

An essay review of "Mr. Sammler's Planet," by Saul Bellow  
(Viking, 313 pp., \$6.95)



## Saul Bellow and the Dogmas of Possibility

by BENJAMIN DEMOTT

**T**he lid is off, experience is in, Action is all: given this situation, have books a future? Can literary minds regain influence on the general culture? Will a voice of moral authority soon again sound—and be heeded—in a novel, poem, or play?

One current incitement to pessimism is the increasing polarization of literary opinion. (Conservatives are locked in the habit of fitting every observation of behavior or feeling into a grid of Cultural Decline; radicals are locked in the conviction that art can't be art unless it is revolutionary and anarchistic. The first view seals writers off from "unstructured" encounters with the age, the second abolishes literary form as a value.)

An incitement to optimism, on the other hand, is the ongoing productivity of the country's major literary talents—and among the latter none stands higher than Saul Bellow. This writer seldom slights his craft: no slovenly books or clownish cynicism or hints that art and public relations are one. High spirits, humor, strong narrative rhythms, responsiveness to place as well as person, a swift idiomatic speaking voice, the power to nudge open a door upon common life without instantly banishing delight and wonder—these are but a few of his gifts. And equal to any of them, at least in the mind of people anxious about the survival of moral authority in letters, is Bellow's relish of talk and thought about the "conduct of life," and his custom of ventilating moral/cultural issues in his books. Usually the author of *Augie March* focuses on personal quandaries (the hero's unrestrainable appetite in *Henderson the Rain King*, Tommy Wilhelm's weakness and self-

deception in *Seize the Day*). But even amidst absorption with the local and idiosyncratic, his eye glances off to items of larger implication—high-fashion enthusiasm for despair (*Herzog*), minority group self-pity (*The Victim*). And this tendency of mind, together with the gifts just mentioned, has fixed an estimate of Saul Bellow as a writer not only ambitious to speak general truth but exceptionally well-equipped to do so.

No book in Bellow's *oeuvre* addresses cultural agonies more directly than the one at hand; nowhere does representation of personal relations run on as regularly into impersonal counsel about how to live. From this it doesn't follow, of course, that narrative interest is neglected, or that a tractarian or essayistic posture is the book's norm, or that the hero—a Polish-born, English-educated septuagenarian—is to be identified with Mr. Bellow himself. (One surprising link between plus-seventy Sammler and plus-fifty Bellow—H. G. Wells—is worth a word. Sammler is presented as an intimate of Wells; Bellow corresponded with that author, an admirer of Bellow's first novel, in the 1940s.) *Mr. Sammler's Planet* is dense in character and anecdote, and if its narrative line is a shade less than gripping, it suffices for the display both of the central figure and of the novelist's comic inventiveness. It is true, though, that book and hero alike seek from the beginning a stance of detachment, and the search creates difficulties for both.

Artur Sammler, one-eyed man of mind, former London-based correspondent for Polish newspapers, icy, aristocratic, Bloomsbury habitué, escapee from a mass grave in a Nazi slaughter, lives on New York's West Side with his niece and his daughter as companions. A couple of his more extraordinary life adventures—hiding out in a Polish mausoleum after the

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escape from the mass grave, service as correspondent of sorts during an Arab-Israeli battle—are recounted in backflashes. And the man does an occasional turn, center stage, most notably a lecture at Columbia on the British Scene in the Thirties, during which he's jumped by student radicals for approving intellectual freedom.

But Sammler is mainly an observer, not an actor. What he looks at is history in the large, the city roundabout (especially the habiliments of vanity and lunacy visible in strangers), and the appetites of relatives and acquaintances studied at close range. The human beings in question include an elegantly clad black pickpocket who works the bus between Columbus Circle and 72nd Street (the fellow at length detects Sammler's surveillance and chases him into an apartment lobby, trapping him in a corner and threatening him, wordlessly, by exposing himself). Others whom Sammler scrutinizes are Dr. Govinda Lal, an Indian astrophysicist guest-lecturing in America, author of a work called *The Future of the Moon*, the opening sentence of which reads, "How long will this earth remain the only home of Man?"; Dr. Elya Gruner, Sammler's benefactor, a Westchester surgeon sick unto death in a Manhattan hospital, who stands forth by virtue of generosity and solidity of self as Sammler's model of human worth; and three members of the takeover generation—the surgeon's endlessly cosseted children, Angela and Wallace Gruner, and Sammler's own daughter, Shula-Slawa, lonely, lit'ry, loony.

The narrative net gathering these people is drawn by two actions—Shula-Slawa's theft of the astrophysicist's moon manuscript (the girl believes the document to be essential to a memoir of Wells that in her mind is the core of her father's life), and Wallace Gruner's attempted destruction of his father's house in pursuit of a cache of "dirty money" allegedly hidden in the pipes by the elder Gruner with the aid of a "Mafia plumber." The comic interludes that interrupt Sammler's reflections on this miscellaneous lot usually feature Wallace, a thoroughly original creation who shuttles from role to role and fantasy to fantasy, excusing himself with the remark that "I'm a different generation. I never had any dignity to start with."

[Wallace] invented curious projects. Several years ago he flew out to Tangiers with the purpose of buying a horse and visiting Morocco and Tunisia on horseback. Not taking his Honda, he said, because backward people should be seen from a horse. He had borrowed Jacob Burckhardt's *Force and Freedom* from Sammler, and it



—Jeff Lowenthal.

**Saul Bellow — "no slovenly books or clownish cynicism."**

affected him strongly. He wanted to examine peoples in various stages of development. In Spanish Morocco he was robbed in his hotel. By a man with a gun, hidden in his closet. He then flew on to Turkey and tried again. Somehow he managed to enter Russia on his horse. In Soviet Armenia he was detained by the police. After [his father] had gone five or six times to see Senator Javits, Wallace was released from prison. Then, once again in New York, Wallace, taking a young lady to see the film *The Birth of a Child*, fainted away at the actual moment of birth, struck his head on the back of a seat, and was knocked unconscious. Reviving, he was on the floor. He found that his date had moved away from him in embarrassment, changed her seat. He had a row with her for abandoning him. Wallace, borrowing his father's Rolls, let it somehow get away from him; carelessly parked, it ended up at the bottom of a reservoir somewhere near Croton. He drove a city crosstown bus to pay off debts. The Mafia was after him. His bookie gave him two months to pay. The handicapping hadn't worked. He flew with a friend to Peru to climb in the Andes. Said to be quite a good pilot . . . He volunteered for the domestic Peace Corps. He wanted to be of use to little black children, to be a basketball coach in playgrounds . . .

And the book's most hilarious moment occurs when Sammler delivers portentously to Dr. Lal the fruits of his meditation on the future of man just at the instant Wallace upstairs breaks the attic pipes, flooding the entire house. "Regularly, now, for generations," Sammler reflects minutes later, carrying plastic buckets up and down the stairs, "prosperous families brought forth their anarchistic sons—these boy Bakunins, geniuses of liberty, arsonists, demolishers of prisons,

property, palaces. Bakunin had loved fire so. Wallace worked in water, a different medium."

As for the fruits of Sammler's meditation: their value lies in alertness to themes of Possibility, Experience, and Wholeness that are indeed central in contemporary thought and feeling, and that have never before in fiction been dealt with as explicitly as here. *Mr. Sammler's Planet* does, to be sure, offer up many commonplace ruminations about the odds against Western culture, and much fulmination against post-Enlightenment man. (" . . . the struggles of three revolutionary centuries being won while the feudal bonds of Church and Family weakened, and the privileges of aristocracy [without any duties] spread wide, democratized, especially the libidinous privileges, the right to be uninhibited, spontaneous, urinating, defecating, belching, coupling in all positions, tripling, quadrupling, polymorphous, noble in being natural, primitive, combining the leisure and luxurious inventiveness of Versailles with hibiscus-covered erotic ease of Samoa . . . ") But the book's formulations concerning the nature of the new appetites are far less stale:

. . . people want to visit all other states of being in a diffused state of consciousness, not wishing to be any given thing but instead to become comprehensive, entering and leaving at will . . .

. . . Human beings, when they have room, when they have liberty and are supplied also with ideas, mythologize themselves . . . They legendize. They expand by imagination and try to rise above the limitations of the ordinary forms of common life . . . Separating themselves from the rest of their species, from the life of their species, hoping perhaps to get away . . . from the death of their species . . .

Humankind had lost its old patience. It demanded accelerated exaltation, accepted no instant without pregnant meanings as in epic, tragedy, comedy, or films.

These formulations, furthermore, have an organic weight—nothing patched-on or abstract about them. Now they're validated by the observed life of the sidewalks:

What one sees on Broadway while bound for the bus. All human types reproduced, the barbarian, Redskin, or Fiji, the dandy, the buffalo hunter, the desperado, the queer, the sexual fantasist, the squaw, bluestocking, princess, poet, painter, prospector, troubadour, guerrilla, Che Guevara, the new Thomas Becket . . .

Now they're validated by the sick non

sequiturs of Wallace Gruner's funny-pathetic talk:

"... They say that fellows that beef themselves up like that—I was a ninety-pound weakling—that such fellows are narcissistic pansies. I don't judge anybody. What if they are homosexuals? That's nothing any more. I don't think homosexuality is simply a different way of being human, I actually think it's a disease. I don't know why homosexuals fuss so much and proclaim themselves so normal. Such gentlemen. Of course they have us to point at—and we're not so great. I believe this boom in faggots was caused by modern warfare. One result of 1914, that slaughter in the trenches. The men were getting blasted. It was obviously healthier to be a woman than a man. It was better to be a child. Best of all is to be an artist, combining child, woman, or dervish—do I mean a dervish? A shaman? A necromancer is probably what I mean. Plus millionaire. Many a millionaire wants to be an artist, or a kid or woman and a necromancer. What was I talking about? ..."

And before the tale is ended, the contrast between self-stability and its opposite is worked into the very texture of people's knowledge of each other. Sammler perceives his friend Gruner as a self-consistency embodying chosen dignity. And he himself in turn is placed by the restless money-maddened types who know him as pure stillness and fixity: "Feffer in the furious whirling of his spirit took him for a fixed point." (At length, true to his own ironic spirit, Sammler grins at the "still point" *shtick*. In "hyperenergetic revolutions," he reflects, men "fall in love with ideas of stability, and Sammler was an idea of stability.")

It's one thing to grant the pertinence of Bellow's account of the new sensibility, however, and another to accept *Mr. Sammler's Planet* as evidence of the trustworthiness of the literary mind now. For although there's much to praise in this work of fiction—spirited comedy, intermittent analytical brilliance—it is nevertheless at bottom a troubled, uncertain book. The problems can be variously labeled. From one perspective they look to be consequences of an over-rigid, over-familiar (see above) "decline-of-culture" set of mind; from another they're traceable to esthetic confusion—a doomed effort to move freely, in a single work, between closed and open literary forms. But both perspectives are mere symptomatology: the strong impression is that the root of the book's trouble, both as argument and as art, is a defect of sympathy.

As might be assumed, Mr. Sammler the protagonist is wary of this defect, determined to guard against it. He un-

derstands that he is a man of the past. He knows that the appetite for multiple selves and for new ways of having experience has connections with past deprivation:

... many have surged forward in modern history, after long epochs of namelessness and bitter obscurity, to claim and to enjoy (as people enjoy things now) a name, a dignity of person, a life such as belonged in the past only to gentry, nobility, the royalty or the gods of myth.

He tries to acknowledge that mere admonitions to "be human" can't instantly increase the attractions of humdrum humanness:

Why should they be human? In most of the forms offered there is little scope for the great powers of nature in the individual, the abundant, generous powers. In business, in professions, in labor; as a member of the public; as an inhabitant of the cities, these strange pits; as experiencer of compulsions, manipulations; as endurer of strain; as father, husband obliging society by performing his quota of actions—the individual seems to feel these powers less, less and less.

And again and again he speaks of his struggle against certainty and the doc-

trinaire temper, his effort to preserve a measure of negative capability ("The best, I have found, is to be disinterested... by not judging").

But the struggle fails. Or, rather, it attains insufficient substance for the reader, seemingly belonging only to the surface structure of Sammler's mind and story. His "fairness," his qualifications, his hesitations, sound faint, as from the wings, whereas his scorn and vituperation come forth strongly as from the center:

The mental masses, inheriting everything in a debased state, had formed an idea of the corrupting disease of being white and of the healing power of black...

From the black side, strong currents were sweeping over everyone. Child, black, redskin—the unspoiled Seminole against the horrible Whiteman. Millions of civilized people wanted oceanic, boundless, primitive, neck-free nobility, experienced a strange release of galloping impulses, and acquired the peculiar aim of sexual niggerhood for everyone.

Just look... at this imitative anarchy of the streets—these Chinese revolutionary tunics, these babes in unisex toyland, these surrealist warchiefs, Western stagecoach drivers—Ph.D.s in

## Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by David M. Glixon

### RIVER RUN

Just fill in the blanks with one of the rivers listed at the right, and assign the correct poet to the lines quoted by Edwardine Sperling of Peoria, Ill. If the current is too swift, seize the lifebuoy on page 37.

1. I saw . . . their wide long lake below  
And the blue \_\_\_\_\_ in fullest flow. ( ) A. Alph
2. Farewell to barn and stack and tree,  
Farewell to \_\_\_\_\_ shore. ( ) B. Avon
3. She dwelt among the untrodden ways  
Beside the springs of \_\_\_\_\_. ( ) C. Doon
4. And the first gray of morning filled the east,  
And the fog rose out of the \_\_\_\_\_ stream. ( ) D. Dove
5. "I'll go to my tower on the \_\_\_\_\_," replied he,  
" 'Tis the safest place in Germany." ( ) E. Esconaba
6. Sweet swan of \_\_\_\_\_! what a sight it were  
To see thee in our waters yet appear. ( ) F. Oxus
7. High upon Highlands,/And low upon \_\_\_\_\_. ( ) G. Rhine
8. Left the fleetest deer behind him,/Left the antelope  
and bison;/Crossed the rushing \_\_\_\_\_. ( ) H. Rhone
9. She prophesied that, late or soon,  
Thou would be found deep drown'd in \_\_\_\_\_. ( ) I. Severn
10. Where \_\_\_\_\_, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man. ( ) J. Tay

(a) Anon. (b) Arnold. (c) Burns. (d) Byron. (e) Coleridge. (f) Housman. (g) Jonson. (h) Longfellow. (i) Southey. (j) Wordsworth.