

VICTORIA AARONS

Introduction: Saul Bellow in His Times

Saul Bellow, recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature (1976), remains one of the major literary figures of the twentieth century. A defining voice of post-World War II America, Bellow continues to be a celebrated icon of twentieth-century letters, a writer whose penetrating prose has influenced writers and readers in America and abroad since the late 1940s. Bellow's novels, beginning with *Dangling Man* (1944) and concluding with *Ravelstein* (2000), span over half a century and reflect the erratic, mutating, and often torturous political, cultural, and intellectual character of his times. Bellow's literary oeuvre articulates some of the most significant cultural experiences of the American twentieth century. His fiction represents and comments on some of the century's major cultural events and issues: the urban experience of European immigrants, especially Jewish immigrants; the socio-cultural ascendance of an influential Jewish middle-class; the ideological seductions of Marxism and Modernism; the tensions between residual European intellectual culture and emergent popular culture; the fraught failures of the Vietnam War; the changing attitudes about gender and race; the "culture wars" in 1990s America; and the underlying fault-lines of anti-Semitism. Moreover, the span of Bellow's career witnessed the impact in America of the Holocaust: as Bellow once put it, "a crime so vast that it brings all Being into Judgment."¹ Bellow's fiction casts its moral gaze upon the spectacle of a civilization in anxious flux, the spinning out-of-control of its impelling desires.

Since the publication of his first novel, *Dangling Man*, extolled by Edmund Wilson in the *New Yorker* as "one of the most honest pieces of testimony on the psychology of a whole generation who have grown up during the Depression and the war," Bellow's fiction came to define the literary possibilities for American cultural thought and expression.² Following the publication of his major, breakthrough novel, *The Adventures of Augie March*, in 1953, Bellow would go on to occupy a prominent place in American literature for over half a century. The American-Jewish novelist Jonathan

VICTORIA AARONS

Rosen, in remembrance of Bellow, has said that his “presence in the world was like a kind of sheltering genius,” an exacting intellectual who “elevated the role of the writer to the highest possible sphere.”³ The distinguished English novelist Martin Amis has called Bellow “The greatest American author ever.”⁴ J. M. Coetzee has described Bellow as “perhaps *the* giant” of American fiction of the second half of the twentieth century.⁵ Bellow is known as one of the three major post-World War II American-Jewish writers to raise the profile and secure a place for American-Jewish literary expression beyond the earlier writing of the immigrant tradition. Along with Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth, Bellow created a “new” Jewish voice and presence in American letters. To be sure, Bellow became one of the central Jewish voices writing in and about America in the post-World War II era, but he also rapidly came to be considered a major American literary presence in the second half of the twentieth century. In straddling his Jewish immigrant origins and his American upbringing, as Christopher Hitchens put it, “it mattered to him that the ghetto be transcended and that he, too, could sing America.”⁶

Bellow embraced American life from the point of view of the astute observer of human folly, but also from that of determined transcendence. Solomon (Saul) Bellow, born in 1915 in Lachine, Quebec, to Russian Jewish émigrés Abram and Lescha Belo (later changed to Bellows), did not come to the United States until 1924. Despite, or perhaps because of, his early French-influenced and Yiddish-speaking years in Canada, Bellow’s work epitomized a developing diversity of American life at a critical moment in American history, as the relative openness of American borders allowed for European immigration to the cities. The American city, especially Chicago and New York, was home to Bellow, the source of impetuous and seductive desire and heady exuberance, as his ardent protagonist Augie March, with intoxicating fervor, declares in the opening pages of the novel: “I am an American, Chicago-born.”⁷ Augie’s unequivocal exuberance is a celebration of both place and identity, an opening for seemingly limitless possibilities.

Bellow’s primary fictive landscape is urban America, the stage upon which his characters play out their most passionate impulses, escapades, and extravagances. As Bellow’s protagonist Artur Sammler ironically puts it, America is “advertised throughout the universe as the most desirable, most exemplary of all nations.”⁸ It is here that Bellow’s characters locate their passions and appetites. And it is in the city, the “soul of America,” in Sammler’s terms, that Bellow’s protagonists expose their most persistent anxieties and obsessions, embracing intellectual and emotional fixations that compel the defining narratives of their lives (146). The city for Bellow is, as he puts it in the novel *Seize the Day*, a “carnival of the street,” a shifting,

Introduction: Saul Bellow in His Times

undulating landscape upon which his characters define themselves as American Jews in the second half of the twentieth century.⁹ They speak the language of urban America: gritty, performative, harsh, intense, antagonistic, and animated, breathing life into a cityscape that captures the noise of post-war life.

With fourteen novels, three collections of short stories, three plays, and two collections of essays, Bellow was a highly prolific writer over the course of his career and has been one of the most critically significant and culturally recognized American writers of the twentieth century. The Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976 recognized him “for the human understanding and subtle analysis of contemporary culture that are combined in his work.”¹⁰ Bellow is the only novelist to have received the National Book Award three times: in 1954 for *The Adventures of Augie March*, a novel that Philip Roth described as “the most important book published in English in the second half of the 20th century”;¹¹ in 1965 for *Herzog*; and in 1971 for *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*. In 1976 Bellow received the Pulitzer Prize for the novel *Humboldt’s Gift*, and in 1988 he was awarded the National Medal of Arts by the Congress of the United States. In 1989 he received the PEN/Malamud Award, and in 1990 the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters by the National Book Foundation. As a further measure of Bellow’s status in American letters, the acclaimed novelist Philip Roth was the first recipient of the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction, a prize named in Bellow’s honor. Roth, upon receipt of the award, named Bellow along with William Faulkner as the two writers who formed “the backbone of 20th-century American literature” and asked, “How could I be anything but thrilled to receive an award bearing Saul Bellow’s name?”¹²

Bellow’s standing as a central figure in American letters and as a major voice of the twentieth century is further evidenced by the critical acclaim he has received both in America and abroad. As the English literary critic, essayist, and novelist James Wood puts it, “Bellow was one, to my mind, of the greatest of American prose stylists in the 20th century – and thus one of the greatest in American fiction.”¹³ Indeed, Bellow’s influence and accomplishments, undiminished by time, reach into a new century and affect generations of writers who have followed, writers inspired by the power of his literary imagination and the weight of his ideas. As the novelist Ian McEwan has said, “It will be some time before we have the full measure of Saul Bellow’s achievement.”¹⁴ Upon Bellow’s death in 2005, McEwan in tribute wrote:

Saul Bellow started publishing in the 1940s, and his work spreads across the century he helped to define. He also redefined the novel, broadened it, liberated

VICTORIA AARONS

it, made it warm with human sense and wit and grand purpose . . . We are saying farewell to a mind of unrivalled quality. He opened our universe a little more. We owe him everything.¹⁵

Undeniably, Saul Bellow is considered, along with Philip Roth and John Updike, to be one of the genuinely significant writers of his generation. Bellow, with subtle nuance and acute judgment, measures the intellectual and moral temper of his age. A writer of the mind, Bellow, through rich, candid, and uncompromising language, manages in his fiction to write simultaneously of the colloquy of the street and of the main ideas of the European intellectual tradition.

Bellow's current status as a major American novelist and intellectual arbiter of his time began with the early reception of his work. From Bellow's initial appearance as a novelist, readers recognized the originality and significance of his fiction. Initial reviews of Bellow's first novel, *Dangling Man*, were notably favorable. The writer Delmore Schwartz, whom Bellow would later make the subject of his novel *Humboldt's Gift*, wrote in the *Partisan Review* shortly after the publication of *Dangling Man*: "Here, for the first time . . . the experience of a new generation has been seized and recorded."¹⁶ Nathan L. Rothman in an early review applauded Bellow on the publication of *Dangling Man*, as "a writer of great original powers . . . He writes with obvious style and mastery, with a sharp cutting to the quick of language, with a brilliance of thought."¹⁷ *Dangling Man*, Rothman predicted, was "the herald of a fine literary career."¹⁸ *The Victim*, Bellow's second novel, was greeted with no less enthusiasm for its depictions of the anxieties of American Jews in the direct aftermath of World War II, a novel that, as Richard Match said in the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, "rates as a subtle and thoughtful contribution to the literature of twentieth-century anti-Semitism."¹⁹ It was with the publication of *The Adventures of Augie March*, however, that Bellow's career was firmly ensconced in the canon of American letters. The novelist Robert Penn Warren praised the novel as "by far the best one" written to date by Bellow, "a rich, various, fascinating, and important book, and from now on any discussion of fiction in America in our time will have to take account of it."²⁰ As Bellow himself said of *The Adventures of Augie March* in an October 19, 1953 letter to his longtime friend Samuel Freifeld, "I myself feel happier about this book than about anything I have ever done."²¹ Lionel Trilling, in his review of the novel, calls *The Adventures of Augie March* a "remarkable achievement," a work that encompasses "a human reality at once massive and brilliant."²²

Introduction: Saul Bellow in His Times

One might consider the trajectory of Bellow's work in terms of the following general directions and preoccupations, and as responses to the historical, socio-political, and cultural conditions of his times. Early novels, such as *Dangling Man* (1944), *The Victim* (1947), and *Seize the Day* (1956), focus on alienated mid-twentieth-century man, estranged from self and others. The novels of Bellow's early literary maturity, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) and *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), involve themselves with the idea of "America" as a scene of self-creation and self-determination. Intellectual man and the ironies of self-projection emerge thematically in *Herzog* (1964), *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), *The Dean's December* (1982), and *Ravelstein* (2000). But these periodic directions only provide a skeletal framework within which Bellow's rich fictive conceits are stretched, reaching beyond – in fact, in defiance of – any one thematic parameter. Nonetheless, seen in these ways, Bellow's fiction can show us the intersecting, mutually dependent, and ironically complex conditions of American culture in the twentieth century.

Since his death in 2005, Bellow remains in the forefront of American fiction, and Bellow's work continues to receive sustained critical and scholarly attention. Ongoing scholarly interest in Bellow can be seen in the continuing publication of books, journal articles, and chapters in collections on his work. In 2000 the first major critical biography of Bellow was published by James Atlas (*Bellow: A Biography*). In 2010 Benjamin Taylor published a fascinating and important collection (*Saul Bellow: Letters*) of selected correspondence between Bellow and numerous literary, philosophical, and cultural figures. More recently, 2015 has seen two major publications devoted to Bellow: the first of two volumes of Zachary Leader's authoritative, comprehensive biography, *The Life of Saul Bellow: To Fame and Fortune, 1915–1964*; and Benjamin Taylor's edited collection of Bellow's non-fiction prose, *There Is Simply Too Much to Think About*. These major publications suggest the enduring influence of Bellow's work on American literature and thought. Perhaps the full extent of Bellow's influence and the impact of his work can only be seen in retrospect, as the intellectual, moral, and material landscape that he both shaped and predicted is being played out.

Rather than attempting a wide-sweeping, broad-brush account of Bellow's extensive literary career, this *Companion* hopes to engage readers in thinking through some of Bellow's most pronounced and influential moments as they shape his career-defining works. Moreover, the approaches taken to Bellow's work in this collection introduce student-scholars to some of the thornier questions raised by his critical assessment of the human condition. As Bellow put it, "The writer ... is invariably motivated by a desire for truth."²³

VICTORIA AARONS

As biographer Zachary Leader points out, “Bellow was a famed noticer and his novels and stories are packed with things perfectly seen.”²⁴ Reading Bellow is not easy. His work challenges us to think hard about some of the most difficult and complex moments in history. It also requires readers to examine their own moral compass in assessing history, culture, and personal responsibility. Willis Salomon has remarked that “Bellow’s novels often ‘go big’ with concepts, history, and the ‘great books’ he taught for years as a professor in the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago.”²⁵ In doing so, Bellow’s novels question the very premises of human motivations and actions and place demands on readers to examine thoughtfully the impulses and justifications of their actions. Bellow’s intellectual bent as a novelist, his consistent focus on embodied ideas, reveals itself often in characters whose most defining traits represent the follies of self-delusion.

To read Bellow is to engage explicitly in an ethical assessment of the worth of the human endeavor. Each of the chapters in this collection poses occasions for deep engagement in the enduring problems and ethical considerations that have defined Bellow’s work throughout his career. This collection seeks to allow new Bellow readers an entry into this complex writer at the same time that it encourages longtime readers of Bellow to rethink their understanding of his work. For students introduced to Bellow for the first time, the essays in this *Companion* will explore some of Bellow’s most persistent questions and show the way in which Bellow’s key works provide a commentary on some of the most pressing contingencies of the second half of the twentieth century. For seasoned readers of Bellow, the essays in this volume are designed to continue the discussion of the concerns that have preoccupied scholars ever since Bellow’s fiction became the subject of critical attention in the academy and beyond. In engaging Bellow’s work through the perspectives taken in the individual chapters in this *Companion*, readers will see a map, not just of Bellow’s career, but of the key concerns of twentieth-century American literature and culture: identity-formation and personhood; intellectual movements such as existentialism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis; race; the changing place of America in a globalizing world; anti-Semitism; genocide; gender; cultural pluralism; and aging and death. In constructing a critical anthology on Bellow’s works, one can select from many different, equally compelling directions: the Jewish Bellow, the American Bellow, the comic Bellow, the intellectual Bellow, the Postmodern Bellow, the autobiographical Bellow, the political Bellow, and the like. This collection engages these different approaches in a dialogue, offering multiple perspectives by which readers can appreciate the diverse directions of Bellow’s work and the range of contemporary critical thought. This

Introduction: Saul Bellow in His Times

collection includes distinguished critics who approach Bellow in the context of American literature and culture. Among these distinguished readers of Bellow are scholars from around the world, whose perspectives on Bellow are not specifically “American,” suggesting the appeal of Bellow’s work beyond America and the international resonance it has for many of his readers.

Part of Bellow’s longstanding appeal stems from the ways his novels “talk to each other,” changing and extending his conceptual reach with successive novels as, taken together, they speak to the changing conditions of American identity. The arrangement of this volume reflects the development of Bellow’s fiction by following the arc of his career without being limited to a narrow chronology. The individual chapters address the major themes and directions of Bellow’s work over more than a half-century of masterfully crafted fiction, its influences, its developing protagonists, its nuances, and its complexities of thought and feeling.

Notes

1. *Saul Bellow: Letters*, ed. Benjamin Taylor (New York: Viking, 2010), p. 439.
2. Edmund Wilson, “Doubts and Dreams: *Dangling Man* Under a Glass Bell,” *The New Yorker* (April 1, 1944): 78.
3. Jonathan Rosen, “Dave Eggers et al., on Saul Bellow,” *Slate Magazine* (April 8, 2005), www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2005/04/saul_bellow.5.html.
4. Robert Birnbaum, “Author Interview: Martin Amis,” *Literary Theory* (December 8, 2003), <http://www.identitytheory.com/martin-amis/>.
5. J. M. Coetzee, “Bellow’s Gift,” *The New York Review of Books* (May 27, 2004), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2004/may/27/bellows-gift/>.
6. Christopher Hitchens, “The Great Assimilator,” *The Atlantic* (November 1, 2007): 1.
7. Saul Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953; rpt., New York: Viking, 1969), p. 3.
8. Saul Bellow, *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970; rpt., New York: Penguin, 1984), p. 14.
9. Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day* (New York: Viking, 1956), p. 78.
10. “The Nobel Prize in Literature 1976,” Nobelprize.org., Nobel Media AB 2013 (May 4, 2014), www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1976/.
11. “Author Philip Roth Wins Saul Bellow Award,” *USA Today* (April 1, 2007), http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2007-04-01-roth_N.htm.
12. “Author Philip Roth Wins Saul Bellow Award.”
13. James Wood, “The High-minded Joker,” *The Guardian* (April 8, 2005), www.theguardian.com/books/2005/apr/09/saulbellow.
14. Ian McEwan, “Master of the Universe,” *The New York Times* Editorials/Op-Ed (April 7, 2005), www.nytimes.com/2005/04/07/opinion/07mcewan.html?pagewanted=2&r=0.
15. McEwan, “Master of the Universe.”
16. Delmore Schwartz, “A Man in His Time,” *Partisan Review*, 11.3 (1944): 348.

VICTORIA AARONS

17. Nathan L. Rothman, "Introducing an Important New Writer," *Saturday Review of Literature* (April 15, 1944): 27.
18. Rothman, "Introducing an Important New Writer," p. 27.
19. Richard Match, "Anti-Semitism Hits a Jew," *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* (November 23, 1947): 10.
20. Robert Penn Warren, "The Man with No Commitments," *The New Republic* (November 2, 1953): 22–23.
21. *Saul Bellow: Letters*, p. 123.
22. Lionel Trilling, "A Triumph of the Comic View," in *A Company of Readers: Uncollected Writings of W. H. Auden, Jacques Barzun, Lionel Trilling*, ed. Arthur Krystal (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), p. 101.
23. Saul Bellow, "The Writer as Moralist," in *There Is Simply Too Much to Think About*, ed. Benjamin Taylor (New York: Viking, 2015), p. 159.
24. Zachary Leader, *The Life of Saul Bellow: To Fame and Fortune, 1915–1964* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), p. 12.
25. Willis Salomon, "Saul Bellow on the Soul: Character and the Spirit of Culture in Humboldt's Gift and Ravelstein," *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and History of Ideas*, 14.1 (2016): 127–140.

I

PHILIPPE CODDE

Bellow's Early Fiction and the Making of the Bellovian Protagonist

Introduction

It is often said that great authors write only one book. The idea behind this expression is that the whole oeuvre of these writers is so consistent that it can really be considered a single work of art. This observation is certainly valid for Saul Bellow's novels, which constitute one of the most impressive post-World War II literary oeuvres. Even his earliest novels – *Dangling Man* (1944), *The Victim* (1947), and *Seize the Day* (1956) – already feature the typical Bellovian protagonist that became so characteristic of Bellow's most famous works: a male, Anglo-Saxon, Jewish, introspective, and slightly alienated intellectual who, possessed of clarity of vision and equipped with parodic self-irony, has wonderful conversations, but mainly with himself – think of the eponymous protagonists of *Henderson the Rain King* (1959) and *Herzog* (1964), Charlie Citrine in *Humboldt's Gift* (1975) or Albert Corde in *The Dean's December* (1982), to name only a few. As such, these early novels remain important not only because they launched Bellow as America's "philosophical novelist,"¹ but also because they can be seen as Bellow's creative laboratory, where the ideas and characters of his later novels were tested and refined.²

Dangling Man

While the early novels clearly anticipate Bellow's later work, there are also remarkable differences: inspired by the bleaker forms of European literature and philosophy, particularly French existentialism³ and Fyodor Dostoyevsky's work, the early novels share none of the effervescence and buoyancy that characterizes Augie's drive to go at things "free-style"⁴ in *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) or Henderson's incessant desire to get more out of life – "I want, I want, I want, oh, I want"⁵ – in *Henderson the Rain King*. In fact, in Bellow's early fiction, Henderson's "I want" still sounds like a rather desperate "I can't." This is perhaps most obvious in Bellow's literary debut, *Dangling Man*, a novel written near the end of World

PHILIPPE CODDE

War II and clearly inspired by Dostoyevsky's *Underground Man*, Albert Camus' *L'Étranger*, and especially Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée*. Equally written in the form of a journal, the novel documents the life and times of the Jewish protagonist named Joseph (without a last name) who is dangling because his life is put on hold when he receives a draft call for the army. He quits his job as a clerk in a travel agency, but because his induction is indefinitely suspended, he spends his days waiting in vain, philosophizing about life, freedom, despair, and death, while wandering from one conflict to the next with the few people he meets during his period of isolation. In an interview, Bellow once stated that "each of us has to find an inner law by which he can live. Without this, objective freedom only destroys us. So the question that really interests me is the question of spiritual freedom in the individual."⁶ In *Dangling Man*, Joseph is presented with a complete freedom, and the novel indeed investigates whether or not this freedom ends up destroying him.

In an oft quoted passage, Joseph makes it clear that he is tired of the traditional code of conduct and that he is looking for a new code that allows for personal feelings: "Today, the code of the athlete, of the tough boy . . . is stronger than ever. Do you have feelings? . . . Do you have emotions? Strangle them. To a degree, everyone obeys this code."⁷ With all this spare time on his hands, Joseph has the freedom to invent a different value system. From the outset, however, it becomes clear that Joseph is not using his freedom very constructively: "I do not know how to use my freedom and have to embrace the flunkydome of a job because I have no resources – in a word, no character" (12). Too cowardly to face the choices that inevitably come with freedom, he longs for automatism and turns his life into a concatenation of insignificant, repetitive non-events. When he does go out occasionally, his social contacts turn into such disastrous and painful conflicts that they paradoxically end up isolating him even more: he makes a scene at a restaurant when a former communist friend refuses to acknowledge him; he experiences a crisis at the Servatius party when he feels completely alienated from the other guests and understands he will never be able to create a "colony of the spirit" (39) with these people; at another party, he spans his niece Etta for considering him insignificant; and he has similarly violent episodes with a German neighbor, with a bank clerk, and with his landlord – all events that make him feel like "a human grenade" (147). He becomes increasingly aware of his social isolation and alienation: "I, in this room, separate, alienated, distrustful, find in my purpose not an open world, but a closed, hopeless jail. My perspectives end in the walls" (92).

Separated from all other human beings, Joseph starts a dialogue with an inner voice that goes by the name of "*The Spirit of Alternatives*," a.k.a. "*But on the*