whirling of his spirit took him for a fixed point. In such hyperenergetic revolutions you fell in love with ideas of stability, and Sammler was an idea of stability. (p. 115)

With his "one good eye," Sammler observes how others see him, as a fixed point, a symbol of suffering and survival; and with the other, a

⁶Robert Alter, "Saul Bellow: A Dissent from Modernism," *After the Tradition*, p. 113.

⁷Saul Bellow, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), p. 91. Future references will be cited in the text.

casualty of a war injury and able to distinguish only light and shade, he can look within. Using this image of double vision, Bellow gives us a double image of Sammler's personal self as we both enter his consciousness and, by the ordering and word choice of the author, we judge that consciousness.

Born and raised in a wealthy Jewish home in the Austro-Hungarian Empire before the turn of the century, Artur Sammler retained a prim, fastidious, intellectual, and elitist view of society. Being named for a German philosopher of nihilism reveals both a reverence for Western European culture (since Cracow was originally part of Poland) and a tendency toward assimilation (Schopenhauer's nihilism being anathema to Jewish tradition). From this Old World refinement, where little Artur would sneeze into his servant's hand to avoid contact with his own germs, it is no surprise that young Artur develops a finickiness about body odors and the flesh (this was, after all, Freud's hunting grounds), a love of English cultivation and restraint, and a sense of being an outsider (like Kafka, he was a German speaker in Polish terrain and a Jew among Christians).

That his finest memories of civilized life are as a fringe member of Bloomsbury positions him as a liberal, perhaps as a pacifist, an avowed apolitical lover of art and ideas, and surely, from Bellow's post World War II perspective, as an overly refined dreamer. Bloomsbury, the term literary history has given to the apolitical devotion to the arts and the intellect that flourished among a group of English intellectuals, "ended" with the death of Virginia Woolf's nephew (Woolf being near to the center of the "movement") Julian Bell, a volunteer soldier on the side of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, that bloody rehearsal of World War II. And Sammler's Bloomsbury came to an end when he returned to Poland to claim his wife's family inheritance a few days before Hitler's invasion of Poland and he ironically inherited his people's history of persecution instead. The only survivor of a mass slaughter and burial, Sammler dug his way to the top of a heap of corpses and returned to life which now meant having to kill to stay alive. When we see Sammler, an old man in New York during the tumultuous '60s, he is still an Anglophile, sporting a furled English umbrella along with his bad eye, his scar from the Holocaust (the umbrella being an ironic emblem of Chamberlain and his catastrophic nearsightedness in his dealings with Hitler). Sammler is tormented by what he believes is a lunatic civilization, worshipping sex, excrement, and madness. "Who had raised the diaper flag? What had made shit a sacrament? What literary and psychological movement was that?" (p. 45).

Old, European, rational, and refined—this is the Sammler that, as

he himself perceives it, is thrust into a chaotic American world of the young, the irrational, and the vulgar. Because Sammler is a cerebral protagonist prone to intellectualize about everything, Bellow has given him a Jewish identity unlike his own that acts as a distancing device to prevent us from unreservedly identifying character with author. Raised in a working class Jewish neighborhood in Montreal and later Chicago and the child of Russian immigrants, Bellow is a much earthier man than Artur Sammler, despite many shared views of the world. As a result, we are sympathetic to Sammler, but only to a point; for at times his refinement seems repressive, his old World character seems elitist or precious, and his sagacity detached and cold. Resulting from the two frequently conflicting social groups within European Jewish life during the first half of this century, the Yiddish-speaking masses of poor Eastern European Jews and the predominantly middle class Western German speaking Jews, who considered themselves more genteel than their Eastern brethren, Bellow has created in Artur Sammler both a secret sharer, with his love of ratiocination and his sense of being an outsider, and a distinct social "other."

The most modern aspect of Arthur Sammler is his status as an accomplished urbanite. Just as others tend to see him as a symbol or stereotype, Sammler's perceptions of others in the heterogeneous and crowded world of the city also tend to be stereotypical. By providing the reader with several views of each character, Bellow undermines stereotypes, and in particular those that have populated American literature in the '50s and '60s.

In her sociological study of human behavior in cities, Lyn Lofland writes that urban man adjusts to the world of strangers he encounters by his ability to order them appearanceally and spatially. But knowing others by appearance has become more difficult for the modern city dweller than it was for the inhabitant of pre-industrial cities where heterogeneity was overt and often dictated by municipal law. In the modern city, she claims that heterogeneity is masked because industrialism provides us with mass produced clothing and because we are legally free to present ourselves as we wish, imitating whatever class or status we desire. Thus, although modern urban man will also make quick judgments about the strangers he meets, if he relies solely on appearance he will be unable to identify others with certainty.⁸ In his seminal essay on the novel, "Manners, Morals and the Novel," Lionel Trilling made a similar observation about the central concern of that genre. Responding to the appearance of money as a social element, the

⁸Lyn Lofland, *A World of Strangers: Order and Action in Urban Public Space* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

novel, beginning with *Don Quixote*, sets for itself "the problem of appearance and reality: the shifting and conflict of social classes becomes the field of the problem of knowledge, of how we know and of how reliable our knowledge is."⁹ In any case, appearances are not very reliable; and urban modern man "knows" others, according to Lofland, either as categories (places them in simple groups, which I will refer to as stereotypes), as persons (has information about the past and perhaps even of the inner life), or as strangers (anyone personally unknown, but visually available).

The only real stranger to Sammler, a man he knows visually but who is personally unknowable to him, is the black pickpocket who exposes himself to Sammler in the lobby of his apartment house. As a recurring stranger in Sammler's world, the pickpocket both frightens and excites him—on a conscious level Sammler admires him because he has class, mastery, dexterity; in short he possesses a nobility which appeals to the old European aristocrat, yet he demonstrates this only through breaking the law. As a man who suffered because of authority and who recollects the ecstasy of killing (he killed a German soldier for his socks, jacket, and food immediately after his escape), Sammler can admire the black man; but as an intellectual, elderly European gentleman, Sammler is frightened by the wordless irrational phallic power of this "other" in his civilization and in himself.

By placing this scene strategically in the novel, Bellow creates a comedy of errors that conveys some of his major concerns. The sexual exhibitionism occurs immediately after Sammler is cruelly jeered and mocked by an audience of Columbia students who, expecting a scheduled lecture on "Sorel and Modern Violence," were not sympathetic to Sammler's reminiscences about Bloomsbury, a topic he had been asked to discuss by his opportunistic young friend, Lionel Feffer. Not content to dismiss the matter as mismanagement, some of the students are intent on openly discrediting Sammler for his age and assumed sexual impotence. "Why do you listen to this effete shit? What has he got to tell you? His balls are dry. He's dead. He can't come" (p. 42). For Sammler this illustrated the "sex excrement-militance" of the "sexual revolution." It is, of course, ironic that the students are outraged because they expected a lecture on violence and cruelty from a man who, after suffering unfathomable cruelty, chose to speak on pacificism. The pickpocket's exposure to Sammler is another way of declaring the lordliness of sexual potency. "In the way the young declare the obsolescence of the old," Bellow has said, "there's a kind of totalitarian cruelty like Hitler's

⁹Lionel Trilling, "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," in his *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Anchor Books, 1953), p. 203.

attitude towards the Jews. . . ."¹⁰

We should be careful not to assume that the use of a black man as physical force and "other" to Sammler's cerebral nature constitutes a blatant straightforward reaffirmation of an ugly racist stereotype. It would violate the novel's verisimilitude to give us access to personal information about a character our perceiving consciousness, Mr. Sammler, could never know. Moreover, giving us other stereotypical characters who are humanized by Sammler's additional knowledge emphasizes the point that city dwellers generally know others only categorically except for the few, frequently in their own subculture, about whom they acquire personal details.

② The characters Sammler does know personally tend to be survivors of suffering like himself, and because Bellow does not want to sentimentalize either suffering or Jewishness, these survivors' categorical presence in the city is eccentric, offensive, perverse, ridiculous, or grotesque. And only with Sammler's personal information do they take on the appearance of humans, exacting our understanding and warmth. Perhaps because much of our American Jewish literature has established the victim as moral hero, Bellow has deliberately shown us the demoralizing consequences of persecution.

a) The three major characters, beside Sammler himself, who were victims of persecution are his daughter Shula, his former son-in-law Eisen, and his cousin Bruch. Each bears psychological scars that affect his or her sexuality. As a stranger seen by a city dweller, [Shula] is the eccentric slovenly woman, the one who is scavenging through trash bins with her wig askew, her slip exposed, lipstick smudged, and who is perhaps talking to herself as she makes her way between all sorts of free public programs:

She wasn't old, not bad looking, not even too badly dressed, item by item. The full effect would have been no worse than vulgar if she had not been obviously a nut. She turned up in a miniskirt of billiard-table green, revealing legs sensual in outline but without inner sensuality; at the waist a broad leather belt; over shoulders, bust, a coarse strong Guatemalan embroidered shirt; on her head a wig such as a female impersonator might put on at a convention of salesmen. . . . She went to sermons and free lectures everywhere. . . . She, with loony, clever, large eyes, the face full of white comment and skin thickened with concentration, sat on her rucked-up skirt, the shopping bag with salvage, loot, coupons, and throwaway literature between her knees. (pp. 22-23)

Eventually we discover that having been hidden in a convent during the war where she had to play the role of a Catholic has left her with a divided personality, Shula-Slawa, both Christian and Jewish. The wig, while a sign of Orthodox Jewry, serves mainly to conceal the Jewish curl

¹⁰Jane Howard, *Life*, p. 60.

which she finds exasperating. "But who knew how many sexual difficulties and complications were associated with Shula's hair?" thinks Sammler.

And, from the troubled widow's peak, following an imaginary line of illumination over the nose, originally fine but distorted by restless movement, over the ridiculous comment of the lips (swelling, painted dark red), and down between the breasts to the middle of the body—what problems there must be! (p. 22)

Seemingly abandoned by her father during the war and always sensitive to her lack of resemblance to her frail aristocratic mother, Shula believes that she can draw attention to herself by deliberately appearing eccentric. "If I was dressed at Lord and Taylor, maybe I'd be less of an eccentric type, and I'd have a chance with somebody" (p. 309), she tells her father. To win a man's love, it becomes clear, Shula is willing to suffer abuse, even to enslave herself, for Sammler flies to Israel to rescue her from her brutish husband, Eisen.

b) [Eisen], whose name means iron, is a metallic macho neo-fascist Israeli:

Unusually handsome, brilliant looking, Eisen had been wounded at Stalingrad. With other mutilated veterans in Rumania later, he had been thrown from a moving train. Apparently because he was a Jew. Eisen had frozen his feet; his toes were amputated. . . . Black curls, a handsome Roman nose, shining sharp senseless saliva-moist teeth. The trouble was that he kicked and beat Shula-Slawa quite often, even as a newlywed. (p. 24)

In our last glimpse of him, he is protecting Lionel Feffer, victimized by the seemingly ubiquitous pickpocket, by battering the black man with some of his iron statues, the victim turned victimizer. Eisen's response to suffering is a renewed faith in physical prowess. And now the pickpocket is pitied by Sammler for being a victim.

c) A very macabre example of the victim turned victimizer, this time in fantasy only, is [Bruch]'s compulsion to reenact his own death by impersonating his persecutors and by acting the role of the victim:

In his early years as a refugee, he and another German Jew, employed in Macy's warehouse, used to hold masses over each other, one lying down in a packing case with dime store beads wound about the wrists, the other doing the service. Bruch still enjoyed this, loved playing corpse. . . . together with other clown routines. Nazi mass meetings at the Sportspalast. Bruch using an empty pot for sound effects, holding it over his mouth to get the echo, ranting like Hitler and interrupting himself to cry "Sieg Heil." (pp. 57-58)

Another victim not ennobled by suffering but made clownish by it, Bruch is haunted by the memory of one of the prisoners at Buchenwald who fell into a latrine trench and suffocated in the feces. Bruch's perverse legacy from the camps is his fetishism; he is aroused by plump dark female arms, preferably those of Puerto Ricans, which he seeks out in order to masturbate. As a categorical stranger, Bruch is the city

pervert, the lecher at the checkout counter. But given his personal history, Bruch may enjoy violating others secretly, covertly assaulting those who are alien to him, as he was overtly assaulted as an alien by those more powerful than he.

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a) Just as labeling Sammler the elder sage, Eisen the macho brute, Shula the eccentric floozy, and Bruch the racist pervert would violently reduce the reality of these humans, labeling Elya Gruner as stereotypical wealthy Jewish doctor in New Rochelle with Mafia connections betrays the essence of this man whom Sammler loves for his humanity. Having lost most of his family in the Second World War, Elya rescued his Uncle Artur and his daughter Shula, bringing them to the United States and supporting them ever since. Elya needs Uncle Sammler to salvage pieces of his family history for him, so that he can feel part of a continuous past and tradition and can retain an identity that satisfies him. Elya is a generous and responsible man—"a dependable man, a man who thought for others"—whose feelings of moral accountability make Sammler think of him as being truly human.

On the level of plot, the novel is the three day quest of Artur Sammler to bid farewell to his nephew Elya who is hospitalized for an aneurysm that could take his life at any moment. If Sammler is a secret sharer for Bellow, then Elya Gruner is another part of the author. A first generation American like Bellow, Elya still has close ties to his European past and a sense of collective identity with the Jewish people. And despite the performance of illegal abortions that denies him (and all Bellow characters) saintliness, he is a man of good deed as well as good intention. In the prayer that Sammler recites for Elya after his death, he recalls that Gruner always did what was required of him, that he fulfilled his human contract. In relation to Elya, one of Bellow's major values is voiced. When Elya's daughter responds to Sammler's praise of her father as being "human" with "I thought everybody was born human," Sammler replies, "It's not a natural gift at all, only the capacity is natural" (p. 304). Sammler's realization of the possibility of the world's instantaneous annihilation is mirrored in Elya Gruner's aneurysm. Sammler, "like so many people who had seen the world collapse once, entertained the possibility it might collapse twice" (p. 33), while Elya had to live knowing that at any moment "any beat of the heart might open the artery and spray the brain with blood" (p. 81). Yet, instead of dwelling on his illness, Elya continues to transact business, buy Israel bonds, and worry about his children. Sammler's prayer for the soul of Elya, which concludes the novel, is an example of Bellow's finest prose:

Remember, God, the soul of Elya Gruner, who, as willingly as possible and as well as he was able, and even to an intolerable point, and even in suffocation and even as death

was coming was eager, even childishly perhaps. . . even with a certain servility, to do what was required of him. At his best this man was much kinder than at my very best I have ever been or could ever be. He was aware that he must meet, and did meet—through all the confusion and degraded clowning of this life through which we are speeding—he did meet the terms of his contract. The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows. As I know mine. As all know. For that is the truth of it—that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know. (p. 313)

It is the concept of human accountability, or what Irving Howe in describing Bellow's writing calls "that root sense of obligation which the mere fact of being human imposes on us,"¹¹ that marks the center of gravity of this novel. And in a discussion between Sammler and a non-Jewish survivor of suffering, the major currents of the novel converge. 5) Dr. Govinda Lal is an Indian scientist, a Punjabi who witnessed the terrible fighting between Hindus and Moslems in the India-Pakistan war of the late '40s. Placing Lal in the context of a '60s cityscape and college campus, Bellow is playing on another familiar stereotype, the Indian guru whose mystical philosophies were sought after by students rejecting technology for self-awareness and spiritual quests. In the type of role reversal we have come to expect from Bellow, however, Lal does advocate leaving this world, but with the aid of technology rather than meditation. In short, Lal's manuscript, *The Future of the Moon*, places its faith in scientific progress, an attitude more indicative of what Indian students and faculty of the '60s were endorsing, as opposed to American students' image of India as a way station on the road to nirvana. The two men understand and like each other immediately, for both have witnessed suffering and seek answers to the problem of maintaining civilized human life in a world gone mad. Their conclusions underscore Bellow's role-reversal technique, for Lal takes a purely rational, scientific approach, while Sammler begins to sound like a mystic. The major difference in their attitude concerns the core issue of human accountability, for Lal retains no hope of restoring meaningful life to the earth, while Sammler refuses to abandon his planet. Lal says to Mr. Sammler:

I believe you intimate that there is an implicit morality in the will-to-live and that these mediocrities in office will do their duty by the species. I am not sure. There is no duty in biology. There is no sovereign obligation to one's breed. When biological destiny is fulfilled in reproduction the desire is often to die. We please ourselves in extracting ideas of duty from biology. (p. 220)

Sammler's reply, of course, is in keeping with Bellow's vision of a moral community and the duties entailed by being human:

. . . when you know what pain is, you agree that not to have been born is better. But

¹¹Irving Howe, "Review of Mr. Sammler's Planet," *Harper's*, 240 (February 1970), p. 106.

being born one respects the powers of creation, one obeys the will of God—with whatever inner reservations truth imposes. As for duty—you are wrong. The pain of duty makes the creature upright, and this uprightedness is no negligible thing. No, I stand by what I first said. There is also an instinct against leaping into Kingdom Come. (p. 220)

Despite Bellow's denial of suffering as necessarily ennobling, the only entirely flat characters in the book, those who are introduced and exit as stereotypes, are young Americans who are insensitive to the struggles of the human community: Angela the Jewish American Princess, spoiled, hedonistic, and egotistical; Wallace her male counterpart, the clownish prodigal son never returned; and Lionel Feffer the managerial, slick, student radical. They are all easy targets of satire: Angela's heavenly name and earthly lusts, Wallace's scheme to name nature for those who have already purchased it, and Lionel Feffer's name, an oxymoron in tone (the dignity of Lionel with the homeliness of Feffer meaning pepper) and a mockery of two serious politically minded Jews, one real and also associated with Columbia, Lionel Trilling, and Feffer in Sholom Aleichem's moving story "Hodel," whose commitment to Marxism resulted in life imprisonment in Siberia. (Bellow included "Hodel" in his collection of Jewish short stories published in 1963.)¹² The shallowest three characters are clearly those who are oblivious to the presence of evil in the world and to their concomitant responsibilities.

In some respects, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* is a complex Jewish version of the theme of American innocence and European experience. "I grant that as an American I am more subject to illusion than my cousins," Bellow wrote in his journal, later published as *To Jerusalem and Back*, his first book-length work following *Mr. Sammler's Planet*.¹³ This perception pervades all of that book and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* as well—beneath the "civilized dinner" (p. 28) in the charming dining room off a Jerusalem street "coolly sweet with night flowers and dark green under the lamps, many. . . families have lost children." What Bellow states explicitly in *To Jerusalem and Back* is the assumption behind *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, a fact that all of the "survivors" in the book seem to understand: "What you do know is that there is one fact of Jewish life unchanged by the creation of a Jewish state: You cannot take your right to live for granted. Others can; you cannot" (p. 26). In *Mr. Sammler's Planet* this existential anxiety is shared by those who

¹²Apart from the allusion to the well-known character of Feffer in Yiddish literature, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* and "Hodel" share a theme—inheritance. "Hodel" is the story of a man caught between two worlds, one of traditional family inheritance and one of mass ideological movements that demand the inheritance due to a class. The irony of literal inheritance becoming a collective historical one is used by both Sholom Aleichem and Bellow.

¹³Saul Bellow, *To Jerusalem and Back* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), p. 131. Further references to this work will be abbreviated as *TJAB* and will be cited in the text.

have suffered (this includes Dr. Lal), but is incomprehensible to those who have not (like Angela and Wallace). A disdain for the juvenile ignorance of the West permeates all of *To Jerusalem and Back*, where Bellow records accounts of torture and political persecutions in the Soviet Union and American indifference:

I am familiar with the history of World War I and of the Russian Revolution. I know Auschwitz and the Gulag, Biafra and Bangladesh, Buenos Aires and Beirut, but when I come back to facts anew I find myself losing focus. Then I begin against reason to suspect the influence of a diffusing power—a demonic will that opposes our understanding. I am forced to consider whether Western Europe and the United States may not be under the influence of a great evil, whether we do not go about lightly chloroformed. (*TJAB*, p. 84)

When he returns to Chicago from Jerusalem, it is as though he returns to the land of the Angelas, Wallaces, and Feffers. "Wall-to-wall everything," "cultural programming," "Continental Dining," and "always 'Chicagoland,' an enchanted place like Alice's Wonderland or the fairy tales' never-never land." In other words, he can once again become immersed in the radio's commercials "for Peking duck and French 'fondoo' dishes, and the names of wines together with all of the world's disasters and outrages" (*TJAB*, p. 147).

Yet he does return to Chicago, and the point of departure for the entire book is exactly that, a *temporary* departure from America, to Jerusalem and *back*. Bellow knows that he, unlike most Israelis, has a choice—he can listen to the Peking duck commercial and tune out the disasters if he so desires. That Chicagoland provides such blinders embarrasses him, partly because having the choice defines "home" for him, and there is something illusory and irresponsible about that home. Once again, this is not reverence for suffering, but a neutral recognition that what he has learned in Jerusalem is a prerequisite for achieving real humanism, and only a prerequisite. "Anyway, by force of circumstances I have had to ask myself simple questions," Sammler says to Lal, "like 'Will I kill him? Will he kill me? If I sleep, will I ever wake? Am I really alive, or is there nothing left but an illusion of life?' . . . The Germans attempted to kill me. Then the Poles also shot at me. . . . Experience of this kind is deforming. I apologize to you for the deformity" (p. 230).

About eight years before Bellow made his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, he transported his character Artur Sammler to the Sinai desert after the Six-Day War as a war journalist, an assignment Bellow himself took for *Newsday*. Sammler goes "If only because for the second time in twenty-five years the same people were threatened by extermination. . . . And he refused to stay in Manhattan watching television" (p. 142). In Sammler's mind, the near extinction of Israel is linked with the genocide of World War II, yet the scene Bellow singles out for Sammler's

observation is that of napalmed Egyptian bodies, the price of Israel's victory over death. It leads, inevitably, to those simple questions that have haunted Sammler, "Will I kill him? Will he kill me?" For Sammler, unlike Bellow, there were no choices. The results of such confrontations, according to Sammler, are deformities—the neuroses of Shula, Eisen, Bruch, and himself. The result of never asking those questions is the vapid sophomoric selves of Angela and Wallace.

By creating a character who, in the wake of the Holocaust, still believes in the possibility of being human in a moral sense, Bellow has underscored his own commitment to humanism. As early as 1963 in his Library of Congress speech, Bellow decried "the theme of annihilation of Self" which characterized the writings of many of his contemporaries, most notably André Gide, Beckett, Sarraute, and Robbe-Grillet. "One would like to ask these contemporaries, 'After nakedness, what?' 'After absurdity, what?'"¹⁴ Like Sammler, even after absurdity Bellow has not given up on his species, nor does he think the individual human self no longer worth writing about. In the same speech he condemns the writer who "automatically scorns contemporary life" and who "bottles its stink artistically." Although he admits that the absolute individualism of the Enlightenment has fallen, that does not mean that it must now be cursed, hated, rended, and annihilated. "It [modern literature] would rather have the maddest chaos it can invoke than a conception of life it has found false. But after this destruction, what?"

It can be argued, of course, that there is as much human dignity in the tragicomic universe of Beckett, where man waits eternally for Godot with nothing but his imagination to shield him from the indifferent cosmos, as there is on the planet of Sammler in the universe of Bellow. But Saul Bellow has consistently seen himself on the other side of a great divide, where a faith in human community and reason as well as imagination acts as a buffer against nihilism. A close look at his novels, and in particular *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, reveals that the three tenets of Jewish life set forth earlier in this paper—a reverence for human life, a belief in human reason and intellect, and an emphasis on deed and involvement—help to define Bellow's position on modernism. Using the symbol of an aneurysm in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* to convey the prospect of imminent annihilation, for example, Bellow makes Elya Gruner continue to fulfill his human obligations, while in *The Floating Opera*, a novel by one of Bellow's more nihilistic contemporaries, John Barth, Todd Andrews' aneurysm allows him to escape from moral responsibility, to regard life more whimsically and cynically.

¹⁴Reprinted as "Some Notes on Recent American Fiction," *Encounter*, 21 (November 22, 1963), 22-29.

Bellow's emphasis on reason may stem from what Alfred Kazin has called "the Jewish passion for ideological moralism, for ratiocination."¹⁵ But whatever its source, Bellow appears to be speaking through Artur Sammler when he thinks, "madness is also a masquerade, the project of a deeper reason, a result of the despair we feel before infinities and eternities. Madness is a diagnosis or verdict of some of our greatest doctors and geniuses, and of their man disappointed minds" (p. 148). Sammler, vestige of the Enlightenment, is shocked to find all of civilized society seeking "the blameless state of madness. The privileged, the almost aristocratic state of madness" (p. 89). The accusation here is both against the theory of madness as wisdom, as put forth by R. D. Laing, Ken Kesey, and others, and also against that trend in the modern novel that has given up on human character. In *Sincerity and Authenticity*, a work of literary criticism that traces the disintegration of an authentic self since the Enlightenment, Lionel Trilling, much like Artur Sammler, concludes "the doctrine that madness is health, that madness is liberation and authenticity, receives a happy welcome from a consequential part of the educated public."¹⁶

So Sammler, in the book's central image, chooses his own planet over the moon, reason over lunacy. And since the publication of *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Bellow has continued to voice his protest against an unthinking embrace of irrationalism as truth. In 1975, he wrote,

No one can doubt the existence of the unconscious. It is there all right. The question is what it contains. Is it only the seat of animal nature, of instinct, the libidinal forces, or does it also contain elements of higher life? Does the human need for truth, for instance, also have roots in the unconscious? Why, since the unconscious is by definition what we do not know, should we not expect to find in it traces of the soul as well as of aggression?¹⁷

In his Nobel lecture in 1976, he once again attacks "the message of Robbe-Grillet" with the question, "Can it be that human beings are at a dead end?" This time he is bolder in his declaration that modern man is unwilling to risk talking about a "spirit" in humanity, because he cannot prove it. "So almost everyone keeps quiet about it, although almost everyone is aware of it."¹⁸

When Bellow admitted that in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* he was baring himself nakedly, he must have sensed that it marked a turning point in his career, in part because his choice of Jewish themes, characters, and setting and his drama of a Holocaust survivor seeking civilized life again

¹⁵Alfred Kazin, "Review of *Mr. Sammler's Planet*," *New York Review of Books*, 3 December 1970, p. 3.

¹⁶Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 188.

¹⁷Saul Bellow, "A World Too Much with Us," *Critical Inquiry*, 2 (Autumn 1975), 9.

¹⁸Reprinted as "The Nobel Lecture," *The American Scholar*, 46 (Summer 1977), 325.

forced him to put his cultural legacy and his humanistic vision into a meaningful relation to each other. By rejecting suffering as moral heroism, the idea put forth in much American Jewish literature, he was able to reconcile basic Jewish tenets with his humanism. Like his alter ego, Artur Sammler, Bellow is a battered survivor of the Enlightenment, a man who deplores ignorance of evil and indifference to suffering, but who also condemns nihilism or a celebration of madness as appropriate responses to them. "Undeniably, the human being is not what he commonly thought a century ago," Bellow writes: "The question nevertheless remains. He is something. What is he?"¹⁹ *

¹⁹Bellow, Library of Congress Speech.

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