# 27 CRITICS DISCUSS

## Saul Bellow

## (1915-2005)

"It was of Dostoevsky that Andre Gide once said all factions could find something in him to support their claims but no one faction could claim him exclusively. Some of this holds true for Saul Bellow. He came up as a writer out of the touch, tight literary magazines, established his beachhead, as it were, and is now successfully fanning out into the broader and brighter domains; his talents, valued from the start by the severer literary critics, have gradually begun to be noticed by greater numbers of the ordinary, intelligent vintage. Mr. Bellow's work contains innumerable diverse elements, it has variousness and is against the grain. His readers, therefore, are to be found anywhere and everywhere and they can be anyone at all."

Harvey Breit
*The Writer Observed*
(World 1956) 271

"Saul Bellow views the past in an almost anthropological way. He finds no moral in it, but rather senses the shaping force of heredity and social circumstances upon man, the isolation and burden of human life, the natural ruins of time, and the continuity of human history. Like James Joyce, a chronicler of the city, Bellow attempts to discover pattern and meaning in the hidden fantasies of man living in a mechanized urban world where the daily routine obscures private realities and where normal human reactions are expected to be proper, abstractions systematized by a code of social behavior, not deeply felt, emotional or genuine….Altogether Bellow seems more suited by temperament and ability than any writer of his generation to create for American "the uncreated conscience" of modern man."

Edward Schwartz
*New Republic*
(3 December 1956) 20-21

"The suffering, the humility, the moral goodness in his books, the honest and ironic realization of human weakness: these are the traits that appeal to us. But this note of resignation, of acceptance does not appear in Bellow's work after the violence and passions of life, as it commonly does in the work of major artists. It appears in Bellow's fiction *instead* of the emotional storm and stress it should transcend. The central image of the hero in his novels and stories is not indeed that of the rebellious son, but of the suffering, the tormented, and the conforming son. To use the phraseology of Salinger, this hero is the good boy, the sad sack; or to use the terms of depth psychology, he is the castrated son."

Maxwell Geismar
*American Moderns*
(Hill and Wang 1958) 221-24

"In all his work thus far Bellow has been moving toward a hedged affirmation: an insistence upon the importance and possibility of such fulfillment with a recognition always of its cost. In qualified terms he has revived the cult of personality and, paradoxically, given us the clue to the social history of the post-war years. Preoccupied with what it feels like, what it takes, what it means to be a human being, Bellow has made the man the vital center of his work. No guiding philosophical conception shapes his image of man; he is concerned with man alive….Bellow wants no confining philosophy or myth…has no patience with passing social phenomena…finds the essentials of human experience in human beings seeking themselves and seeking love. And fleeing annihilation. That fate awaits the corporate, tabulated man whose identity has been surrendered. Bellow's fiction is surely a response to his need and ours to push back the many-faced Leviathan. It is a reaction against the loss of community in modern America. In its ultimate atomization it is social history.

Chester E. Eisenger
*Accent*
(Summer 1958) 202-03

"Since the appearance of *The Adventures of Augie March* in 1953, the reputation of Saul Bellow no longer depends on the favors of the cognoscenti. His career is now a matter of public acclaim. We rejoice in him as a writer of the mind; a social critic who weathered the Depression years without benefit of dogma; a Jewish author who succeeds, as few others do, in defining what Fiedler called 'the need of the Jew in America to make clear his relationship to that country in terms of belonging or protest'; a Chicagoan, free-style and city-bred...Bellow is both in a new and old-fashioned sense a sustained fantasist of the real…Bellow's intuitions of reality have the authority of the classic European novel behind them—the speculative earthiness of Cervantes, the social scope of Balzac, the spiritual leanness of Dostoyevsky—and possess at the same time a quality of hope which we recognize as peculiarly American….

The sense of cosmic wonder Bellow preserves through his novels lightens the solemnity of the spiritual quest his heroes undertake. The quest is presumably for freedom, for knowledge, for love….What remains when all our seeking is done amounts to this: the inestimable gift of awareness, of life willing and overreaching itself….It is true that Bellow's heroes finally learn to humble themselves before experience. But if they end with humility, they begin in humiliation….Freedom is the provisional goat of their quest, but freedom forces upon them a knowledge of the self they did not bargain for, and self-knowledge discloses to them a world intelligible only in love. The notion of love is one that Bellow develops more acutely with each successive work…

The attitude is most engagingly, most accurately, expressed by Gimpel the Fool in a story Bellow translated from the Yiddish of Singer. It is no wonder that the earlier hero-victims of Bellow, detached, analytical, surly, give way to characters like Augie and Henderson who find their prototypes in the Jewish *schlimazl* and philosophical buffoon…The fetid distillation of our dream of perfection is nowhere more evident that in our great urban centers….It is not on the high seas, on rolling plain or in wooded vale, that Bellow's American Adam is prepared to receive illumination. It is rather on Broadway….Money, too, may be an arch illusion….

Bellow was born of Russian immigrants in 1915 and grew up in Chicago—his experience of the Depression might have been acute. The style and sensibility of his finished work, however, prove that he never surrendered to the 'leftist' school of writing. His treatment of the Jew, compared to the pallid caricatures Irwin Shaw and Herman Wouk chose to draw, reveals once again how far the pieties of liberalism and doctrines of orthodoxy fall short of his intent…Bellow remarked, 'For us the pain of Shylock may be greater than for others because we are Jews, but it has fundamentally the same meaning' we discover in the pain of Job or Lear."

Ihab Hassan<br>*Radical Innocence: The Contemporary American Novel*<br>(Harper/Colophon 1961) 290-94

"Saul Bellow warns us against 'deep reading.' 'Perhaps the deepest readers are those who are least sure of themselves. An even more disturbing suspicion is that they prefer meaning to feeling.' But the warning cannot take us very far when, as Bellow says, 'the best novelists and poets of the century have done much to promote' the kind of deep reading he deplores. Bellow's own novels all require great subtlety in the reader; their narrators are all only partially reliable. Who is to say with certainty to what degree Augie or Henderson or Leventhal speaks for Bellow's norms? Thus even if we take…Bellow's advice and abandon symbol-hunting, the equally pervasive irony-hunt will go on. Once on this road we cannot turn back; we cannot pretend that things are as simple as they once seemed….One of the worst results of all this is that it becomes more and more difficult to rely, in our criticism, on the old standards of proof; evidence from the book can never be decisive."

Wayne C. Booth<br>*The Rhetoric of Fiction*<br>(U Chicago 1961) 369

"To me Bellow's world is far from being identical with the mass big-city America he writes about. It is distinctively a world of his own—in style, in speculative intelligence, in the anguish of its feeling and the conscious buffoonery of its wit. It as little resembles even the European tradition of the novel Bellow would like to follow as it does those young American novelists who have lately found in him the kind of

strength they would like to capture. Bellow, even for a writer, is so much his own man that the various cultural labels that come with him—the Chicagoan, the Jew, the one-time anthropologist—figure more as themes in his work than they explain him. One of the key themes in his fiction, however, is the attempt of his protagonists to get a grip on existence, to understand not themselves (they know that this is impossible) but the infinitely elusive universe in which, as human creatures, they find themselves….

There is no class for which Bellow has the proletarian novelist's political sympathy. The external world, for Bellow, is always the covering, not the home, of a spirit not so much disaffected as unattachable. He is a novelist who in this sense reminds one of 'metaphysical' American novelists like Melville, for he identifies man's quest with the range of the mind itself."

Alfred Kazin
"The World of Saul Bellow" (1959)
*Contemporaries*
(Little, Brown/Atlantic Monthly, 1962) 217-18

"Bellow's work, though it has been widely discussed, does not lend itself readily to critical analysis. Bellow himself, though he has lectured and taught at colleges, does his best to discourage formal criticism of his work, demanding in an article in *The New York Times Book Review* that it be regarded as 'entertainment.' His first two novels, *Dangling Man* (1944) and *The Victim* (1947), were carefully constructed, highly introspective works. The first is the journal of a young man waiting to be inducted into the Army in 1943. He has quit his job after receiving his draft notice only to be left 'dangling' for nearly a year until he is finally called up. The second seems to be an allegory of anti-Semitism. Asa Leventhal, a Jew, is accused by Albee, a Gentile, of having ruined Albee's career. Though Leventhal understands that his accuser is simply a scoundrel, he is seized with a generalized typically Jewish guilt. The reader is left to decide who finally is 'the victim.'

Beginning with *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), Bellow's style, always rich, became flamboyantly and rhetorically comic. Writing on 'The Distractions of a Fiction Writer' in *New World Writing*, Bellow declared, perhaps with his own early work in mind, that writers 'are prone to exaggerate the human personality.' To correct this imbalance he turned to the external world of adventure and imagination. His characters came to life through their rich speech, or through descriptions of their physical make-up. The hero of *Henderson the Rain King* (1959) is a giant of a man with aspirations that match his bulk. Henderson responds to a voice within him that says, 'I want, I want!' and goes to Africa in search of adventure. The book departs from a realistically described New Jersey-New York milieu to a fantasy world where Henderson finds his destiny in a series of comic adventures culminating in his becoming the Rainmaker for a savage tribe.

*Herzog* (1961), a novel about a college teacher, is the most nearly autobiographical fiction Bellow has yet produced—though *The Adventures of Augie March* drew on his experience of the Chicago in which he was brought up from the age of nine. Bellow was one of the founding editors of a little magazine in book form, *The Noble Savage*. Readers who have admired Bellow's fiction have had to take him on his own terms: 'There are critics who assume that you must begin with order if you are to end with it. Not so. A novelist begins with disorder and disharmony. Whatever that process may be, Bellow has demonstrated his mastery of it. He also wrote *Seize the Day* (1956), a little-noticed yet excellent volume containing a long title story, a play, and the short story, 'Looking for Mr. Green'."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
*The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*
(Crowell 1962) 76

"Saul Bellow's novels, altogether the most exciting fiction in these years, have worked, too, within the motion from alienation to accommodation….Since the beginning all Bellow's heroes have started in a gesture of escape from burdens, an extreme romantic gesture….Bellow's characters, for all the variousness of mood and style of the novels, remain much the same: a youth and a fat man, with a quirky philosopher loitering near-by. And they face problems which are reducible to a single problem: to meet with a strong sense of self the sacrifice of self demanded by social circumstance. Alienation, the sense of separate and

unconciliating identity, must travel to accommodation….The dialogue between alienation and accommodation is what the novels first of all are about….

With the exception of *The Victim*, the novels are not even well-made. They spill over on themselves, they work themselves out according to the demands of character, and if they deal finally, with great subtlety, in a conspicuous issue, it is not because Bellow has studied the issue as such. The novels have their novelistic failures—*Dangling Man* is enclosed and short of action, Augie's exuberance runs down in the middle and becomes repetitive, Henderson suffers turgidity among his other sufferings—but they are never either journalistic or pedagogic. They work themselves out toward thematic statement….

Human beings crowd upon Bellow's hero and attempt to subjugate him. Human beings threaten his freedom, his self, and become burdensome to him….It is to the point that Bellow, unlike the past masters, Hemingway and Faulkner, is entirely a city writer. (*Henderson* takes place mostly in Africa, to be sure, but not in the green hills of Africa. It is an Africa teeming with people and political intrigue and with furniture, an Africa urbanized.) In a city there is much more to contend with. Things and others both are close and thick in Bellow's novels and, though Bellow is not without affection for Nature, there is no escape into rural simplicities. In urban circumstances the rites of love are enormously difficult….

Bellow's city imagination is not comfortable with the natural laws. He has little Nature to bring to them. But his hero entertains a yearning for them and a provisional trust that they are good, because the circumscription of the possibility of escape demands it. Joseph [*Dangling Man*] dismisses 'Nature' when it is presented to him by a friend who complains of the treelessness and the too-human deadness of New York—dismisses it as nostalgic sentimentality. Nevertheless his whole struggle toward what he calls the 'facts of simple existence' is involved in a turn of the seasons toward fruitful harmony. The death and disorder of winter submit to spring. Joseph begins his journal in the dark Chicago December and surrenders himself, relieves himself of his freedom, in April. Bellow accents the matter by having Joseph look forward throughout his winter to walking in the park in his spring coat on the twenty-first of March, and he shifts the mood of the novel toward resolution with the coming of spring."

Marcus Klein
*After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century*
(World/Meridian 1962) 34, 44-45, 47, 51-52

"It was Saul Bellow…who came closest to attaining the stature of a major novelist [1945-63]. Bellow wrote in the main, intelligent tradition of fiction; in his work realism was constantly qualified by the full powers of the imagination. His central concerns were freedom and love: freedom as the interplay between what is given and what is made in the life of man, and love as the interplay between man's identity and his completion in others. The versatility of Bellow was evident in the differences between such earlier novels as *Dangling Man* (1944) and *The Victim* (1947), surly one of the most profound treatments of the relation between gentile and Jew, and such later torrential narratives as *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) and *Henderson the Rain King* (1958), which made a grand attempt to reconcile laughter and pain, and unite the claims of love and freedom. His finest work may well be the novelette, *Seize the Day* (1956), which struck at the heart of American society in our time. Its original confrontation of what both money and manners come to mean in society with the stark fact of death opens the doors of self-knowledge."

Ihab Hassan
*Literary History of the United States,* 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1426-27

"Saul Bellow, one of the most admired of the contemporary American writers of fiction…considers himself a Chicagoan….Critics have noticed that a number of writers in Bellow's generation have rediscovered the picaresque tradition and made good use of it for their own purposes. The very title of Bellow's book about Augie March of course recalls that of Mark Twain's masterpiece in the tradition—*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. One quality of novels in the older tradition which (if one judges from their narratives) pleases today's fiction writers is the opportunities which they afford to show characters encountering some of the rougher aspects of life."

Walter Blair
*The Literature of the United States* 2

(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 1430

"As Norman Podhoretz points out in a concise and trenchant reading of the novels up to *Herzog* (in *Doings and Undoings*), Bellow's social and political bias has been pretty much the neo-conservative one, with which Podhoretz associates his pessimism, his refusal to arraign the institutions that produce his characters' malaise, his damming up and deflection of rage, and his tendency to end his dark novels on an upbeat note: recently, that of love. The detection of this bias is accurate but to ask Bellow to drop it and to adopt a more radical one is to ask him to turn his art, and the ideas and emotions that support it, upside down. What Bellow knows before he knows anything else—knows in his bones—is the settled weight and ambiguity of existence, both inner and outer. It is precisely from this feeling…that he derives his amazing descriptive power—a power, incidentally, that makes *Seize the Day* the best criticism of the money culture, as it affects the middle class, that I know of. To open his art to meliorative politics would be to rob it of its specific gravity."

Theodore Solotaroff
*The Red Hot Vacuum: And Other Pieces on the Writing of the Sixties*
(1969; Atheneum 1970) 302

"All of Bellow's books—whether melancholy realism, moral fable or picaresque fantasia—represent for him a new departure, a chosen risk in form and perception. Bellow has the most powerful mind among contemporary American novelists, or at least, he is the American novelist who best assimilates his intelligence to creative purpose. This might have been foreseen at the beginning of his career, for he has always been able to turn out a first-rate piece of discursive prose; what could not have been foreseen was that he would also become a virtuoso of fictional technique and language….His last few books comprise a hectic and at times ghastly bazaar of contemporary experience; they ring with the noise of a struggle; characters dash in and out, glistening with bravura; adventures pile up merrily, as if the decline of the West had not been definitely proclaimed; the male characters plunge and rise, mad for transcendence; the women (a little tiresomely) are all very beautiful and mostly very damaging. And the language spins….

Bellow's style draws heavily from the Yiddish, not so much in borrowed diction as in underlying intonation and rhythm. Bellow's relation to Yiddish is much more easy and authoritative than that of most other American Jewish writers. The jabbing interplay of ironies, the intimate vulgarities, the strange blend of sentimental and sardonic which characterizes Yiddish speech are lassoed into Bellow's English: so that what we get is not a sick exploitation of folk memory but a vibrant linguistic and cultural transmutation. (Precisely at the moment when Yiddish is dying off as an independent language, it has experienced an astonishing, and not always happy, migration into American culture. In two or three decades students of American literature may have to study Yiddish for reasons no worse than those for which students of English literature study Anglo-Saxon.

One of the most pleasing aspects of *Herzog* is that Bellow has brought together his two earlier manners: the melancholy and the bouncy, the 'Russian' and the 'American,' *Seize the Day* and *Augie March*. *Herzog* is almost free of the gratuitous verbalism which marred *Augie March*, yet retains its vividness and richness of texture….*Seize the Day* shows a man utterly exhausted, unable so much as to feel his despair until the wrenching final page. *Augie March* shows a man composing a self out of a belief in life's possibilities. Of the two books *Seize the Day* seems to me the more convincing and authentic."

Irving Howe
"Down and Out in New York and Chicago" (1964)
*The Critical Point*
(Dell/Delta 1975) 122

"Saul Bellow has written marvelously of men who are victims of women. Easily one of our best novelists, Bellow has a superb unrhetorical style, remarkable for its immediacy and color. His novels often display a speculative intelligence caught in sexual emotions like quicksand. This is the plight of the man whose great family feelings are the death of him, whose allegiances perpetually bring him down. The recurring problem in Bellow's novels is involvement. The appeal of his best recent characters is the richness of thought and interest they bring to a sense of sexual involvements as dangerous. Their intelligence offers the continual promise of a solution. Why is this promise never fulfilled?…Augie March

avoids the pain of involvement by making his life a series of abortive adventures…Bellow keeps his adventurer safely disengaged from responsibility and brings him home, unencumbered with a wife, to his mother….

In Bellow's best novels the psychological suffering of his heroes and their passive resignation to being victims are justified or magnified by historical circumstance. Modern history has taught all of us our powerlessness, and Bellow at his best can put us inside the minds of men who are solidly on the hooks of the Depression and World War II…. *Henderson the Rain King* and *The Adventures of Augie March* attempt to get away from such insistent fatalism. Henderson is the man of mammoth proportions whose wealth, wives and sheer 'strangeness will help to abduct man from life.' But Henderson's joie de vivre is not believable, and Bellow brings him to a 'recognition' that heroism is not simply being without fear or inhibition but is absorbing life's blows and not passing them on to others, not ridding oneself of pain by becoming the aggressor. Henderson has the possibilities of a joyous man, but the emotions of a depressive."

Josephine Hendin<br>*Vulnerable People: A View of American Fiction since 1945*<br>(Oxford 1978) 99-100, 105

"Malamud is primarily, like Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, a more traditional novelist of social and psychological behavior. And, like the Bellow of *Herzog* and the Roth of *Portnoy*, Malamud is forthrightly and gratefully a Jewish novelist. However, it seems to me (and I write from a *goyische* perspective) that Malamud is the best of these Jewish novelists, that he has been the more successful than the others in universalizing his Jewishness."

Robert Scholes<br>*Fabulation and Metafiction*<br>(U Illinois 1979) 190

"*Tri-Quarterly* began a series on 'Ongoing American Fiction' in the winter of 1973, and in the spring of the same year *Modern Fiction Studies* published a special number on recent American fiction: the authors represented were with only two exceptions 'disruptionists,' including Vonnegut, Brautigan, Gass, and others. The two-decade-long dominance by Bellow-Updike-Malamud seemed over….

But not for the major, entrenched critics of American fiction—commentators who had built their reputations on the ascendancy of the dense, intellectual fiction of Bellow and his contemporaries….Pearl Kazin Bell [for example]. Her favorite remains Saul Bellow: 'What will probably be remembered of American writing in the 1960s and '70s, long after Barthelme and Pynchon have been declared passe, is being written by novelists who care more for people than their garbage, and for words—precise and suggestive—more than *dreck*. Saul Bellow is still, as he has been for almost 20 years, the most inventive, intelligent, and genuinely surprising novelist in America, and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* is one of the few contemporary books that engage the mind and heart as one reads'."

Jerome Klinkowitz<br>*Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction*<br>(U Illinois 1975, 1980) 169-70

"His first two novels, presenting a Kafka-like atmosphere, are *Dangling Man* (1944), a psychological study of a man waiting to be inducted into the army and living in limbo between civilian and military life, and *The Victim* (1947), about the agonizing, equivocal relations of Jew and Gentile. His next novel, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), which won a National Book Award, is naturalistic in treating the picaresque adventures of a young Chicago Jew. *Seize the Day* (1956) includes a novella, stories, and a one-act play. *Henderson the Rain King* (1959) opens with a realistic depiction of an intense middle-age Connecticut millionaire whose inner urge for fulfillment of self—'I want, I want'—drives him to primitive Africa, where in a symbolic tragi-comedy he encounters fantastic experiences.

*Herzog* (1964) is an intense revelation of the life and experiences of a middle-aged Jewish intellectual, presenting his involvements with two wives and other women, with his children, with a friend who betrays him, and with the careers of teaching and writing. He is led through neurosis almost to suicide and emerges

'pretty well satisfied to be, to be just as it is willed.' *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1969) is a fictive critique of modern society as seen by a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp resident in New York. *Humboldt's Gift* (1975, Pulitzer Prize) depicts a crisis in the life of the narrator that is resolved by his friend, the poet Humboldt. Bellow did not publish another novel until *The Dean's December*, issued seven years later, whose protagonist is in part an autobiographical figure. *Mosby's Memoirs* (1968) collects stories, *The Last Analysis* (1964) is a comic play, and *To Jerusalem and Back* (1976) deals with his visit to Israel. In 1976 he was awarded a Nobel Prize."

James D. Hart
*The Oxford Companion to American Literature,* 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 65

"Saul Bellow is often spoken of as a novelist of ideas; but it is here, in sustained thought, that he is weakest. He, in fact, writes best not at the level of ideas, where his protagonists express puerile views, but at the level of parody, mockery, sarcasm, wit, where panache replaces intellect….In his attack on 'radical writers'—Mailer? Gaddis? Heller? Roth?—he suggests that the real novelist…hugs the center, saying neither yea nor nay. Yet the center hugged so tightly in *Augie March* dissipates the tremendous energy Bellow obtains at the extremes—Einhorn is surely an extreme, and so is Simon, or Thea. Radicalism is surely not political, but a way of observing; so that we can say the great novelists of the twentieth century have all been radicals….

Bellow stresses that as the son of Russian Jews, he did not feel comfortable with the Anglo-Saxon traditions, even with English words. His center remained elsewhere, not in the English tradition. In his first two novels, Bellow flirted with Dostoyevskian and Kafkan approaches, an ironic surface beneath which life drops off into endless tunnels of torment and anguish…

Bellow's specialty was in the writing of paragraphs. His paragraphs often have a small world in them, whereas most postwar novelists are sentence writers. One of the great qualities of nineteenth-century writing was their realization that the paragraph was far more than several sentences put back to back. Bellow tries to achieve that rhythm, beyond word, phrase, and individual sentence. Such writing requires information, thought, and a synthesizing ability….Each paragraph tends to move along on several fronts, glacierlike, giving him his thoughtful quality, far more than does any purely intellectual content of his material. Bellow quotes extensively from other writers, historians, philosophers; but these are usually tags and pieces, well-known to anyone familiar with the history of ideas and lacking resonance. While they impress reviewers, they pretend to far more than they deliver.

What Bellow evidently feared from his work on *Augie March* was that excess of individuality, that threat of narcissism and reliance on personality, which he felt were disproportionate to what was significant in American life. As a reaction, he cultivated a literarily conservative aesthetic….Bellow was distressed that the American overevaluation of self derived from Rousseau, when it would better have come from Nietzsche. The latter saw the self as being associated with Apollo, god of light, god of harmony, music, reason; whereas the group or tribe was associated with Dionysus. In Nietzsche's formulation, Bellow stresses, the self served a real function, as part of the mediating process between 'the individual and the generic.' It was not an all-consuming commodity which demanded to be fed, as it was in Rousseau, villain of modern versions of selfdom. In these excesses of self, the American moves to antipodes of experience, from nihilistic denial of his own mysteries to the feeding of the self and the exclusion of the world."

Frederick R. Karl
*American Fictions 1940-1980*
(Harper & Row 1983) 27, 143-145

"In the course of reaching a wider American audience than any other major writer of his time, Bellow has clearly marked several modern themes—particularly the theme of the displaced person—as his own. Bellow introduced this theme in his first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944), the story of a man waiting anxiously to be inducted into the army. In that book narrated like Sartre's *Nausea* (1938), in the form of a journal, the hero fears the presence of 'the unhuman in the all too human city,' a fear that is elaborated in Bellow's next two novels, *The Victim* (1947), a story about the personal conflicts between a Jew and a Gentile that tough-

mindedly explores the meaning of 'human,' and *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), in which Bellow's philosophic sense of what it means to be human is dramatized by the picaresque experiences of a persistently optimistic young Chicago man from an impoverished Jewish family who finds that 'you do all you can to humanize and familiarize the world, and suddenly it becomes more strange than ever.'

At the core of Bellow's next book, *Seize the Day* (1956), a short novel many critics regard as a modern masterpiece, is the unrelievable need for human contact in a world where people feel so displaced that they find it almost impossible to communicate their need even for a simple glass of water. 'Nobody truly occupies a station in life any more,' we read in Bellow's fifth novel, *Henderson the Rain King* (1958), the story of a Connecticut millionaire who searches for self-understanding in the African jungles….Bellow's protagonists tend to be social creatures, and urban ones as well. To them, nature remains a largely alien world. Yet the cities where they live are likely to leave them feeling dulled, exhausted, and spent rather than sustained, nourished, or excited. They move amid incessant change, feeling themselves entangled by worlds to which they never quite belong.

Like the protagonist of Bellow's next novel, *Herzog* (1964)—an intellectual who lives on the edge of suicide yet refuses to yield to despair—Bellow's main characters retain both a strong sense of family and a strong sense of religion without finding support or consolation in either. Their personalities are often dominated in part by feelings of shame or guilt that they carry as a burden, and in part by a longing for deliverance that they carry as an unfulfilled need. They are characteristically introspective people who, like the elderly hero of *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), have come bitterly to hate modern ideals of self-fulfillment, and they often possess both a disordered sense of history and a fear of social disorder. Like their sense of family and their religious impulses, however, their talent for self-analysis and their sense of history are more often burdens to be borne than blessings to be cherished."

David Minter
*The Harper American Literature* 2
(Harper & Row 1987) 1888

"Saul Bellow, one of America's greatest novelists since World War II, was the youngest of four children of Russian-Jewish immigrants….Though *Dangling Man* and *The Victim* are considered apprentice works, they bear Bellow's distinguishing characteristics as a novelist: accurately realized scenes of urban and domestic life-styles and of the hero who feels alienated from his environment because of his moral insight. Recognition as a major talent came for Bellow with the publication of *The Adventures of Augie March*. A massive, sprawling novel in picaresque form, the book records in a euphorically dazzling style, reminiscent of the optimistic affirmations of Walt Whitman, the coming-of-age of its idealistic title character. It is also the host of subsidiary personalities that gives the work its special exuberance. The portrayal of the Einhorn family, for example, has a Dickensian zest that places the book in the great tradition of the nineteenth century European novel.

*Seize the Day*, more economical than its predecessor, presents a more somber and confused hero in Tommy Wilhelm, who tries to maintain his dignity amid the crises of a failing marriage and career and the embittered disappointment of a domineering, unloving father. In *Henderson the Rain King*, a comic fantasy about a man who flees to Africa to find himself, Bellow creates a farcical and melodramatic world…The novel glistens with exuberance and an opulent skein of characters, such as King Dahfu, for example, who has read the pragmatic philosophers and who dreams of being reincarnated, after death, in the form of a lion.

With *Herzog*, Bellow produced what is generally considered his finest novel. Moses Herzog, the sensitive intellectual and student of Romanticism who writes letters to the world at large in an effort to keep his sanity and to understand his place as a moral sufferer in a world devoid of compassion, is a composite of all the heroes in Bellow's fiction. Such a hero is a man with a conscience, with a deep sense of his dignity, at conflict with a society which has become indifferent to human needs. The central dilemma for Herzog, as for all Bellow's heroes, is how to maintain self-respect and a system of values in the midst of self-effacement imposed by the social structure of postwar America.

Bellow thus assumes a traditional position as a novelist. He is more concerned with the basic, unchanging values of humankind than with the psychic disorders peculiar to the modern man as reflected in much modernist fiction. As a novelist, Bellow looks back upon the 'moralistic' classics of English and Russian literature, such as the works of Fyodor Dostoevski, rather than toward the aesthetically experimental psychological novels of the twentieth century. Though his later novels, such as *Mr. Sammler's Planet* and *Humboldt's Gift*, have been criticized as being too introspectively self-indulgent, especially *The Dean's December*, Bellow remains a writer who has consistently grown with each new work. His place in American letters as a major novelist seems assured."

Edward Fiorelli
*Cyclopedia of World Authors* II, Vol. 1
ed. Frank N. Magill
(Salem 1989) 166-67

"Some of the new figures we do remember are J. D. Salinger's troubled adolescent…Ralph Ellison's angry symbol of the American Negro as the *Invisible Man*, and Norman Mailer's hipster or 'White Negro,' and Saul Bellow's portrait, in *The Adventures of Augie March,* of a Jewish boy leaving the Chicago slums and wandering over three continents, not to win a fortune, but to find the answer to a simple question: Who am I? That question echoes through many other novels and helps to convey the puzzled spirit of the times, but it is still not enough. There has to be something more than a few rebellious characters asking representative questions before the new mythology comes into being…[1962]"

Malcolm Cowley
*The Portable Malcolm Cowley*
ed. Donald W. Faulkner
(Viking/Penguin 1990) 384-85

"Bellow is usually considered to be one of America's most important contemporary writers; his work impresses one with its diversity of style, the profundity of its content, and its scope. Bellow published his first novel, *Dangling Man*, in 1944; it is a diary of a demoralized man who is left 'dangling' with no real purpose as he waits to be drafted. Three years later, Bellow published *The Victim*, which borrows the technique of the Doppelganger from Dostoevski's *The Eternal Husband*. In this second novel, he depicts the intense psychological battle between the Jew Asa Leventhal and his 'double,' the Gentile Kirby Allbee.

In the late 1940s, Bellow became disenchanted with the…'victim literature' of his first two novels. Detached in tone, these restrained works followed 'repressive' Flaubertian formal standards. With *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), Bellow broke free from the…chains that bound him. In contrast to the two morose early novels, this open-ended, picaresque narrative with its flamboyant language, zany comedy, and exuberant hero affirms the potential of the individual, his imagination, and the worth of ordinary existence.

Bellow's much anthologized *Seize the Day* (1956) is certainly a more somber novel than *Augie March*, yet it is not a return to the largely humorless pessimism of his novels of the 1940s. This dark comedy depicts the day of reckoning in the life of Tommy Wilhelm, 'a loser' who is spiritually reborn at the very end of the work….*Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) and *Humboldt's Gift* (1975) strengthened Bellow's reputation. Like *Herzog*, these two darkly comic novels depict the struggles of Bellow's sensitive romantic humanists to come to terms with cynical 'reality-instructors.' Like Herzog, they finally reject 'the Wasteland outlook'….

Bellow is a master of narrative voice and perspective; he is a remarkable stylist who can move with ease from formal rhetoric to the language of the street. A great comic writer, perhaps America's greatest since Mark Twain, he explores the tragi-comic search of urban man for spiritual survival in a materialistic world hostile to the imagination and 'higher meanings'."

Allan Chavkin
*The Heath Anthology of American Literature* 2
(D. C. Heath 1990) 1855-56

“His vigour, vitality, humor, and passion were always matched by the insistence on thought, not the predigested cliches of the mass media or those on the left which had begun to disgust him by the Sixties.”

Linda Grant
*The Observer*
(10 April 2005)

“The backbone of 20th-century American literature has been provided by two novelists—William Faulkner and Saul Bellow. Together they are the Melville, Hawthorne, and Twain of the 20th century.”

Philip Roth (2005)

“The greatest American author ever, in my view.” Martin Amis (2005)

“I judged all modern prose by his. Unfair, certainly, because he made even the fleet-footed—the Updikes, the DeLillos, the Roths—seem like monopodes….I discovered Saul Bellow’s prose in my late teens, and henceforth, the relationship had the quality of a love affair about which one could not keep silent. Over the last week, much has been said about Bellow’s prose, and most of the praise—perhaps because it has been overwhelmingly by men—has tended toward the robust: We hear about Bellow’s mixing of high and low registers, his Melvillian cadences jostling the jivey Yiddish rhythms, the great teeming democracy of the big novels, the crooks and frauds and intellectuals who loudly people the brilliant sensorium of the fiction. All of this is true enough; John Cheever, in his journals, lamented that, alongside Bellow’s fiction, his stories seemed like mere suburban splinters. Ian McEwan wisely suggested last week that British writers and critics may have been attracted to Bellow precisely because he kept alive a Dickensian amplitude now lacking in the English novel….But nobody mentioned the beauty of this writing, its music, its high lyricism, its firm but luxurious pleasure in language itself.”

James Wood
“Gratitude” (eulogy)
*The New Republic*
(25 April 2005)

“He was fortunate in that the world lined up to offer him all its rewards and prizes—Nobels, Pulitzers, National Book Awards, medals from PEN, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, honorary degrees, and the rest of it—without his ever having written an entirely successful novel. This last judgment is quite as much Bellow’s as mine…In his letters Bellow stakes out no grand claims for his books….

Did Saul Bellow leave any masterpieces? Is there any one book on which his reputation ought to stand? Or is it the collectivity of his fiction, his *oeuvre*, on which he should be judged? Some people will prefer one book over another: If one loathes all that happened in the 1960s, *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* is probably your favorite Bellow novel. (Bellow called the book ‘an essay,’ but it needs to be said that he took politically courageous positions in the so-called culture wars, and this novel is one of the best-aimed missiles fired during its duration.) For those whose taste runs to comic irony, *Herzog* figures to be their book. Others might prefer one of the novellas; *Seize the Day* would probably be the top candidate here. (In a freshman class I taught many years ago at Northwestern, a student said that he liked *Seize the Day* well enough, but frankly didn’t understand why its hero, Tommy Wilhelm, just didn’t get a job, thus tendering a criticism I have never been able to answer.) But there will be nothing like a consensus, and I think I know why.

The reason is that Bellow could not construct persuasive plots. ‘My stories aren’t very successful,’ he wrote to Pascal Covici, his editor at Viking. ‘I suppose I lack a sense of form.’ For all his rich gifts, his powers of invention were limited. He wrote *romans a clef*, with the keys not all that hard to find to unlock and reveal the people on whom his characters were based. Having to draw so strictly on life often got him into difficulty, sometimes as a writer, inhibiting his imagination by locking him into fact, and sometimes with readers, some of whom he saddened by these methods….

Despite all the prizes and critical praise, one comes up against the possibility that Saul Bellow wasn't truly a novelist. He could do extraordinary, even marvelous, things: draw a wondrous cityscape; describe a face at the MRI level of detail; capture the comedy in self-presentations; soar in great lyrical, and even more in intellectual and metaphysical flights. The problem was that he couldn't quite seem to land the plane. His endings never quite fit, which is to say, work. He couldn't do the first, essential thing that novelists with vastly less talent than he know in their bones how to do, which is to construct convincing plots.

Highly intelligent people without an interest in the lives of intellectuals and artists—and intellectuals and artists were always his main subjects—can't read Saul Bellow, even though these artists and intellectuals puff away, Nestor-like, on the meaning of the universe, the dissolution of the soul, the death of art, and other such elevated topics. (Bellow once told me that when he published a novel '50,000 people buy it in hardcover, 5,000 read it, and 500 care.') In the end, of course, his subject was almost always himself. "By now,' he wrote to Cynthia Ozick in 1987, 'I have only the cranky idiom of my books—the letters-in-general of an occult personality, a desperately odd somebody who has, as a last resort, invented a technique of self-representation.'

Perhaps he wasn't a novelist at all but a high-octane riffer, a philosophical schmoozer, an unsurpassed intellectual kibbitzer, one of the great monologists of the age. But he was no storyteller. Which explains why one doesn't have much taste for rereading him and why, there is good reason to believe, future generations are likely to have even less taste for reading him in the first place."

Joseph Epstein<br>"The Long, Unhappy Life of Saul Bellow"<br>The New Criterion 29.4<br>(December 2010) 10-12

"'You know, Joseph [Epstein], Mr. Atlas [biographer of Bellow] will only grasp the true nature of Saul Bellow when he understands that our friend Saul, had he been allowed to sit for two hours in the lap of the Queen of England, would, when told by the Queen that she must now attend to her official duties, though she much enjoyed their visit, freshly emerge from the Queen's lap with two observations: first, that the Queen had no understanding whatsoever of the condition of the modern artist, and, second, that she was an anti-Semite'."

Edward Shils<br>quoted by Epstein, 4

Michael Hollister (2015)