

“A Mind Merciless With Itself” – A tribute to Saul Bellow

My first encounter with Saul Bellow’s work came in a course on US literature from 1945 to the present run by a professor whose lectures discouraged classroom engagement with the novels, poetry and plays. We watched during that long summer course as three times a week his fingers chased bits of paper or themselves around the edges of the lectern while his eyes rolled heavenward, flicked to the windows at the back of the room, to the white walls, resting everywhere but on the faces of his students, as he talked and talked. Once a student bravely asked a question, but for thirteen weeks we were mute and stupefied. There was no readily discernible reason for studying one poet instead of another. Immediately apparent was the low opinion the professor had of US literature. He repeated an exchange he had had with William Empson which went something like: “When Empson said that American literature was a bit of a pudding, I had no way to argue, really.” Perhaps our professor chose texts that were the most edible parts of that pudding. How a good opinion of any writer survived this manner of presentation is a mystery.

Yet an interest in Bellow and Malamud remained. What struck me then about *Herzog* was the crackle of dialogue, the nervous flutter of ideas, and a liveliness most welcome that dry summer. It was a relief to be in the cosmopolitan world of *Herzog* after being confined to the campus life represented in Malamud’s *A New Life* and Auchincloss’s *The Rector of Justin*. Some of Bellow’s intensity, as well as his urbanity and engagement with ideas on the way men and women interacted, reminded me peculiarly of Henry Miller.

In a 1987 book review, William Gaddis praised Bellow’s latest novel: “One turns the last pages of *More Die of Heartbreak* feeling that no image has been left unexplored by a mind not only at constant work but standing outside itself, mercilessly examining the workings, tracking the leading issues of our times and the composite man in an age of hybrids.” High words of praise from one dissector of society, who rarely wrote reviews, for another. They prompted me to look again at Bellow. Despite the passage of time, his novels have largely weathered changes in taste, and their integrity insure his posterity. They are socio-historical artefacts as well as literary works; they captured a time and a generational shift in the United States, as well as psychological states, in prose which retains its intelligence and asks readers to come up to its level. To quote from Gaddis’s review again: “we welcome back the calamitous wit of *The Adventures of Augie March* and *Herzog* among people diligently struggling to rearrange one another’s lives in their efforts to rescue, or simply to redefine their own, the human comedy implicit in Lenin’s poser: Who uses whom?” Mortal death doesn’t still the wit and the voice; the novels remain for every speculator to quarry for what they find most valuable.

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