

Mr. Bellow's Planet

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Marking the centenary of Saul Bellow's birth, two new books show why the prose of the American writer and Nobel laureate has escaped eclipse: the first volume of a comprehensive "authorized" biography by Zachary Leader and a rich collection of nonfiction chosen and edited by Benjamin Taylor. Emerging is the complex portrait of a writer prolific in ideas, who resisted thinking of himself as an intellectual.

Reviewed: Zachary Leader, *The Life of Saul Bellow: To Fame and Fortune, 1915–1964*, Knopf, 812 pp. ; and Saul Bellow, *There Is Simply Too Much to Think About: Collected Nonfiction*, edited by Benjamin Taylor, Viking, 532 pp.

"When I decided my way in life," Saul Bellow said in 2001, "I knew that society would be against me. I also knew that I would win... And that it would be a small victory."

The victories of Bellow, who died a decade ago, have proved as eloquent as they are imperishable. Two new books marking the centenary of Bellow's birth—the first volume of a comprehensive "authorized" biography by Zachary Leader and a capacious collection of nonfiction—show why his prose, pulsing with what Bellow called "the freest and fullest American choices," has escaped eclipse.

Bellow was born in Lachine, Quebec, a suburb of Montreal, in 1915. His parents had immigrated a couple of years earlier from St. Petersburg. They spoke Russian to each other and Yiddish with the children. The mother, melancholic and religious, never learned to read English. The father, "tyrannical" and "whirling with impatience," in Bellow's words, considered his bookish youngest child "utterly unequipped to meet the world."

From his parents, Bellow got an early political education. He says he had first heard of Lenin and Trotsky "in the high chair while eating my mashed potatoes." From the streets in the Jewish slums of Montreal, "not too far removed from the ghettos of Poland and Russia," he got another form of education. He remembers French Canadian kids shouting obscenities, "and I soon understood that I was a *zhwiff*¹."

In 1924, when Bellow was nine, the family moved to Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood. Here he nourished himself on the extravagances of the city's street talk, its "verbal swagger." He

¹ Bellow's comical way of expressing how "Juif" ("Jew") sounded to his young ears.

listened to soapbox orators and crackpot radicals. Here, too, began his lifelong preoccupation with the effort required of children of immigrants to become American. “The distortions they suffered in Americanizing themselves also charged them with a certain energy,” Bellow observed.

Bellow took that energy to the University of Chicago and Northwestern in the 1930s, where he encountered pedigreed professors of the old guard who called his credentials into question. “I had good reason to fear that I would be put down as a foreigner, an interloper. It was made clear to me when I studied literature in the university that as a Jew and the son of Russian Jews I would probably never have the right *feeling* for Anglo-Saxon traditions, for English words.” “You’ve got a very good record,” the chairman of Northwestern’s English department told Bellow, “but I wouldn’t recommend that you study English. You weren’t born to it.”

At the end of the 1930s, “muddled in the head but keen to educate myself,” Bellow came to New York, to the ferment of Greenwich Village. Here he found another kind of incessant talk about “the Cold War, mass society, pop art, high art, psychoanalysis, existentialism, the Russian question, the Jewish question.” He joined the circle of combative self-made intellectuals around *Partisan Review*, the *avant garde* journal that joined modernist highbrow culture to left-wing politics. Bellow began writing for the journal at the age of twenty-five.

The young man impressed the New York intellectuals with his singleness of purpose. Even before Bellow published his first novel, Alfred Kazin said, “he carried around with him a sense of his destiny as a novelist that excited almost everyone around him.” In his late twenties, when his first novel was coming out, Bellow wrote to his publisher: “If I thought I were merely talented and clever in a small way I would give up writing tomorrow and never write again, not so much as a letter.”

Still, he had inhibitions to overcome. “Somewhere in my Jewish and immigrant blood,” he confessed to his friend Philip Roth, “there were conspicuous traces of a doubt as to whether I had the right to practice the writer’s trade.” Neither of his early novels—*Dangling Man* (1944), about a young Chicagoan waiting for word from his draft board, and *The Victim* (1947), about a submissive Jew hounded and exploited by a Gentile—sold well.

Only in Paris, where he came on a Guggenheim fellowship in the years 1948 to 1950, did Bellow give himself license to break through to his signature style. At first, he was depressed by the Parisian *grisaille*, or gloom. He was rattled by French anti-Americanism, which he attributed to bad conscience. “Vichy had made them cynical,” he wrote to Philip Roth. Unlike his predecessors Henry James and T.S. Eliot, Bellow did not seek in Europe what he found wanting in America.

Yet it was here, of all places, that Bellow realized that in its postwar rebirth, America—churning with its promises of self-invention, but also its self-indulgent excesses—called for a new language. “Subject and language appeared at the same moment. The language was immediately present—I can’t say how it happened, but I was suddenly enriched with words and phrases. The gloom went out of me and I found myself with magical suddenness writing a first paragraph.... I

had the triumphant feeling that this is what I had been born for.” He set down the opening lines of what would become *The Adventures of Augie March*, published to critical acclaim in 1953:

I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes not so innocent.

Once Bellow loosened himself from the restraints of his first two books, *Augie March* sluiced in. “All I had to do was be there with buckets to catch it.” In catching the intonations of Jewish urban speech, he had discovered an exuberant galloping style that juxtaposed high and low registers. “The most ordinary Yiddish conversation,” Bellow said, “is full of the grandest historical, mythological, and religious allusions. The Creation, the Fall, the Flood, Egypt, Alexander, Titus, Napoleon, the Rothschilds, the sages, the Laws may get into the discussion of an egg, a clothes-line, or a pair of pants.” The new keyed-up style, “a language that made everything available,” took liberties with grammar and allowed itself contradiction.

“A novel,” Bellow wrote to Bernard Malamud, “like a letter, should be loose, cover much ground, run swiftly, take risk of mortality and decay.” In his next books, each an interpretation of the world in its American version, Bellow learned both to run swiftly and to tame the propulsive language he had discovered with *Augie*.

The first part of Zachary Leader’s massive new biography covers Bellow’s life from 1915 to 1964. (A second volume will cover Bellow’s last forty years.) It ends with the success of *Herzog* (1964), Bellow’s account of a cuckolded polymath who yearns “to live in an inspired condition, to know truth, to be free, to love another, to consummate existence, to abide with death in clarity of consciousness.” To do this, Herzog must test his ideas and higher learning against his own sense of life’s humiliations.

Herzog, wrote the critic Hilton Kramer, “was a triumph... a novel from which people I knew read out passages to their friends on the telephone. ‘Listen to this!’ we would say... It was a book that defined our world.” The novel would remain on the *New York Times* bestseller list for a year, and confirmed its author’s position as America’s most celebrated writer. As Leader’s book draws to a close, Bellow, 49, is at the top of his form, riding a wave of awards that would crest with the Nobel Prize in 1976.

The search for an interior self, Bellow had *Augie March* say, is “hard, hard work, excavation and digging, mining, moling through tunnels.” In burrowing through 81 previously restricted boxes of Bellow’s papers, Leader, an American-born professor at the University of Roehampton in London, has given us a biography that in its exhaustive profusion of detail surpasses even James Atlas’s biography, published in 2000.

The man who emerges from Leader’s portrait is great-souled and gregarious, a conversationalist of great wit, but also needy for praise, self-absorbed, and as despotic in life as he was toward the emotionally susceptible characters in his fiction. His competitiveness and vulnerability makes him also raw-nerved. He holds onto grudges, grievances, and imagined slights. He uses his fiction to settle scores and fulminate against ex-wives and ex-friends.

Yet Leader's hard work of excavation does not guarantee that the search for an interior self will succeed. "The soul of another is a dark forest," Bellow has another of his characters say. For all his attention to the trees, Leader's readings prove too pale to illuminate the forest. He reads the novels too biographically; time and again he resorts to a literalist identification of Bellow's characters with the real-life "models" on whom they are said to be based.

But Bellow's characters stand on the far side of the gulf separating art from fact. Herzog expressed the hope that a life be not "mere facticity." However much Bellow's fictional protagonists reflect his own intellectual evolution and his own relationships, his novels are not merely autobiographies in disguise. Bellow's fifth wife, Janis, insisted on just this point: the way Bellow touched facts with imagination, she said, "is nothing like the cutting and pasting of actual events. Biographers, beware: Saul wields a wand, not scissors."

We are tempted to read Benjamin Taylor's rich new collection of Bellow's essays, travelogues, speeches, and interviews with Norman Manea and Philip Roth, arranged in chronological order, as a closer approximation of autobiography.

Taylor, who previously edited Bellow's letters, displays to virtuoso effect how lightly Bellow wore his seriousness. Bellow himself was prolific in ideas. He spent a lifetime teaching—at Princeton, Bard College, the University of Minnesota, Boston University, and at the University of Chicago. His novels, weighted with a ballast of ideas and allusions to Greek, Jewish, and European philosophers, do not sail along straight-plotted narrative lines.

But Bellow strenuously resisted thinking of himself as an intellectual. "I might have become an intellectual," he writes, "but this makes me think of the prostitute in the French cartoon who said, '*J'aurais pu faire la religieuse*'—I might have been a nun."

In the pieces Taylor has judiciously selected, Bellow reserves the most scathing remarks for professors, with their academic hauteur; publicity-intellectuals, with their didactic judgments; and trend-setting culture-bureaucrats who take more interest in Opinion than in Creation. What do such people do with literature? "They make careers of it; they become an élite through it; they adorn themselves with it; they make discourse of it." They do little more, Bellow writes, than "translating imagination into opinion or art into cognition." Their erudite books lead readers into "deserts of abstraction." Their literary quarterlies, offering off-the-rack attitudes, "do for graduate students and young intellectuals what *Vogue* and *Glamour* do for working girls and housewives."

Although Bellow concedes that contemporary fiction no longer commands the prestige or authority it once enjoyed, he is especially rankled by critics who pronounce the death of the novel; he classes them with the worst tyrants. "The modern world is full of people who declare that other people are obsolete. Stalin and the Kulaks, Hitler and the Jews and Slavs and gypsies, and [Lionel] Trilling and T.S. Eliot and several others have decided that novels are done for historically."

In his Nobel speech, included in Taylor's volume, Bellow defends the novel as "a novel in which the spirit takes shelter." Bellow's notion of shelter brings us to the theme that lends this

collection its title. Describing himself as “distracted by the subject of distraction,” Bellow complains that we are tyrannized by the noise of technology. The chatter of public life drowns out private life. We are benumbed by the incessant din of politics and mass media. We are whipped without refuge into a consumerist commotion. Our endurance is overtaxed by a permanent condition of clamor and crisis. Given this proliferation, “there is simply too much to think about,” Bellow writes, and not enough contemplative quiet to think about it, let alone turn it into art. “I feel that art has something to do with the achievement of stillness in the midst of chaos... with an arrest of attention in the midst of distraction.”

In the tradition of American self-fashioning, and true to his original purpose, this son of immigrants made himself, freestyle. In the process, he attained a form of expression that both shelters our spirit and arrests our attention still.

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