

# The New Criterion

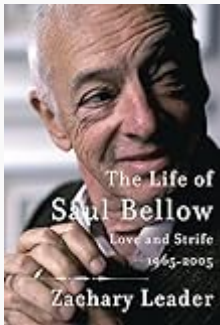
Features November 2018

## Mr. Bellow's planet

by Dominic Green

*On the Canadian writer, occasioned by the publication of the second volume of *The Life of Saul Bellow*, by Zachary Leader.*

### BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



*Zachary Leader*

*The Life of Saul Bellow: Love and Strife, 1965-2005*

Knopf, 784 pages, \$40.00

In the geography of the arts, Canadian is to American as Irish is to English and Jewish is to everyone. Social imitators by proximity, but intellectual ironists by distance, Canadians are the same as Americans, but more so—more obviously stranded in the wilderness because there is so much of it and so few of them, and more similar in politics to the Old World than the New. Their Liberals are centrists, not leftists ashamed of their leftism, and their Conservatives are even Tories.

Let us now praise the Canadians who have expressed American culture on behalf of the neighbors. Imagine post-war American culture without Oscar Peterson, Neil Young, The Band, Northrop Frye, Joni Mitchell, Marshall McLuhan, William Shatner, Leonard Cohen, Dan Aykroyd, Michael J. Fox, Celine Dion, Mike Myers, Jim Carrey, Drake, Seth Rogen, Bryan Adams, Rachel McAdams, the one who played Chandler on *Friends* whose name I always forget, and, of course, Justin Bieber and Steven Pinker. The world's most prominent animal rights activist is Pamela Anderson. The philosopher of the moment is Jordan Peterson. The engineer of our future is Elon Musk, whose

mother is Canadian. And the supreme post-war novelist remains Saul Bellow, who, born Solomon Belo in 1915 at Lachine, Quebec, immigrated illegally to the West Side of Chicago at the age of nine, and formally became an American in 1941, aged twenty-six.

No one forgets that Bellow was Jewish, even though he insisted, Jewishly, that he was an American writer. Few remember that Bellow, while growing up in Yiddish and Russian, began in French-speaking Canada. Among modern “American” novelists, only Nabokov has a similarly rich linguistic background. There is an expansive music to Bellow, as if his inner ear is attuned to assonances from the next room. And though Nabokov may strike higher notes in the linguistic register, Bellow reaches the lower depths of the social register. But how is Bellow remembered?

The academy has shoved his novels down the memory hole. Bellow is off the syllabus, and has been since before today’s undergraduates were born. He is “problematic,” and in these days of what his Artur Sammler calls “this present shallowness,” problems can be forgotten about if you put your mind to it. All anyone with ambitions in the English department of an American university need remember about Saul Bellow is the remark attributed to him by his ex-friend Alfred

Kazin: “Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus? The Proust of the Papuans? I’d be glad to read him.”

“I was speaking of the distinction between literate and pre-literate societies,” Bellow explained in a *New York Times* op-ed in March 1994. “For I was once an anthropology student, you see.”

France gave us one Proust and only one. There is no Bulgarian Proust. Have I offended the Bulgarians too? We, for that matter, have no Proust either: should the White House issue a fatwa and set a price on any head for blaspheming against American high culture?

My critics, many of whom could not locate Papua New Guinea on the map, want to convict me of contempt for multiculturalism and defamation of the third world. I am an elderly white male—a Jew, to boot. Ideal for their purposes.

Bellow now lived in a society divided between the literate and the post-literate, where even the readers had little time for literature. The “third world” no longer existed, either: the ordering of the nations into the free world, the unfree Communist world, and the tertiary fields of their conflict had ended three years prior with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The lines of battle had been drawn earlier, in the mid-sixties.

**L**ove and Strife, the second half of Zachary Leader’s Life of Saul Bellow, begins not in 1953 with the publication of Bellow’s breakthrough novel *The Adventures of Augie March*, but in

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1964, with the publication of *Herzog*, which confirmed his talent and eminence.<sup>1</sup> A work of midlife crisis, *Herzog* is an epistolary novel in which the letters are not communications but orientations. The subtitle of Leader's first volume, *To Fame and Fortune: 1915–1964*, traced Bellow's effort to become a public success. The subtitle of this volume suggests the bifurcated life of celebrity.

"Saul alone of the old gang has achieved first-class status. . . . Saul alone has made it, with the furious resistance of personal imagination to the staleness of the round," Kazin writes after attending the launch party for *Herzog* in September 1964. "Nothing is stale, he cries, if only you look at it hard enough, see in it aspects of human fate in general. Put your story on the universal stage of time, and the old Chicago friends will seem as interesting as kings in the old history books."

As Bellow approaches fifty and the first reviews of *Herzog* are printed, Kazin compares Bellow's public persona to Charlie Chaplin's "in that first photograph of the tramp—the face absolutely open to life, open, humble, almost childlike, in its concentrated wistfulness and naive expectancy. Above all, a face submissive to the fates." Kazin believes that *Herzog* looks like this too. A year later, however, and Kazin is "tired of adjusting" to Bellow's act: "Saul is in an interesting state of self-consciousness, of course, because of his present fame and fortune. Having worked so long to make it, he now is suffering even more than usual because he has." Bellow was, "as usual, making mental lassos of everyone to himself." Kazin felt that Bellow's philosophical modesty was a bait, and that he used the people around him as mental fodder.

The changes of orientation in the last fifty years of Bellow's life are not aesthetic, but political, social, and marital. His style and reference points are now fixed, and his face is a known quantity. When *Herzog* brings in the money, he sells his manuscripts, donates his house at Tivoli, New York, to Bard College, and divorces Susan Glassman, his third wife. Other celebrities disburden themselves of their old lives, the better to integrate themselves into their new lives. Bellow, never much of a joiner, becomes increasingly solitary, and not just because fame isolates by amplifying the solitude of talent.

Bellow retains the social and marital habits of his youth. He returns to Chicago and, his salary having been raised, stays on at the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought. He remains close to his "ghetto friends," who go at literary criticism their own way, freestyle, and call John Updike an "anti-Semitic pornographer." As his old friends die out, new admirers offer friendship on less equal terms. As old wives and girlfriends lose their charm, new ones keep spinning out of the revolving door of Bellow's bedroom. But he is redefined by the changes in his political orientation. In 1964, Bellow's son Daniel tells Leader, Bellow might have figured Adlai Stevenson for "a putz" and been more interested, if only from a novelist's point of view, in "the big Daley machine people who ate up Stevenson." But Bellow is also "seriously" thinking about writing a book on Hubert Humphrey, "a man he admired."

In 1966, Bellow accepts a *Life* commission to profile Robert Kennedy. At this point, he is a supporter of the Congress on Racial Equality, a sponsor of the National Committee for a Sane

Nuclear Policy (sane), and a public opponent of Johnson's escalation of the Vietnam War. But, having recovered from a juvenile bout of Trotskyism, he is not one to "just line up" when ordered, or to endorse confrontation. In October 1965, after a sane rally in Washington, D.C., turned violent, Bellow writes to *The New York Times* and the *Chicago Sun-Times*. The Johnson administration is "wrong to attack the political liberties of those who wish to debate its policies," but Bellow remains "wholly opposed to civil disobedience . . . unreasonable rebelliousness and pointless defiance of authority." He holds the balancing act through 1966, declining to contribute to Authors Take Sides on Vietnam, but taking out fifty subscriptions to *Dissent*.

In May 1967, Bellow volunteers for the Six-Day War as a reporter for *Newsday*. "It puts one in touch with reality," Bellow wrote on June 7, 1967. "Otherwise one's decades begin to feel empty like an old amusement park no longer patronized and oneself the caretaker remembering childhood, boyhood-youth as side shows . . . This is much better." The Israelis had "war, and not the moral equivalent of war William James was looking for," to give them "firmness." In their "concern for the decay of civilization and in their pride," Bellow thought, they had "something to teach the world."

In November 1967, Bellow the teacher denounces student groups and the counterculture in the *Chicago Sun-Times*:

As Marie Antoinette played with sheep, as Gauguin turned to the South Seas, as Rimbaud went primitive, so the kids of Haight Ashbury require from the civilization that produced them the freedom and happiness of primitives. . . . Youth movements are not invariably a good thing. Germany's Hitlerjugend certainly was not. Nor Benito Mussolini's Society of the Wolf. Nor Stalin's Komsomol. Nor do the young Maoist gangs fill one with confidence and hope.

Six months later, in May 1968, Bellow got mau-maued at San Francisco State after giving a talk entitled "What Are Writers Doing in the University?"

"I want to challenge you," a latecomer named Floyd Salas said. Bellow refused to reply, because Salas had not heard his lecture, which had argued that the university should be "a haven from vulgarity." Yet when a young female student asked Bellow about the autobiographical content of *Herzog*, he told her it was "none of your business." Salas, who was thirty-seven years old and had published a novel, denounced Bellow:

I then stood up in the aisle where I was sitting and said that they, the faculty, all worshipped this man in his camel hair suit and alligator shoes and got annoyed when he was asked important questions, this effete person who refused to enter into a dialogue with the students (I was implying that this was what was wrong with a university of strictly middle-class white kids and a nearly all-white male faculty) when he was the epitome of what was wrong with the university in the first place and probably couldn't even come.

The choicest of the ironies here is that Bellow was enchanted with the same visions of primitivist energy as the students. He was a vitalist who had done time in the orgone accumulator. He was

about to enter that most countercultural of phases, a dalliance with the “anthroposophy” of Rudolf Steiner. Vulgarity, measured within the extended period, was the vital energy of his style, and promiscuity a premise and reward of literary production. Augie March had rebelled against the Taylorism of the American soul, pursuing picaresque experience instead of what Frank Olson, another student at San Francisco State, called “the factory machine education.” Herzog’s breakdown can be seen as a case of the conflict that Herbert Marcuse had summarized in 1955 as *Eros and Civilization*. Herzog’s recovery could be read as affirming the impostures of Norman O. Brown’s *Life Against Death* (1959), a book that, impossible as it now seems, Norman Podhoretz once recommended to Lionel Trilling.

A liberal mugged by reality, Bellow now wrote the first neoconservative novel, *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970). Bellow inflicts the San Francisco State episode on his protagonist, Artur Sammler, as well as the weight of Jewish history. In the 1930s, Sammler, a Polish Jew, believed in the modern promise, and met Maynard Keynes and the Bloomsberries in London. In the Holocaust, he lost an eye to a German rifle butt, crawled out of a mass grave, leaving his wife and child behind, and killed an unarmed German soldier. He is a civilizational Tiresias, experiencing both the Old World and the New. As Leonard Cohen, another Canadian Jew, wrote in his song “The Future” (1992), “I have seen the future, and it’s murder.”

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Sammler, like Bellow after his dose of Israeli “reality,” understands the youth revolt in historical perspective. He is appalled by the “sexual madness” of the sixties. The Maoists who attack liberal civilization and the Nowists who throw off historical consciousness are the latest manifestations of the Amalekites of the modern West: the youth movement. “How extraordinary!,” Sammler reflects after escaping the angry students. “Youth? Together with the idea of sexual potency? All this confused sex-excrement-militancy, explosiveness, abusiveness, tooth-showing, Barbary ape howling.”

In the American kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. This is confirmed by the episode in which a black pickpocket forces Sammler to consider the *Welthistorisch* significance of his penis, a “large tan-and-purple uncircumcised thing—a tube, a snake.” Here, Bellow does what he and Sammler condemn in the students: he is letting it all hang out, and exposing his polymorphous perversity. In denouncing the complex of “sex-excrement-militancy,” he exposes another fetishistic triad, the modernist association of Jews, Africans, and women as both vital and foul.

James Atlas, in his one-volume Bellow biography of 2000, calls *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* an “outburst of racism, misogyny and puritan intolerance,” announcing Bellow’s transformation into a “full-blown reactionary, shrilly defending the very institutions he had once satirized and slyly undermined.” Yet Bellow had always been critical of the university’s damaging effect on literature, and he remained so. Leader, who has written a better biography, if not one of the best literary biographies of recent decades, takes a typically judicious approach to *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*.

Leader argues that Bellow managed to frame his rage in artistic form, and to admit that he and Sammler are indicted by modernity too. It was modernist artists and philosophers who fetishized and abased women, Africans, and Jews. The counterculture's prizing of what Sammler notoriously calls "sexual niggerhood" is the American translation of the modernists' *Négritude*. Like Sammler escaping from the pit, Bellow describes the continuities between the Old World and the New, and hopes that Jews will disentangle themselves from modern realities. He also suggests that, in world-historical terms, the wished-for dissolution of that modernist triad of women, Jews, and Africans implies that the Jews are only passing through an America determined to destroy its own civilization.

Perhaps it took a Canadian to make such an unpatriotic suggestion. And perhaps Bellow was right. Sammler is off the curriculum, but *Hair*, a 1968 musical that fetishizes black potency and punishes female sexuality, was revived on Broadway in 2008. Time called it "if anything, more daring than ever." Meanwhile, future historians of American literature will, like Jack Benny after the all-nude scene in *Hair*, ask, "Did you happen to notice if any of them were Jewish?"

1. *The Life of Saul Bellow: Love and Strife, 1965–2005*, by Zachary Leader; Knopf, 784 pages, \$40.

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**Dominic Green** is a contributor to *The Wall Street Journal* and a columnist for the *Washington Examiner*. His latest book is *The Religious Revolution: The Birth of Modern Spirituality, 1848–1898* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux).

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