

ANALYSIS

Mr. Sammler's Planet (1970)

Saul Bellow

(1915-2005)

“Saul Bellow has really had one commanding subject: the derangements of the soul in the clutter of our cities, the poverty of a life deprived of order and measure. His work has in part continued the line of sensibility established by T. S. Eliot in ‘The Waste Land,’ for in Chicago and New York one can ask as urgently as in London, ‘what branches grow out of this stony rubbish?’ But Bellow has also diverged, in the more original portions of his work, from the Eliot line of sensibility, for he has come to feel that the once-liberating perceptions embodied in Eliot’s great poem have, through the erosion of popularity, become clichés. Bellow now writes from a conviction that even today men can establish a self-ordering discipline which rests on a tentative-sardonic faith in the value of life without faith....

There is always a danger in the work of an urban novelist like Bellow that his books will turn into still another tiresome afterword to the literary talk about Angst and Alienation; but what has saved Bellow from that fate has been his fierce insistence that, no matter how heavy the cloud of despair hanging over this (or any other) time, we can still find some pleasure in sociability and our bodies, or, at the least, still experience that root sense of obligation which the mere fact of being human imposes on us.... He has maintained two narrative voices signifying two world-outlooks, the first sententious and the second sardonic, yet with the declamations of the sententious voice never quite undone, and sometimes even slyly reinforced, by the thrusts of the sardonic voice. This has kept the reader on his toes, precisely where he belongs.

Mr. Sammler's Planet is set in a milieu that has become Bellow’s own, a created province of the imagination quite as much as Wessex is Hardy’s and Yoknapatawpha is Faulkner’s. New York’s Upper West Side is a grimy place, at once unfit for human habitation and the scene of what must, I suppose, be called an advanced civilization. It is ugly filthy, dangerous; it reeks with dog shit; its streets are crammed with the flotsam of society: winos, junkies, pushers, whores, grifters; yet here too are stately refugees, stuffy reformers, literary intellectuals, eager Puerto Ricans, and elderly Jews haunted by memories of sweatshops and concentration camps and no longer able to take life as incessant struggle. In this menagerie of integration, anomie, and good feeling, people still manage to live.

Bellow first immortalized this neighborhood in *Seize the Day*, but the Upper West Side in that great novella was mainly a bright-colored backdrop to a personal drama. In *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, however, the Upper West Side is more than setting, it becomes a tangible sign of the nature of our time. In the Upper West Side, as Bellow sees it, the continuities of ordinary living, by no means always a triumph but never to be sneered at, manage somehow to coexist with the raspy notional foolishness our culture casts off like smoke. The Upper West Side becomes transformed in Bellow’s fiction into a principle of sorts, a mixture of health and sickness exemplifying our condition, and not merely through his gift for evoking every street, every figure, every shade of light and dark, but still more through the saturation of his characters with the spirit of the place. On a smaller scale, Bellow does for the Upper West Side what Lawrence has done for the Midlands and Hardy for Dorset: a linkage of setting and figure so close that the two come to seem inseparable parts in a tradition of shared experience.

Mr. Sammler is a Polish Jew in his seventies. In his early years he had worked as a correspondent in London, which accounts for his old-fashioned liberal courtliness and values; later he escaped miraculously from a death convoy in the Nazi camps. Sated with experiences beyond absorption and reflections forever conjectural, Arthur Sammler looks out upon America in the sixties: its violence, its coarseness, its jabbermy mindlessness, its sexual cult. He is not surprised, having lived in Europe after the First World War; he is alarmed, knowing that history can repeat itself. Yet Sammler is not a polemicist, he is too canny for easy visions of apocalypse. Preparing for death, he knows the world is no longer his.

Sammler means 'to collect' in Yiddish, and Sammler, like all those compulsive talkers, half-clown and half-philosopher, in Bellow's novels, is a collector of experience, sometimes a tentative sorter of conclusions. First of all his *Sammlung* consists of relatives, mostly female. Shula, Sammler's daughter, was saved by a Polish convent during the holocaust and now is 'almost always at Easter' a 'week-long Catholic.' Mercilessly devoted to the higher things in life, this amiable loon believes her father is writing an inspired memoir of H.G. Wells. The complications of the plot, if there is a plot, devolve partly around Shula stealing an Indian scholar's manuscript because she thinks it will help her daddy. Any day on Broadway, our garbaged Morality Row, you can see Shula between 72nd and 86th Streets....

Next, Sammler's niece Margotte, also mad for culture...a dumpy lady prepared to discuss Hannah Arendt's theory of evil (or anyone else's theory about anything) all day long, while looking helplessly for a piece of salami with which to make a sandwich. And last, Angela, 'one of those handsome, passionate, rich girls...always an important social and human category,' who is driving herself crazy through sheer sexual concentration. The derangements of the first two women are of earlier decades, Angela's of his very moment. This cast, with several supporting players, is more than a bit mad yet not at all insufferable. Human all too human, it is presented by Bellow with an affectionate sardonic detail, and the incidents that pile up with seeming casualness bring them into quick changes of relationship, all calculated to set off Sammler's dilemmas and reflections.

He detects a black pickpocket, superbly elegant and powerful, working the Riverside bus; the pickpocket, aware that he has been seen but not frightened, follows Sammler into an apartment lobby; and there, as evidence of his superiority of being—quite as if he'd been reading certain reviews—he exposes to Sammler his formidable penis. It is an act of symbolism Sammler is prepared to understand, if not quite appreciate. In another episode, again shot through with the fevers of our moment, Sammler accepts an invitation to lecture at Columbia about England during the thirties: 'Old Man! You quoted Orwell before.'... Lively-odd figures, brilliantly managed incidents—but what does it all come to? That, until the very last paragraph, is the question one keep asking about *Mr. Sammler's Planet*.

Perhaps there's an answer of sorts in the lectures and speeches, more in the style of *Herzog* than *Seize the Day*, that Bellow scatters through his pages? For whole sections the book moves into a genre somewhat like those conversations Thomas Love Peacock wrote in the nineteenth century, in which voices of varying refinement representing disembodied but fixed opinions are set up in an interplay of friction. There are readers who have always felt these portions of Bellow's novels to be digressive or pretentious, in any case lessening the immediate emotional impact of his work. I think such criticisms mainly—not always—ill-conceived, first because Bellow is a man of high intelligence so that his generalized commentary is intrinsically absorbing, and second because he has the rare gift of transforming dialectic into drama, casuistry into comedy, so that one is steadily aware of the close relationship between his discursive passages and the central narrative...

Throughout the book Sammler keeps returning to the hospital room of a friend, Dr. Arnold Elya Gruner, a rich and crafty man, sometime Mafia abortionist, soured father of Angela the handsome nymph, and yet, as we come to see, a decent man in quite commonplace ways. Elya had rescued Sammler and Shula after the war, had given them money with which to live: a not very costly, and if you wish, a *bourgeois* gesture. Sammler knows his faults, but knows too that in this ordinary man there are strengths and resources of a kind we must have if we are not to perish on this earth.

An old man implicated, despite his wish for detachment, in the lunacies of his daughter, the gabble of his niece, the suicidal thrust of Angela, the brutalities of the Columbia heckler, the threat of the pickpocket, and a host of other menacing fantasies and realities that rise out of the very pavements of the Upper West Side, Sammler all the while keeps yielding himself to the most fundamental themes of gravity: a man is dying, a man who has been good to me. He has shown himself responsible to me, I must be responsible to him. Gradually all the foolishness of Sammler's days, all the absurdity and ugliness of his encounters, all the brittleness and bravura of his thought, give way. There remains only the imperative of the human obligation. Standing over the dead body of his quite unremarkable friend, Sammler speaks the final words of the book.... These lines, like most of Bellow's endings, constitute an overwhelming stroke. Carrying its

truth as a precious cargo I yet find myself wondering whether Eliot, a writer of different persuasion, might not ask, 'Yes, in our inmost hearts we know, or at least remember, but *how* do we know? Is it not through the memory of traditions lapsed and beliefs denied?' What Bellow might say in reply I would not presume to guess, but the strength of the position from which he would speak seems very clear to me.

Of all the 'American Jewish writers' of the last few decades Bellow is not merely the most gifted by far, but the most serious—and the most Jewish in his seriousness. In him alone, or almost alone, the tradition of immigrant Jewishness, minus the *Schmaltz* and *Schmutz* the decades have stuccoed onto it, survives with a stern dignity. Sammler speaking at the end is something like a resurrected voice: experience fades, explanations deceive, but the iron law of life is the obligation we owe one another. The *Sammlung* is complete.”

Irving Howe
“Down and Out in New York and Chicago”
The Critical Point
(Dell/Delta 1975) 130-36

“In Bellow’s world, even survivors lose. Mr. Sammler in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* is a seventy-year-old victim of the Holocaust who hid from the Nazis in a cemetery and emerged alive. This Lazarus is an intellectual whose behavior is kind but whose heart is full of contempt for the carnival of violence he sees as the streets of New York, as his daughter’s insanity, as his sexy niece’s white lipstick which makes him think of perversion, of her ‘performing fellatio on strangers.’ His generous nephew who has supported him is dying, his nephew’s children are disappointments, renegades. He believes the planet is in decline. His fatalism is intensely conceived and linked to the Holocaust, both as experience and as a model for the destruction of the human family, and of the earth itself. In Bellow’s finest novels, the Jewish man on the hook, or the man whose life is a combat he will lose, is the image of history as personal experience, as tribal death, as intellectual adversary.”

Josephine Hendin
Vulnerable People: A View of American Fiction since 1945
(Oxford 1978) 107

Michael Hollister (2015)