

Saul Bellow as a Novelist of Ideas

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Abstract: - A novel whose story expounds and explores a particular philosophy perspective on the world is called the novel of ideas. It is different from a novel with ideas. It requires a poise, a balance, and most of all an eclectic faith in the democracy of ideas. Once the novelist deserts this position, his novels have only one of two ways to go; they may become novels not of ideas but of persons; this seldom occurs because the conversation of a novelist of ideas is scarcely an aesthetic conversation. Or they may become essays almost purely, and the narrative itself a setting for the exposition rather than the dramatization of idea.

Bellow's work has, in fact, stretched the borders of what we mean— or, perhaps more correctly, what can be meant—by the novel of ideas. Rather than essayists per se, his protagonists tend to be absorbed in “mental letters”, or “recitals”, or Sternerian meditations. They are, in a word, stuck—not only in that grappling with ideas, which produces more anguish than manuscript pages or in theory of what Charlie Citrine calls “a life in greater disorder”, but in an exhaustion, which yearns for transcendental relief. As Joseph, the testy, hypocritical journal-keeper of ‘Dangling Man’ puts it—

“We are all drawn towards the same centres of the spirit— to know what we are and what we are for, to know our purpose, to seek grace.”¹

The protagonists of Bellow's later novels would, no doubt, agree, although they would probably express the sentiment with more flash, more stylistic punch. His ‘Herzog’ is an excellent contender for the top position on a list of novels of ideas. It was instantly heralded as a literary masterpiece when it was published in 1964, and won Saul Bellow his second National Book Award for Fiction. There is an interesting narrative in ‘Herzog’, but the book often follows Herzog's mental wanderings. His mental letters are the best indication of Bellow's continuing interest in a self-styled novel of ideas and of the stylistic advances he had made since the days when his protagonists were either confined within their adult brooding or condemned to a protracted adolescence. In addition to the letters, Herzog makes extensive use of flashbacks. The novel, ‘Herzog’ is ultimately a fascinating study of life in a world of ideas. The explicit emphasis on ideas present in the letters also appears in the main narrative and flashbacks. Even Herzog's sessions with a psychiatrist focus on issues like whether Nietzsche had a Christian view of history. The placement of the intellectual references demonstrates the unique place of ideas in the lives of thinkers. In both everyday discussions and in his letters,

Herzog shifts between the mundane and the intellectual. The world of ideas reign in Herzog. When he writes to his Governor, he ends up asking himself,

“Since when have you taken such an interest in social questions, in the external world ?”²

It is, however, clear that the world of ideas and the real world are constantly co-mingling. A story of relationship difficulties, intellectual failures and, at times, seeming madness, ‘Herzog’ could be read as cautionary tale for readers about the perils of ideas. Living in a world of ideas alone comes with its consequences. Engaging with these ideas, however, is well worth the potential risks. Following quotations of this novel, too may be quoted here to prove it—

“One thought-murder a day keeps the psychiatrist away.”³

“Readiness to answer all questions is the infallible sign of stupidity”.⁴

“Is there nothing between birth and death but what I can get out of this perversity—only a favourable balance of disorderly emotions ? No freedom ? Only impulses ? And what about all the good I have in my heart— does it mean anything ? Is it simply a joke ? A false hope, that makes a man feel the illusion of worth ? And so he goes on with his struggles. But this good is no phony. I know it isn't. I swear it.”⁵

Saul Bellow's ‘Mr. Sammler's Planet’ presents more emphatically humanic elements in its theme, characterization and some important critical observation on the Jewish situation in a larger measure than done in the earlier novels. Arthur, the protagonist of this novel, is the most private among the protagonists of Bellow's novels. Most of the time he talks to himself. He has a divided consciousness because his mind is drawn in two directions—

by the polite society outside of himself and by his internal belief within his mind. He thinks that the inner voice of the individual is suppressed by the polite society outside of received opinions. It is a conflict between the rationalistic talk and the secrets of the spirit. The noise of the rationalist talk has drawn out the utterance of the individual spirit, and, therefore, threatened the very existence of the “human” in the individual. To quote E. Pifer in this regard—

“Bellow uses here [in ‘Mr. Sammler’s Planet’] a distinction, Pascal made centuries ago in his Pensees.....two modes or processes of reflection, the analytic and the intuitive, draw Sammler’s mind in opposing directions, towards meaning that contradict and conflict.”⁶

Bellow is thus trying to give Sammler a language to explore what is deep in his heart, what he feels intuitively but what cannot be perceived by others. Sammler tries to understand, analyse and explain the nature of existence. The conflict in Sammler’s mind thus arises from the fact that his rational and critical mind is strong enough to create a doubt in his mind about the ‘felt’ experiences or the intuitive knowledge or informal beliefs. He has an intuitive feeling that mankind is headed towards. Some disaster, which he too cannot precisely visualise or define because he is a part of the human race. But he surely has some kind of a premonition, that it would happen and he would also be involved in it. Being a modern intellectual man, he tries to use analytic mind to probe this mystery. He collects vast data and facts to arrive at general theories and laws, that may explain reality what he calls “superstructures of explanation”. As the novel begins, he is seen in his west side bedroom conducting an inner dialogue with himself while he is waking—

“Intellectual man had become an explaining creature. Fathers to children, wives to husbands, lecturers to listeners, experts to laymen..... man to his own soul explained. The roots of this, the cause of the other..... the history, the structure, the reasons why for the most part, in one ear out of the other. The soul wanted what it wanted. It had its own natural knowledge. It sat unhappily on superstructures of explanation, poor bird, not knowing which way to fly.”⁷

Further, Bellow’s ‘Humboldt’s Gift’ is unique pattern found in ‘Herzog’ and ‘Mr. Sammler’s Planet’. The American way of life creates violence, fraud, social chaos and erotic sexuality. It is worse affected Citrine. He struggles against a morally corrupting situation. Bellow deals with Citrine’s story divided into two separate but unequal parts—

backward glances at what he calls his “significant dead” and the forward motions of a life growing increasingly cluttered. In a model, modeled on D. Schwartz, Humboldt is the lyric poet extraordinaire. During the 1930s, his Harlequin Ballads was “an immediate hit”, the stuff of which literary fame—and literary power—is fashioned. But an appetite like Humboldt’s depends upon calculated restlessness, a fight to the finish between life as it is and what his poetry might make it become. If Goethe had insisted, at the end, on “More light”, poor Humboldt required an even wider range of excesses, more enemies, more influences, more sex, more money, more.....As Citrine puts it—

“Humboldt wanted to drape the world in radiance, but he didn’t have enough material.”⁸

In this sense, ‘Humboldt’s Gift’ may be the best illustration of what Hoffman had in mind when he talked about the novel of ideas requiring a poise, a balance, and most of all an eclectic faith in the democracy of ideas. For example, Citrine muses about his Mercedes in a mood, which is neatly divided between the playful and the elegaic. To quote—

“Suddenly I got an idea. I went into what I called an Anthony and Cleopatra mood. Let Rome in Tiber melt. Let the world know that such a natural pair could wheel through Chicago in a silver Mercedes, the engines tickling like wizard-made toy millipedes and subtler than a Swiss Accutron—no, an Audemars Piguet with jeweled Peruvian butterfly wings ! In other words, I had allowed the car to become an extension of my own self (on the folly and vanity side), so that an attack on it was on myself. It was a moment terribly trifle in reactions.”⁹

Moreover, Citrine dangles between manic action and vaguely depressive meditations as if he were destined to reduplicate the essential patterns of Humboldt’s life. Indeed, that is what the movie scripts about Caldofredo and Corcoran come to at the bottom line. With regard to the “meditations”; since the opening pages of ‘Seize the Day’, Bellow has been much attracted to symbolic carpets; after exciting himself with thoughts about his vanquished auto, Citrine lapses into yoga exercise on his plus green carpet. To quote from the text to prove it—

“Clutching my half-bald head in both hands as if in despair, fingers interlocked I had my trembling legs in the air, tufts of side-hair sticking out, and the green Persian carpet flowing under me. I was heart-injured. I was dissolute. The beauty of the carpet was one of my

comforts. I have become deeply attached to carpets, and this one was a great work of art. The green was soft and varied with great subtlety.”¹⁰

Thus, it is clear that Saul Bellow is a great novelist ideas. His novels are fine examples of novel of ideas; as— ‘Herzog’, ‘Mr. Sammler’s Planet’, ‘Humboldt’s Gift’, etc.

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