Saul Bellow and the Twentieth Century

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In 2000, the last year of the 20th century, Saul Bellow has come onstage again to the literary world, accompanied by *Ravelstein*,[1] the scandalous novel of his own and James Atlas's *Bellow: a biography*,[2] the so-called definitive biography of our octogenarian Nobel laureate. He has made a good appeal to the world, proving that he is going strong.

Prior to these epoch-making books, however, Bellow had collected a lot of pieces into "a gathering of some of the more readable essays" and published the collection in 1994.[3] The preface, which shows some authorial modesty behind his own voice, will very likely suggest what Bellow has been thinking about the world around him—its people, its societies, its cultures as well as its history.

In this essay, I will consider what Bellow is thinking about our world, or what he is interested in in the human society: that is, what the writer pays attention to most. For that purpose, I may use the collection by the writer who might claim that he has witnessed the 20th century through his own life.

Saul Bellow starts his collection with "Mozart: An Overture."[4] Conscious of being amateurish enough to discuss Mozart, he tries to "size up the composer," as if thinking of writing a novel in which Mozart might appear as a character, and realizes "Mozart...can be loved freely and naturally by amateurs," because "Mozart is immediately accessible to the naive."

Citing Peter Porter,[5] Bellow further analyzes what Mozart's modern-ness is. Herein I might expect to find what Bellow thinks about us,

modern people. Bellow's interpretation begins with confirming the meaning of the word "modern." The word can ultimately mean that "the best of contemporary minds show qualities of power, subtlety, scope, and resourcefulness, of infinite plasticity, adaptability, of the courage to cope with all that world history has dumped on the generations of this present age" (6). In contrast, Bellow earlier mentions Ortega y Gasset's idea of the Mass Man. The Mass Man, not "a modern man," is "unable to distinguish between a natural object or process and an artifact, a second-nature object" (4). The Mass Man, Bellow adds, may also be an educated professional.

Bellow points out that Mozart is singularly modern as an observer, as in "characterizing by minute particulars" and describing "personal impressions" (7). And moreover, Mozart is modern in that he was to be mobile not only by his traveling life of concerts but also by temperament. Bellow realizes that "to be modern is to be mobile, forever en route, with few local attachments anywhere, cosmopolitan, not particularly disturbed to be an outsider in temporary quarters" (8).

Now I must go back to the Mass Man, probably our double, in the present time, whom Bellow gives his alarm against. While it is argued that Mozart is modern (close to ourselves), and yet it is the essence of the "modern" to demystify, there is an unsolved question left: we modern Mass Men cannot claim that we understand Mozart's music. "Modern Mozart" is increasing mystery for us. Summing up Bellow's alarm, since we are contaminated in rationality of the external world which high technology has transformed remarkably, we make gestures of rationality to signify that we are capable of keeping up. Mozart is mysterious in that his music repudiates our rationality, in other words, our explanations. A modern Mass Man cannot help depending on his consciousness because he has given away his innate nature, which is supposed to help him sense "the mystery of our common human nature" (14) that Mozart speaks to

beyond words.

Mozart himself, however, Bellow contemplates, "is all coherence" (12). His music "is not a product of effort." "Concentration without effort is at the heart of the thing" (11). Although he does not use a cognitive language, we can feel his musical speech of affects. Through what we cannot call but mysterious we hear and recognize that "our sense of the radical mystery of our being" (12) is expressed there. Deducting from what is attractive about Mozart is that he is an individual, Bellow concludes that Mozart's modernness derives from his independent self, his complete self-reliance, his "pure and faultless freedom" (8). Although Mozart's life does not look like a triumph, it can be said so in that his completely free soul soars up forever, compared with that of the mass men who are suffering from the burden of self-consciousness.

"Mozart: An Overture" has proved to be appropriate to the introduction of the collection, which I suppose is the manifesto of the human struggles in the twentieth century by Saul Bellow, the writer who will watch the century to its end. It might well be said that *It All Adds Up* has shown what the twentieth century made of Bellow and what Bellow made of the twentieth century.[6] Realizing like Mozart that he "has only himself to rely on" (14), the writer might have found his role to "speak to us about the mysteries of our common human nature" (14).

Saul Bellow does not seem to mind being isolated from the society in which they are included those educated professionals as well as the mass men. Now I am going to discuss what Bellow thinks about the public.

In "The Distracted Public," Bellow criticizes the present social conditions—the media, the public, and the intellectuals. A characteristic common to these three is distraction. The children of immigrants in Chicago were Americanized, which was in no small part to be Anglicized. The promising writer was instilled in English Romantic poetry and was introduced into the Wordsworthian idea of "emotion recollected in tran-

quillity" or "a state of attention or aesthetic concentration" (153). Those Romantic poets made the adolescent aware that "there were higher things" (155).

Bellow thinks he is a writer by trade and that the power of a tale-teller depends on his ability to obtain and hold attention. Distraction, therefore, "is the hostile condition (massive and worldwide)" (155) that a writer must overcome. The common phenomenon is "an affliction from which no one can be immune and which obviously originates in the endless crises of this century" (155). The writer is, consequently, forced to examine the public and mass society of the twentieth century that "[u]-rbanization and technology indisputably dominate" (156).

Bellow sees distraction as a characteristic common to the three—the media, the public and the writers. He points out that the media, especially TV, which "brings scattered solitaries into a sort of communion," in fact, makes contribution to our distraction by leading us "into wild diversity" "through the promise of unity" (159). The distracted public, on the other hand, really look to the media for "distraction in the form of a phantom or approximate reality" (159). We are inclined to join "a state of dispersed attention" which "seems to offer certain advantages" (161). Bellow senses that in distraction "we reserve our options" (161).

Meanwhile, "the democrat", the citizen" in the writer and the writer as "the heir to the literary moralism of the last century" (161) may not be tempted to prescribe "cognitive activity" and "ideas" for the cure of distraction. The cognitive activity "brings us back to the heart of distraction: the curious instability of disorderly consciousness" (163). The writer "competes with other claimants to attention" (168), opposes "the powers of an electrified world and of a transformation of human life" (168), and unearths "the human essences neglected and forgotten by a distracted world" (169). With trained attentiveness, writers "induce attentiveness in their readers" (165), and make them hear "an individual

tone under the words" (168) and identify it by "a distinct and unique human quality" (168). These writers have "power over distraction and fragmentation" (168) and they "can bring unity and carry us [the reader] into a state of intransitive attention" (168).[7]

In one of the interviews after the publication of *Herzog*, Bellow expresses his real intention as a writer, referring to the Wordsworthian idea of tranquillity. He is not sure "whether there will ever be enough tranquillity under modern circumstances," but he feels "that art has something to do with the achievement of stillness in the midst of chaos." Bellow thinks "that art has something to do with an arrest of attention in the midst of distraction." Bellow seems to have found his authorial attitude toward the distracted public.[8]

Bellow attempts to describe "aesthetic bliss" (162), "the pleasure that comes from recognition or rediscovery of certain essences permanently associated with human life" (168). As a writer, he believes that "art, in bringing relief from the absurd striving of consciousness, from the enslaving superego, frees us for aesthetic bliss" (162). He even asserts, "emergence from distraction is aesthetic bliss" (168). Bellow, so far, does not say that "fundamental feelings, the moral sentiments so long bred into civilized peoples, have been wiped out altogether" (156), although he acknowledges that "[i]n an age of enormities, the emotions are naturally weakened" (156).

I am interested in that Bellow expresses his opinion about nihilism: nihilism, which he considers as "moral vacancy" (128),[9] "acknowledges the victory of the bourgeois outlook" (128), and it is "the absence of the noble and the great" (162), and further "distraction is probably a by-product of nihilism" (167).

Bellow takes up the media and the public again in "There Is Simply Too Much To Think About," which shows what he was then interested in. According to Bellow, ideology "is a system of false thinking and nontruth

that can lead to obedience and conformity"(173). And he believes that "[a]s the allure of agreement—or conformism—grows, the perils of independence deepen"(172).

On the contrary, most of us become hopeless to know "[t]here is simply too much to think about"(173). We feel drawn toward "packaged opinion"(174) of opinion makers about public questions. Bellow sees through "their private ends"(171), or "the study and calculation behind the naturalness of these artists of information"(174), and he considers these artists have in common "a national project"(173) that "it would be better to remake us"(175)—"the creature of flesh and blood"(175) who are "defective, shameful" and "can contribute nothing"(175).

Bellow makes an appeal to the public nearly drowned in a sea of information, not because they should be attracted by given information, but because they should "acknowledge how necessary it is to think hard, to reject what is mentally dishonorable"(171). He warns American people against "programming"(175), which the media, the ideologue, has arranged; in coping with the media, he speaks to us that we should think for ourselves, without surrendering our mental freedom and without rejecting thinking.

Bellow's parents had emigrated from Saint Petersburg to Montreal in 1913. Events in Russia were on their minds, and at the dinner table the topic of the October Revolution in 1917 was brought up with that of their relatives left in the old country. Their youngest son Saul, born in 1915, had grown to believe that like other children of immigrants he was also somehow Russian(99). The young generation in his Chicago high school inevitably got drawn to Russian culture: Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, and Lenin and Trotsky.

In the Great Depression, when "[c]apitalism seemed to have lost its control over the country," many regarded the overthrow of the government as "a distinct possibility" under the aftermath of the Revolution,

reflecting "echoes of freedom and justice" (99).

In college (1933) Bellow, the young writer in his apprenticeship, was instilled into Trotsky's Leninism, "the orthodoxy peculiar to the defeated and ousted" (100). To Bellow, who was not an activist but a writer, however, "what really mattered was the vital personal nourishment we took from Dostoyevsky or Herman Melville, from Dreiser and John Dos Passos and Faulkner" (100). In *Partisan Review* he had access to significant European writers. *Partisan*'s leading American contributors, "the *PR* intellectuals," were Marxists, and they had sided with Trotsky during the Moscow trials. Although he still admired Lenin and Trotsky who had been the topics of family circle in his childhood, Bellow did not get involved in Marxists politics and with the *PR* intellectuals. Nevertheless he tells us the glamour of the Revolution, referring to Edmund Wilson, one of "the most respected literary and intellectual figures" (101).[10]

Bellow's admiration for Trotsky, however, had cruelly been frustrated by his assassination. As we see the details of the scene in *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), he and his friend was going to meet Trotsky on that day after having managed to get an appointment. The death of the great thinker had made him understand that a far-reaching power of a despot could easily order a death; one person just had a slight hold on the matter we were made of.[11]

This may have been the special year for Bellow: he might have decided to stand on his own foot and to rely on himself. It may lead that he will quit the *PR* group as well as Marxist politics later. As he confesses, "[w]hat you invest your energy and enthusiasm in when you are young you can never bring yourself to give up altogether" (104-05), it took some time for him to separate from the New York intellectuals and communism.

The glamour of the October Revolution, Bellow writes, "had its greatest effect on intellectuals in the West" (103). The Lenin administra-

tion itself "was made by a small band of intellectuals under the direction of Lenin, their chief theoretician," what Wilson calls "the Great Headmaster"(104). Bohemian intellectuals in Greenwich Village, among whom we see Bellow's friends, Isaac Rosenfeld from their Chicago high school days and Delmore Schwartz, favored the Leninist style. Like these eminent intellectuals in the country Bellow "was avid for high-minded, often with wildly speculative talk," struggling for conversation with these thinkers. The New York intellectuals, on the other hand, drew more than a few distinctions between an intellectual and a writer. For them "those who had ideas"(105) were important as the culture heroes. Bellow "intuited—that writers seldom were intellectuals"(105), thinking about what one of the Villagers said to him: "Faulkner was an excellent writer whose books would be greatly improved by dynamic ideas"(105). At that time, it is conceivable, Bellow might have recollected the art critic, Clement Greenberg's comment on the intellectuals in Greenwich Village with reference to Brecht, the Berlin intellectual:

> [T]he followers of Lenin and Trotsky—like little men aping the externals of those they follow—have cultivated in themselves that narrowness which passes for self-oblivious devotion, that harshness in personal relations and above all that devastating incapacity for experience which have become hallmarks and standard traits of the Communist 'professional revolutionary' ...it is the cultivated and trained narrowness ...which frightens away imagination and spontaneity. (104)

Although Bellow makes a good excuse, saying that he does not "intend just now to go farther into the differences between cognition and imagination"(106), he must have recognized as early as his start in career that a writer should make full use of imagination, keeping in his mind Che-

khov's rules: "Absence of lengthy verbiage of a political-social-economic nature" and "objectivity, brevity, audacity, the avoidance of stereotypes, and compassion" (105). Unlike European writers, such as Sartre, Bellow never accepted politics as the thing to do, although he has been discussing art versus politics. Whereas he asserts that "[t]o obtain a clear picture of the modern project, to give the best possible account of the crisis of the West is still a necessity," he declares that politics is not his vocation, expanding his personal inclination into the general one that "writers are not much good at it [politics]" (109).

Now it would be better to make a clear definition of an intellectual and a writer in the case of Bellow. I have already discussed his experiences with the *PR* intellectuals, for whom young Bellow had a feeling that he was a bit out of place. For Bellow intellectuals are "refined specialists in a hundred fields" (75). They, Bellow denounces, "are often as philistine as the masses from which they emerged" (75). He goes on to say that "educated philistinism emerges as a new negative force" (75) in America. Since the learned are often far from art and taste, they have not become "a new class of art patrons" (75).

Bellow, therefore, goes in mentioning an ideal art patronage so far as to say that he used to have "sad daydreams about how nice it would have been to commune ...with an aristocratic patron, himself a man of sensibility" (77). One of the problems in the US is the silliness, instability, and philistinism of the educated people.

Referring to Max Weber who once said that modernity is "disenchanted," Bellow assumes that our disenchantment is linked with the rise of consciousness, and declares "this self-consciousness of ours does little to sustain us now," unlike "the illusions that sustained mankind in earlier times" (75). And in a more usual explanation he concludes, "the cause of our disenchantment lies in the rationality of the new social, economic, and technological order" (75-76).

Intellectuals seem to me to have turned away from mysterious elements in life which cannot be accounted for in modern science and that have in the present age come to be devoid of substance. As a writer, not an intellectual, Bellow makes his appeal to the soul [something mysterious], which he has in common with other artists.[12]

Now Bellow attempts to define his position as a writer. Beginning with his views about the twentieth century and the intellectuals,[13] he explains, "[w]riters here and there still stake their lives on the existence of these forces [the powers of the soul]" which science and commerce desert to be left behind, and about which "intellectuals have little or nothing to say"(113). In relation to "the soul and its mysteries," Bellow earlier quotes from his close friend, Alan Bloom so that he may illustrates the direction he meant to take in his speech at the International PEN Congress in New York (1986), where Gunter Grass seemed to have believed Bellow was justifying the establishment:

> Civil societies dedicated to the end of self-preservation cannot be expected to provide fertile soil for the heroic or the inspired. They do not require or encourage the noble... . One who holds the 'economic' view of man cannot consistently believe in the dignity of man or in the special status of art and science.(111-12)

"[A]n exceptionally clear-minded political theorist, Allan Bloom" (111) and Bellow had kept friends ever since the former was invited to the University of Chicago in 1979. The latter, inclined to have a liking for ideas, seemed to find an ideal companion in the former. Bellow contributed a forward to Bloom's bestseller, *The Closing of American Mind* (1987), which made a millionaire of its author. Bellow's latest work *Ravelstein* (2000) has been widely talked: the protagonist Ravelstein reminds us very much of what Allan Bloom used to be.

The preface by Bellow as a colleague sounds rather disinterested and well-mannered, as he never expected that the book would sell well onto the bestsellerdom. It is, however, notable that he refers to his own novel *Herzog* (1964) featuring a professor of philosophy. Through the novel Bellow has got applause by focusing on the comical humanity of an intellectual. The protagonist who probably embodies Bellow's real intention as a professor is rather an amiable ordinary man compared with the actual Professor Bloom—as far as the character design is concerned. Bloom seems to have been a popular figure in the university who would explode his destructive power performing a modern Dionysius of Greek philosophy and would carry out his classical scholarship by excluding from his class those students who do not have a good command of Greek. In his private life Bloom had his own way regardless of the expense.[14] In his memorial address at Bloom's funeral, Bellow admires him who "had too much intelligence and versatility, too much humanity, to be confined to a single category" (277).

It was, therefore, not only Bloom's profound scholarship in Western thought but also his powerful and irreplaceable personality that Bellow, as a writer, had been attracted to. The plot development of *Herzog* is so plausible as melodramatic, according to some critic's words.[15] Conceivably, the intuition of the practicing writer was stirred and it has yielded the novel *Ravelstein* by the real image of Bloom.

Bellow also spoke highly of Bloom for his last book of literary criticism, *Love and Friendship*[16], because a political theorist by profession discussed literature by exerting all his strength left in his closing days. Bellow says that "his [Allan's] free and powerful intelligence, responding to great inner impulses..." asks us "to see what has happened to our own deepest feelings in this age of artificial euphorias forced upon us by managers and manipulators" (279).

Now I will look at the fact that *Ravelstein* was published in 2000, the

last year of the twentieth century. When Allan Bloom was invited to come back to his old college in 1979, the US had returned to conservatism. The radical counterculture movement in the sixties and seventies repelled some liberal intellectuals who wanted to keep middle-class values, and this led to produce new conservatives.

Allan Bloom was, as it were, expected to be a hero of the times; Bloom and Bellow became immediately "soul mates" (Atlas, 478) and their partnership was legendary in the University of Chicago. Atlas says, "the literature course they team-taught drew crowds" (531). The brilliant professor of philosophy was fifteen years younger than Bellow, who had found they had a lot in common and accepted the young scholar as his intellectual mentor. In their partnership the elder professor might have served as a foil for the new academic hero.

It is said that in the sixties Bellow failed to draw his audience in his lecture at a university in California, and he could not help leaving the hall in booing.[17] Since then his criticism of higher education has, I might claim, developed into that of the philistinism of educated people.

Bellow, proud of belonging to "a generation, now largely vanished, that was passionate about literature," believes literature "to be an indispensable source of illumination of the present, of reflective power" (279). And so he keeps mourning over the lost friend, who departed from this life with a deep understanding of literature as well. Facing the greatness of an intellectual giant, Allan Bloom, who had been exhausted in changing people in his extraordinary style, it seems to me that the real-life model speculation about *Ravelstein* will be upstaged in each mind. At the end of the twentieth century Bellow a survivor might have sensed that he should hold himself responsible for depicting the legendary hero Allan Bloom, who represented the contemporary intellectual elite and to whom he would respond in literary sympathy in those Arcadian days of theirs. As Atlas also suggested, "writing *Ravelstein* was a mission" (596) for Bellow.

Bloom had embodied himself through his book, *The Closing of American Mind*, "the fundamental right of intellectuals to steer an independent course"(532). And "the book was a gallant expression of resistance to conformity"(533), which Bellow as a writer/intellectual thinks of as middle-class complacency, or mass conservatism of non-independence.

At the end of the Cold War (1991), Bellow whose parents emigrated from Russia and who grew up hearing them talk about Russian events at the dinner table, and as a young man who was involved in Leninism, seemes to have a strong feeling that our century will draw to a close. He tries to make a summary of the twentieth century in his reminiscence. In so doing he regards himself as a witness of the century. This may be because he was born in the early period of the modern US history, and grew up in its development, and reached full growth along with its overmaturity.

Now that he is in advanced age, he seems to leave message with people who will meet the new century of high technology. Bellow has seen distraction in the chaotic modern life. As a novelist he suggests to the distracted public that they should recognize or rediscover "certain essences permanently associated with human life"(168). He says the source of the human essences can be derived from "unity," "a state of intransitive attention" which a writer of "a distinct and unique human quality"(168) brings us the reader.

At almost the same time of the Cold War's end, one of those intellectual giants in the twentieth century, Allan Bloom departed from this life, leaving his remarkable achievement. This great loss forced Bellow to remove from his homeland Chicago into Boston; without Bloom he could find any significance in living Chicago.[18] It would be not until he has settled in New England that he could live in tranquillity for the rest of his days.

In the preface to *IAAU* Bellow reveals his obsession-like thoughts on "the subject of distraction." He has analyzed the chaotic conditions in modern life and extracted its fundamental essence: distraction. As a member of the society Bellow thinks himself to be distracted. As a writer who has survived the twentieth century full of violent fluctuations, he considers what he should provide coming generations with. And he attempts to prescribe for distraction, although he feels despairingly "there is simply too much to think about."

Saul Bellow keeps admiring Allan Bloom who he honors represented the intellectual zenith of the twentieth century in America. He himself confesses, "my sixties and my seventies proved to be enlightening decades," and that he learned many things that he should have known earlier. This self-appointed late learner is now ready "[t]o enter an era of improved errors," expressing his true feelings that "it gives satisfaction nonetheless to have rid oneself of tenacious old errors." Such modesty as seen in his old age has surprisingly proved to change itself into a missionary passion represented in his writing *Ravelstein*. We are cautioned against authorial intention; in fact we can find Bellow's own words: "When a writer says, 'My time is up,' it's highly probable that he doesn't really mean it (*xii*)."

The senior writer, having lived to the 21st century, might have been overcome by deep emotion to look back over the dim past: he has come a long way off. He discloses his mind, answering for the eternity question: "So the only thing I can think of is that in death we might become God's apprentices and have the real secrets of the universe revealed to us" (Atlas, 599). It is not too much to say that despite that note of humility we may expect him to watch this world in the uncertain future. He declares himself that he is "a most persistent self-educator, long[ing] for correction (*xiii*)."

Notes

1 Saul Bellow, *Ravelstein* (New York: Random House, 2000).

2 James Atlas, *Bellow: a Biography* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2000).

3 Saul Bellow, *It All Adds Up: From the Dim Past to the Uncertain Future* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1994), "Preface", *xii*. All textual references abbreviated *IAAU* are to this edition.

4 First published in *Bostonia* magazine, Spring 1992. Delivered at the Mozart Bicentennial, 5 December 1991, in Florence, Italy. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-91).

5 He wrote that Mozart "seems a modern man," closer to ourselves than Bach, "a personality in sight and comprehensible to our temperament."(*IAAU*, 5).

6 James Atlas, 576.

7 intransitive (adj) = not passed on to another person, or beyond certain limits (specified or implied). (OED)

8 "Saul Bellow: An Interview By Gordon Leoyd Harper" from *Writers at Work: Third Series* (New York: The Viking Press, 1967). Rpt. in Irving Howe ed., *Saul Bellow: Herzog* (Vikig, 1976), 358.

9 John Berryman expressed that way. (*IAAU*, 127)

10 Inspired by the Revolution, Wilson visited Moscow and published his history of Revolutionary thought, *To the Finland Station* (1940). It was also the year of Trotsky's assassination.

11 *IAAU*, 102.

12 *IAAU*, 77.

13 The twentieth [century] inverted Romanticism by substituting hate for love and nihilism for self-realization. Intellectuals seem to me to have turned away from those elements in life unaccounted for in modern science and that in modern experience have come to seem devoid of substance (*IAAU*, 113).

14 "Allan Bloom", *IAAU*, 276-79.

15 John W. Aldridge, "The Complacency of *Herzog*" *Herzog: Text and Criticism*. Ed. Irving Howe (Viking, 1976), 440-44. Aldridge sees Herzog's suffering "is the very measure of his significance both as a person and as a dramatic figure." Aldridge considers Herzog plays "the role of the Jewish intellectual as symbol of contemporary Everyman." So the novel has been welcomed in the sense that it offers a wholesome justification the intellectuals have long been seeking for their role's significance in life.

16 Allan Bloom, *Love and Friendship* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

17 Mark Harris, *Saul Bellow, Drumlin Woodchuck* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1980), 119-21.

18 James Atlas, 565-67.