PREFACE

Saul Bellow

When *Saul Bellow* published his first book, the time had come for a change of climate and generation in American narrative art. The so-called hard-boiled style, with its virile air and choppy prose, had now slackened into an everyday routine, which was pounded out automatically; its rigid paucity of words left not only much unsaid, but also most of it unfelt, unexperienced. Bellow's first work, *Dangling Man* (1944), was one of the signs portending that something else was at hand.

In Bellow's case, emancipation from the previous ideal style took place in two stages. In the first, he reached back to the kind of perception that had found its already classic guides in Maupassant, Henry James, and Flaubert, perhaps, most of all. The masters he followed expressed themselves as restrainedly as those he turned his back on. But the emphasis was elsewhere. What gave a story its interest was not the dramatic, sometimes violent action, but the light it shed over the protagonist's inner self. With that outlook the novel's heroes and heroines could be regarded, seen through and exposed, but not glorified. The anti-hero of the present was already on the way, and Bellow became one of those who took care of him.

Dangling Man, the man without a foothold, was thus a significant watchword to Bellow's writing, and has, to no small extent, remained so. He pursued the line in his next novel, *The Victim* (1947)

and, years later, with mature mastery in *Seize the Day* (1956). With its exemplary command of subject and form, this last novel has received the accolade as one of the classic works of our time.

But with the third story in this stylistically coherent suite, it is as if Bellow had turned back in order at last to complete something which he himself had already passed. With his second stage, the decisive step, he had already left this school behind him, whose disciplined form and enclosed structure gave no play to the resources of exhuberant ideas, flashing irony, hilarious comedy and burning compassion, which he also knew he possessed, and whose scope he must try out. The result was something quite new; Bellow's own mixture of rich picaresque novel and subtle analysis of culture, of entertaining adventure, drastic and tragic episodes in quick succession interspersed with philosophic conversation with the reader - that too very entertaining - all developed by a commentator with a witty tongue and penetrating insight into the outer and inner complications that drive us to act, or prevent us from acting, and that can be called the dilemma of the age.

First in the new phase came *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953). The very wording of the title points straight to the picaresque, and the connection is perhaps most strongly in evidence in this novel. But here Bellow had found his style, and the tone recurs in the following series of novels that form the bulk of his work: *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), *Herzog* (1964), *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), and *Humboldt's Gift* (1975). The structure is apparently loose-jointed, but for this very reason gives the author ample opportunity for descriptions of different

societies; they have a rare vigour and stringency, and a swarm of colourful, clearly-defined characters against a background of carefully observed and depicted settings, whether it is the magnificent facades of Manhattan in front of the backyards of the slums and semi-slums, Chicago's impenetrable jungle of unscrupulous businessmen intimately intertwined with efficient criminal gangs, or the more literal jungle in the depths of Africa, where the novel, *Henderson the Rain King,* the writer's most imaginative expedition takes place. In a nutshell, they are all stories on the move, and, like the first book, are about a man with no foothold. But (and it is important to add this) a man who keeps on trying to find a foothold during his wanderings in our tottering world, one who can never relinquish his faith that the value of life depends on its dignity, not on its success, and that the truth must triumph at last, simply because it demands everything except - triumphs. That is the way of thinking in which Saul Bellow's "anti-heroes" have their foundation and acquire their lasting stature.

Bellow is very explicitly an urban novelist. The city he writes of whether it be New York or Chicago, is a melting pot of races, a dense agglomeration of misery and competition. Survival is a Darwinian struggle, but in this study I have tried to show that the direction of Survival, in Bellow's work, is essentially moral. It turns towards understanding and the acceptance of others. Through some of his novels I have made an effort to show that his heroes are frequently at odds with the society they inhabit, searching for the freedom of self, but it is

as much the self as the world that must undergo a proper adaptation. This being so, his novels have a dense moral and psychological dimension which owes a good deal to Dostoevsky and similar European novelists, and his urban landscape is not simply anonymous, but a landscape of the spirit which must be realized as reality and turned into a condition for growth and self-renewal. There is an explicit resistance in his novels, in particular in *Herzog*, to those who would instruct us in the bleak absurdity of reality, who say that man is necessarily alienated, who tell us that the age of the moralized and personal self is finished. Bellow gets much of his energy as a writer, and his standpoint is not, as many critics have suggested, one simply of adaptation to the system, but one that liberally seeks to restore a true sense of fullness of self hood, that demands that the world be made for men. There is a core of deeply realized humanity in his clear conviction that the essential task is to discover the basis of individuality and brotherhood in a world of singularly complex reality. In this thesis it is explored that most of his heroes bear the burden of working out in the most difficult circumstances a satisfactory relationship to other men and to the moral demands of the self in a universe intensely complicated philosophically and socially. A world in which, as one of these heroes Henderson, puts it, no man has a place any longer. Through his novels, he works these themes with an exuberant imaginative zest. In part this comes from the richness of a prose that can effectively allude to moral matters because it has all the force of Jewish soul - searching rhetoric behind it; which can reach from the comedy of

suffering to the ideal of aspiration towards human grandeur, which can sustain appeal to the transcendental and eternal as a consistent and fundamental element of his style. In the earlier novels the essential theme of inquiry is man's obligations towards others, in the later ones it becomes an often euphoric exploration of the grandeur of self.

In the works I have considered here, and in the fiction published later as well, Bellow has been moving toward a hedged affirmation: an insistence upon the importance and possibility for each man of fulfillment in knowledge and spirit, with a recognition always of the cost of such fulfillment. In qualified terms he has revived the cult of personality and, paradoxically, given us the clue to the social history of the post war years. Preoccupied with what it feels like, what it takes, what it means to be a human being, Bellow has made man the vital centre of his work. No guiding philosophic conception shapes his image of man, he is concerned with man alive. Augie says, in one of his introspective passages, that he seeks simplicity, and one is reminded of Thoreau's 'Simplify! Simplify!' and then of his famous declaration of faith, "I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear, nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life..."

So it is with Bellow, who wants no confining philosophy or myth, who has no patience with passing social phenomena, who finds the essentials of human experience in human beings seeking themselves and seeking love.

The present study, is basically analytical in nature and hence collection and analysis of books both primary and secondary have been the major source of findings. For the purpose of arriving at a particular conclusion reliance is placed on documents, books, statements and resolutions relating to existential philosophy and liberal humanism. In the process of analysis some reflections of authors and critics of Bellow are consulted with a view of supporting the contention. References are made to secondary sources, articles, papers published in leading journals, national and international, regional and local dailies and weeklies and data is also collected on the internet both primary and secondary.

Since no thesis is complete without a bibliography, I have prepared the same following the instructions as laid down in the MLA Handbook.

In presenting this work I should like to make a mention of all those whose invaluable assistance I have received.

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