'You Had to Be a Crank to Insist on Being Right': Saul Bellow's Comedy

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Early in his career, Saul Bellow became concerned with the tendency for high-mindedness to become kitsch. In his view, a pose of seriousness had run amok in mid-century literary culture. Following the publication of *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), he commented to Bernard Malamud that too many of his readers 'suffer from culture-gravity. They say "picaresque" and don't laugh' (Taylor 129). Bellow believed the same to be true of the readers of Malamud's *The Natural* (1952), sardonically referring to its elite reception by 'baseball experts' – who he said were 'sinners against imagination and the spirit of gravity' (Taylor 129).

According to Mark Greif, the middle of the twentieth century saw the emergence in the United States of a distinctive literary discourse centred on human collapse. 'Man became at midcentury the figure everyone insisted must be addressed, recognized, helped, rescued, made the centre, the measure, the "root," and released for "what was in" him' (8). The lofty-minded seriousness of this discourse was carried on by any number of writers and intellectuals, from Reinhold Niebuhr to Lionel Trilling, and their work developed a distinctively stifling quality. 'One of the striking features of the discourse of man to modern eyes', Greif writes, 'is how unreadable it is, how tedious, how unhelpful' (11). Moral purpose became the order of the day, as literary figures in the pages of *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* weighed in on the good, the necessary, the just, and the right – and in relation to everything from nuclear weapons to media policy.

Bellow's hostility to the serious poses of the literary culture had likely emerged at least in part out of frustration with one of the most earnest writers of all: the younger Saul Bellow. His first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944), seeks to explore the compounding tragedies and contradictions of a character caught between withdrawing political commitments, divergent philosophical ruminations, and the reality of forthcoming army service. The novel was a moderate critical success and was celebrated in the very terms that Bellow would later reject. In an appreciative piece in the

Partisan Review in 1944 – which immediately followed a review of Lewis Mumford's *The Condition of Man* (1944) – Delmore Schwartz concluded that in Bellow's debut novel 'the experience of a new generation has been seized and recorded' (348). The author, he writes, has made 'an important effort to describe the situation of the younger generation' (350). Reading the novel today, it is hard to avoid Greif's conclusion that the book is indeed 'unsure, in its first pages, whether it would prefer to be an essay in *Partisan Review*' (149).

By the early 1950s, Bellow had begun to seek in levity an alternative to 'culture-gravity'. He was now coming to believe that the multifarious disturbances of comic expression could overturn prevailing attitudes and interrupt overwhelming high-mindedness. Reflecting on the breakthrough represented by *Augie March,* Bellow suggested to Malamud that 'two things about the book please me still: the comedy and the characters' – even if these were not always understood by the culture at large. 'Many people', he said, 'have missed what, to me, is the fun of the book' (Taylor 128). As Bellow's publication record through the 1950s and early 1960s indicates, the potential power of the comic increasingly motivated his work, from *Henderson the Rain King* (1959) to *Herzog* (1964).

Outside of his fiction and letters, Bellow became more outspoken about the limitations of the prevailing literary style. In a short piece in the *New York Times Book Review*, 'Deep Readers of the World, Beware' (1959), he decries what he was at this time calling 'low seriousness' (*Collected Nonfiction* 94). He argues that literature at its most powerful escapes systematization – not only rigid Marxism and Freudianism but also those models offered by the era's other literary sages, the New York Intellectuals. In a lively metaphor, he suggests that meaning and pleasure are more richly available in the pursuit of a butterfly at a country picnic than they are in accounting for the inner mysteries of the egg in the salad, or in speculating about the secret of a butterfly's metamorphosis:

> In this age of ours serious people are more serious than they ever were and lightness of heart like [E. M.] Forster's is hard to find. To the serious a novel is a work of art; art has a role to play in the drama of civilized life; civilized life is set upon a grim and dangerous

> course—and so we may assume if we are truly serious that no good novelist is going to invite us to a picnic merely to eat egg salad and chase butterflies over the English meadows or through the Tuscan woods. Butterflies are gay, all right, but in them lies the secret of metamorphosis. As for eggs, life's mystery hides in the egg. We all know that. So much for butterflies and egg salad. (*Collected Nonfiction* 92)

For Bellow, the gleeful chase of a butterfly is everything that abstract systems are not – in such moments life is grasped in its wider significance. (The butterfly is particularly liable to this kind of treatment: in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–72), Farebrother's carefully curated and labelled cabinet of butterflies represent all that he cannot understand about moving life.) In imagining a butterfly chase, Bellow is rejecting the sententiousness of then-current moral reasoning about the novel. 'Is modern literature Scripture? Is criticism Talmud, theology?' he asks. 'Deep readers of the world, beware! You had better be sure that your seriousness is indeed high seriousness and not, God forbid, low seriousness' (*Collected Nonfiction* 94).

Bellow developed his thoughts further in his entry for the term, 'Literature', in *The Great Ideas Today* (1963). Reprising his earlier comments about 'low seriousness' (which he here suggests is 'the degenerate effect of the ambition for high seriousness'), he now gives a more explicit account of the potential for comedy to make the prevailing critical mood of bleakness and despair appear foolish:

> 'The inner life', the 'unhappy consciousness,' the management of personal life, 'alienation'—all sad questions for which the late romantic writer reserved a special tone of disappointment, of bitterness, are turned inside-out by the modern comedian. Deeply subjective self-concern is ridiculed. *My* feelings, *my* early traumas, *my* moral seriousness, *my* progress, *my* sensitivity, *my* fidelity, *my* guilt—the modern reader is easily made to laugh at all of these (Qtd. in Leader, *Fame and Fortune* 520).

As Zachary Leader writes, for Bellow in this moment 'it is not that comic writing lacks seriousness or that the search for higher qualities is useless, only that accounts of its difficulty ought not to result in what [he] calls "the popular orgy of wretchedness in modern literature"' (*Fame and Fortune* 521). Even a decade after *Augie March*, Bellow's sense of the literary field was still clearly shaped by the loose coteries that had formed around the *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* – and he wished to expand the conceptions of literary value to take in a fuller range of its potential satisfactions.

This article explores the significance of Bellow's comic expression in *Mr Sammler's Planet* (1970), a work that disturbingly oscillates between what Bellow calls high and low seriousness. I trace his thoroughgoing assault on the terms of literary value, both those of the novel's time and our own, as he refuses either to accept the kind of moral exhortations or claims about literature's contribution to the good that have long been the preserve of literary reception. In fact, the very attempt to sustain contraries as intellectual constructs breaks down, as Bellow instead encourages his readers to laugh at the sententiousness of those who believe they can truly locate the condition of man in the deformations of the Shoah or can convert suffering into the basis for shared group identity. He achieves his effects through a consistent strategy of deflating even the most tragic of topics: Sammler's near-death experiences in the Zamosht Forest are allied with what the novel calls 'dreadful, comical, inconsequent, senseless stuff' (*MSP* 58). Yet, for all Bellow's suspicion of seriousness-mongering, he does not extinguish the idea that we have grounds for shared life or that the novel can be a space in which human flourishing and its limits are explored. Here, though, the accumulation of bewildering and excessive materials in the book ultimately strips characters of authority, leaving them fallible and fragile – in opposition to ponderous schemes of either philosophical or political reason. The book's comic strategies are not secretly redemptive, as instead we are asked to live uncomfortably and unresolvedly with the manifold complexities of confounding experience.

To explore the potential significance of Bellow's comedy requires that we consider literature's relation to the public good. For those accustomed to the routinized translation of literary texts into political or moral insight, the novel can be very disturbing indeed – which is a point Bellow himself well understood. Following the publication of *Mr Sammler's Planet*, he wrote in a letter to Philip Roth that his critical readers ('so-called fabricators') will be 'grinding their knives' about the novel:

> They have none of that ingenious, possibly childish love of literature you and I have. They take a sort of Roman engineering view of things: grind everything in rubble and build cultural monuments on this foundation from which to fly the Bullshit flag. (Taylor 290)

Bellow's opposition to the attempt to build 'cultural monuments' strikes to the heart of any critical reception (despite his admiration for what he thought of as literary greatness). What is the end of literary criticism if not to 'build cultural monuments' – or indeed, depending on one's view, to 'fly the Bullshit flag' on this foundation? Bellow preferred the rambunctious spirit of childhood, where we discover the joys of literature without preening intellectualism. It is this desire to reject the terms of such literary thought that has not been fully understood in critical debate about the novel – and this element is hard to address, I suggest, largely because of the challenge it presents to our critical undertakings. The novel seeks to make mockery of its reception in whatever high-minded terms – as a representation of American racial dynamics, as a work that has a bearing on American Jewishness, or indeed as anything else. The most profound challenge *Mr Sammler's Planet* offers is to those who seek to 'grind everything in rubble' and 'fly the Bullshit flag' – that is, to us.

1. Party-Line Aesthetics

In advancing a reading of the comic in Saul Bellow's writing, this article touches on one of the thorniest issues in the reception of his work, namely, his well-known frustration from the 1960s onwards with liberal politics. From a certain angle at least, it might be thought that Bellow's comedy mainly reflects his skepticism of what he came to think of as liberal pieties. However, comedy in Bellow's fiction tends to be both more widely directed and more thorough than this account would suggest. Rather than simply satirizing progressive politics and seeming right-mindedness, Bellow often mocks even his own tightly-held views, as he surveys the motivations and frailties that contribute to political posturing of all stripes. This is a crucial strategy in his work, as it turns him away from *any form* of explicit political moralizing in the novel (a practice with which

he had become impatient). The clearest demonstration of this undertaking is in a later novel, *The Dean's December* (1982), which emerges directly out of Bellow's political frustrations of the late 1970s. I will briefly discuss the book before turning to the main focus of this article, *Mr Sammler's Planet.*

There is a longstanding view that postwar liberalism was a mere staging post for many of the New York Intellectuals in their transition from radical to neoconservative. Figures such as Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz are central to this account, especially as the latter redirected *Commentary* from a magazine of the left to one of the leading voices of the new right (Nathan Abrams calls *Commentary* 'the womb in which neoconservativism was conceived and gestated' (4)). Bellow himself is easily associated with such a trajectory. He went from being what he calls a 'Trotskyist' in college in the 1930s to writing the introduction for Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) in the 1980s (*Collected Nonfiction* 393). As with important figures from the new right, Bellow made any number of public statements that testify to being out of step with left politics later in his career. Most notable among these are his controversial reported comments in an interview with James Atlas: 'Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus? The Proust of the Papuans? […] I'd be glad to read them' (*Love and Strife* 507).

Yet as Amanda Anderson points out, merely tracing the general 'trend line' of the political shifts of postwar liberalism 'loses sight of one of the most significant phases of liberal thought', what she calls 'bleak liberalism' (24). This distinctive temperament of philosophical and political thought, she argues, 'manifests an interplay between hope and skepticism, often marked by a tension between moral aspiration and sober apprehension of those historical, sociological, or psychological tendencies that threaten its ambitions' (24). Anderson's account usefully highlights the affective and tonal qualities of mid-century liberalism, its tendency to 'dwel[l] as much in the existential register of crisis and repair as in the normative regions of principle and procedure' (24).

The bleak affective qualities of this period of literary thought emerged, of course, out of the events of mid-century history, from the Shoah to the ever-more apparent failures of Bolshevism. Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) – a book which sold 'seventy thousand copies in hardcover and a hundred thousand in paperback' – navigates between the moral imperatives of political progress and literature's capacity to contribute to politics in a salutary, yet non-instrumental, fashion (Menand 168). As Louis Menand writes, the 'argument of *The Liberal Imagination* is that literature teaches us that life is not so simple—for unfairness, snobbery, resentment, prejudice, neurosis, and tragedy happen to be literature's special subject matter' (169). In other words, the perfective tendencies of progressive politics, which had led to Stalin's gulags and occupied the energies of any number of intellectuals in the 1930s, are checked by literature's humanizing reflective capacities. As Trilling puts it, 'literature is the human activity that takes fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty', as it opens the space for a recognition of the overreaches of the 'liberal imagination' (xv).

By focusing on the distinctive characteristics of liberal thought and Bellow's own varied responses to it, we can make sense of some of the more unusual handlings of political thought in his fiction – which are at once more cryptic than the narrative of a political shift from left to right would accredit. Like other postwar liberals, Bellow confronted the limitations of what Anderson called 'party line aesthetics', and was skeptical of any attempt to reduce fiction to instrumentalized forms of reason (29). In the first instance, this meant he was hostile to Soviet realism and related aesthetic programmes. In a reminiscence late in his career, Bellow refers to the 'ideological infection' in the Chicago office of the WPA Writers' Project. 'The Popular Front style,' he writes archly, 'was distinctive and its "culture" was easily recognizable' (*Collected Nonfiction* 395). Yet Bellow's impatience with, and indeed contempt for, such aesthetic programmes did not stop with his early radical enthusiasms. In his view, the liberal anticommunists were not much better. 'Among these thinkers small distinction was made between an intellectual and a writer', he concludes, as 'the culture heroes who mattered were those who had ideas' (*Collected Nonfiction* 398).

On this account, believing that the novelist is in the first instance an intellectual misunderstands the role of the artist, which is to engage in the pursuit of moving fiction rather than rigid concepts. He recalls that Sidney Hook once told him that he thought William Faulkner to be an 'excellent writer', albeit one 'whose books would be greatly improved by dynamic ideas'. Hook told Bellow: "I'd be glad to give him some'" (*Collected Nonfiction* 398). For Bellow, this is another kind of philistinism, as the literary is yet again annexed by instrumental reason.

It is with a sense of the distinctiveness of literature from other kinds of discourse that Bellow tends to relativize his own political thought in his fiction. While characters often voice opinions very much like Bellow's public statements, the novels do not simply endorse whatever his bugbear was at the time. This is a significant formal development from Bellow's earliest writing. He certainly never lost his desire for the novel to speak to concerns such as the condition of man and the status of American culture, yet his fiction would lose its secondary quality in relation to these questions, and instead motivate a wider range of thoughts, often through its handling of voice and other formal devices. As Vidyan Ravinthiran observes in relation to *Mr Sammler's Planet*, for example, this work maintains an 'unstable ironic distance between author and character'. Hence while Bellow's pursuit of a spontaneous literary voice in his fiction may *feel* as though we are listening to the author's 'unexpurgated thoughts', there is in fact often a subtle critique of his public thinking (491). As Ravinthiran concludes, quoting Bellow: 'Through the character of Sammler, [he] leads – as he explained to Louis Gallo a writer must do – his ugliest, least "tolerant" feelings "into the hottest fire", to "expose them". Indeed, the "degree to which you challenge your own beliefs and expose them to destruction", [Bellow] writes, "is a test of your worth as a novelist"' (492).

The Dean's December (1982) shows how Bellow, once established as a novelist, came to relativize his own views in the form of the novel, as he put views similar to those he announced in public at a troubled comic distance. The novel deals partly with the aftermath of the publication of two cantankerous broadsides against contemporary Chicago urban life, written by Albert Corde,

a university administrator and sometime journalist. In conversation with another journalist, Dewey Spangler, Corde realizes that 'to a shrewder man those two articles in *Harper's* must have seemed unaccountable acts of self-destruction. […] It was a hell of a strange development' (*Novels, 1970-1982* 787). The articles keep returning to the narrative, albeit motivated differently in relation to each of the parade of characters. The university provost, for example, concludes that Corde is naïve and soft-headed, incorrigibly unable to see the wider circumstances. Spangler thinks Corde is a dreamer, unable to throw off the weight of the past. A university radical simply believes Corde to be racist. Late in the novel, as the articles themselves are finally quoted at some length, Corde is at last able to see something more like the truth of the matter. He realizes that underneath his articles are unacknowledged apocalyptic fantasies, ones that might be damaging for both public political thought and being taken seriously. 'I personally think about virtue, about vice. I feel free to. Released, perhaps, by all the crashing. And in fact everybody has come under the spell of "last days"' (*Novels, 1970-1982* 984). As the narrative voice slips into and out of Corde's weariness, we see how his disappointed social views, like any of the disenchanted postwar liberals, may be paradoxically hard won and a little out of proportion.

In these moments, Bellow is further developing the treatment of character in the critical and creative works of the New York Intellectuals, as he refuses to subordinate character to the idea of dignity or to the development of some more assured temperament. If for Trilling character tends to problematize abstract systematizing – character acts as the grit in the machine and shows us something determinate about systems – Bellow instead more fully absorbs inhuman systems into character. Character is all, here, which in turn makes political philosophy more difficult to engage in a committed way through fiction. Bellow's refusal in his fiction to engage arguments on the terms made available by intellectual disputeis an important dimension of his work and is ultimately part of what grounds his case for the distinctiveness of literature from other discourses.

A friend of Bellow's, William Hunt, recalled that the novelist's views were 'increasingly dystopian' in the late 1970s, as he worried about drugs, slums, and the superficiality of the media. Leader writes that Corde's articles 'reproduce material from the "Chicago Book"', which was a work of New Journalism that Bellow had researched and begun to write in the later 1970s in the mood that Hunt describes (*Love and Strife* 259–60). The work was to draw on the writing of the likes of Tom Wolfe; Bellow even undertook interviews for the project. The opprobrium the Dean faces in *The Dean's December*, according to Leader, is a mixture of the reaction to the second Jefferson Lecture that Bellow delivered in Washington DC in 1977 and Bellow's sense of 'the hostility he would have faced' had his proposed Chicago book been published (*Love and Strife* 260). Leader describes the controversial second Jefferson lecture in the following terms:

> The lecture opened with several paragraphs about American success, then turned on its audience, who embodied it, attributing to them an unspoken or repressed 'feeling that this miraculously successful country has done evil, spoiled and contaminated nature, waged cruel wars, failed in its obligations to its weaker citizens, the blacks, the children, the women, the aged, the poor of the entire world'. That women and blacks were listed as among the country's 'weaker citizens' may have unsettled some listeners. Other unsettling passages were to follow. Bellow returned to Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s, to the neighbourhoods populated by immigrants from Poland, Italy, Ireland, and Eastern Europe. These neighbourhoods he described as places of relatively harmony and industry. Today, thanks to the 1924 Immigration Act, everything had changed. (*Love and Strife* 252–3)

Bellow went on to argue that this Act had led neighbourhoods that once housed immigrants from southern and eastern Europe – those who had 'improved themselves and moved upward' – to be 'repopulated by an internal immigration from the South and from Puerto Rico'. Later arrivals, he said, 'brought with them no such urban skills and customs as the immigrants had' (Leader, *Love and Strife* 253). Leader reports that the lecture was received with 'muted applause' and that the reception afterwards was icy (*Love and Strife* 255). A denunciation in the University of Chicago newspaper followed, along with further controversies.

All of these elements of Bellow's public thinking in the late 1970s – a dystopian sensibility, a worry about a country out of control, and an angry liberal public – feature in *The Dean's December*,

albeit now motivated through distancing devices. By the time Corde's articles themselves are quoted near the end of the novel, they have been personalized in a way that would be uncomfortable for him, and indeed for the Bellow of the 'Chicago Book' and Jefferson lectures – this is the exposing of Bellow's 'ugliest' feelings to the 'hottest fire', as he described it. Corde's declining sense of vocation, his disappointment with his career, and the memories of his youthful radical enthusiasms, all do their own work on Bellow's strongly-held arguments, suggesting that they are a consequence of an underlying end-of-days sensibility. It is enough to make Corde's views appear to be the thinking of a man on the brink – a thought that runs counter to the positions the author seemed to hold dear only several years earlier.

Yet that is not to say that Bellow simply reversed his views. *The Dean's December* is interested in how a character's dystopian sensibility can give rise to certain styles of argument: Corde's articles may be madly overstated, the novel suggests, but this character's underlying feelings, if understood as partial and limited, may have their own (potentially perverse) value for thinking about the condition of culture. After the publication of the articles, Professor Beech, a geochemist who believes that lead poisoning is the source of most social ills, becomes convinced that he has found in Corde a potential sympathizer with and publicist for his cause. According to Beech, the social decline of America is a consequence of the 'millions of tons of intractable lead residues poisoning the children of the poor', especially in 'old slum neighbourhoods.' The 'crime and social disorganization in inner city populations can be traced to the effects of lead', he concludes, 'it comes down to the nerves, to brain damage' (*Novels, 1970-1982* 851). The novel tenders the thought that Beech is a crank and hence that like is attracting like (Corde reflects that he 'felt that they had a lot in common, he and Beech' (*Novels, 1970-1982* 854)). These two intellectual wanderers, disappointed and shunned, come to express an understandable but unattractive moral fervour. They share a desire 'to set before the public' news of the 'apocalypse' – irrespective of whether that news is wanted or true in anything other than a deeply felt sense (*Novels, 1970-1982* 853). Again, though, the novel never quite clinches the view that Beech is entirely wrong. Instead,

his theories are set at the edge of plausibility, as this learned man, awkwardly out of place in these modern times, fulminates against the invisible ills with which everyone else lives.

Bellow's handling of character opens the space to admit ambivalent feeling into public thought, such that tendentious and even disreputable arguments are neither rejected nor truly taken seriously on their own terms. Instead, they are at once tendered and relativized, caught up in the often-comic run of ordinary human frailty. It is this comic edge that ultimately deflates his own airy thoughts from the Chicago Book and indeed the Jefferson lectures. A central pleasure of the book is laughing at the Dean's moral fervour, at whatever unacknowledged part of him it is that leads his mind to return repeatedly to the ultimately limited world of campus politics, even amid the death of his mother-in-law and the end of Ceausescu's Romania. Words and thoughts simply keep slipping out, ones that give a lie to his sense of himself as a concerned, dispassionate citizen – and make him seem a crank after all. We cannot help but intuit a reflection on the distinction between the writer and the public intellectual in all this: Bellow's fiction asserts the supremacy of the novel as such, as it is able to inhabit the knowable and unknowable nature of human motivation, and to realize understandings that function beyond the hidebound and personal. Even if the terms had by now changed, he retained the sense, as he wrote in a review of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), that 'modern imaginative writers' should be '*un*specialists', seeking to offer 'a true middle-of-consciousness for everyone' (*Collected Nonfiction* 61). In other words, he wanted his *fiction* to achieve a level of understanding that he, speaking at the Jefferson lectures and writing the 'Chicago Book', could not. As we shall see, Bellow's handling of the novel in relation to public intellectualizing is most powerfully brought off in *Mr Sammler's Planet* – a work in which darkly comic tones inflect not petty campus politics but the rather more serious matters of Holocaust remembrance and survivor experience.

2. The Humiliations of Inconsequence

Mr Sammler's Planet surveys serious-minded thoughts about ethnic identity and historical experience, only to disturb them through enigmatic comedy. This is not the realm of committed argument, but instead of traversing the different claims that feeling can make on reason. As these thoughts are described in the novel (focalizing Sammler): 'You had to be a crank to insist on being right' (Bellow, *MSP* 3). The endeavour to generate uncontaminated ideas, according to this view, is a kind of 'Dutch drudgery'. It requires 'pumping and pumping to keep a few acres of dry ground' – 'the invading sea', we are told, 'being a metaphor for the multiplication of facts and sensations' (*MSP* 4). In these moments, which move freely into and out of Sammler's thoughts, the novel supplies its own interpretation. If we allow the dykes of the imagination to be overwhelmed, dykes which, to continue the metaphor, have been established as part of Sammler's high-minded scholarly labour, then we may be party to a richer mode of understanding than the academic realm he has occupied to little reward throughout his life. The flooding of the house of Sammler's patron at the conclusion of the novel suggests that the pumping metaphor is not entirely abstract, either. Sammler's Dutch drudgery fails, and he finds himself flooded by the very world of human motivation that he has sought to avoid.

The opening chapter of the novel best demonstrates how the work plays with its sense of its public position through disturbing shifts in tone and voice. The chapter moves around several distinct scenes: Sammler being heckled at a lecture at Columbia University; his journey on the bus (where he observes a Black pickpocket); his memories of interwar Europe; the intellectual reception of the Shoah in the 1960s; and his obscene encounter with the pickpocket at the chapter's end. For Sammler, as for us, none of these locations is fully extricable from each other. We enter his thoughts in one place, only to exit them in a different, often strange location, where his thinking may seem inappropriate. As the novel describes: 'The many impressions and experiences of life seemed no longer to occur each in its proper space, in sequence, each with its

recognizable religious or aesthetic importance, but human beings suffered the humiliations of inconsequence, or confused styles, of a long life containing several separate lives' (*MSP* 26).

Amid all of these 'humiliations of inconsequence' we are party to a criticism of the reception of the Shoah in political theory, in particular the political theory of Hannah Arendt. This criticism emerges in conversation between Sammler and 'his niece and landlady', Margotte (*MSP* 14). Sammler, we are told, cannot tolerate lengthy discussions with Margotte: 'She was sweet but on the theoretical side very tedious, and when she settled down to an earnest theme, one was lost' (*MSP* 15). This leads Sammler to avoid her company: 'This was why he ground his own coffee, boiled water in his flask, kept onion rolls in the humidor, even urinated in the washbasin (rising on his toes to a meditation on the inherent melancholy of animal nature, continually in travail, according to Aristotle)' (*MSP* 15). It is only from here – hiding in his room, keeping onion rolls in the humidor, and practising unusual toilet habits – that the subject of Arendt's work is introduced:

> He had learned his lesson one week when she wished to analyze Hannah Arendt's phrase The Banality of Evil, and kept him in the living room, sitting on a sofa […]. He couldn't bring himself to say what he thought. For one thing, she seldom stopped to listen. For another, he doubted that he could make himself clear.

These thoughts quickly become mixed up with Sammler's own memories of war:

> Most of [Margotte's] family had been destroyed by the Nazis like his own, though she had gotten out in 1937. Not he. The war had caught him, with Shula and his late wife, in Poland. They had gone there to liquidate his father-in-law's estate. Lawyers should have attended to this, but it was important to Antonia to supervise it in person. She was killed in 1940, and her father's optical-instrument factory (a small one) was dismantled and sent to Austria. (*MSP* 15)

Introduced in these terms, the novel's thinking about Arendt is framed by, and subject to, a series of historical misfortunes, interpersonal disputes, and human failings. It is not clear how seriously we are meant to interpret the thoughts that are on offer about responsibility – we are not yet able to rationalize it into some specific argument about Holocaust memory.

Sammler and Margotte's dispute turns on whether Arendt's understanding of bureaucratic modernity strips responsibility from Holocaust perpetrators. Margotte describes Arendt's

argument in the following terms: 'Here is no great spirit of evil. Those people were too insignificant. […] It's because of the division of labour all over society which broke up the whole idea of general responsibility. Piecework did it' (*MSP* 16). In Sammler's view, that line of reasoning is a too-rigidly philosophical account of human motivation. After several pages of reflections on Margotte's personal failings, focalized through Sammler – she is fleshy, oversexed, earnest, and forgets to flush the toilet – he finally responds:

> The idea of making the century's great crime look dull is not banal. Politically, psychologically, the Germans had an idea of genius. The banality was only camouflage. […] There was a conspiracy against the sacredness of life. Banality is the adopted disguise of a very powerful will to abolish conscience. […] This woman professor's enemy is modern civilization itself. She is only using the Germans to attack the twentieth century—to denounce it in terms invented by Germans. Making use of a tragic history to promote the foolish ideas of Weimar intellectuals. (*MSP* 18–19)

These lines of reasoning broadly represent the reception of Arendt's writing throughout the 1960s in New York intellectual circles. In *Commentary*, *Dissent*, and *Partisan Review*, there had been spirited arguments about *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. The 'symposium' collected in the Spring 1964 issue of *Partisan Review*, for example, features responses to both the book and the controversy by a range of prominent cultural figures, such as Lionel Abel, Irving Howe, Dwight MacDonald, Mary McCarthy, and Robert Lowell. In *Mr Sammler's Planet*, Bellow ultimately pits a caricature of Arendt against her fiercest opponents. Margotte adopts the version of Arendt that had been described by Lionel Abel in a 1963 review: 'Eichmann himself was an utterly replaceable instrument in the programme', Abel writes of Arendt's treatment of the Holocaust perpetrator, 'a mere cog in the machine' (211). Arendt's more sophisticated thoughts about judgment and responsibility are not able to be articulated by Margotte, such that Arendt becomes precisely the narrow theoretician Abel had rather inaccurately accused her of being. Meanwhile, we inhabit with Sammler the opinions of Arendt's more hostile critics. Norman Podhoretz had written in a 1963 review of *Eichmann*: 'Anyone schooled in the modern in literature and philosophy would be bound to consider [Arendt's] a much better story than the usual melodramatic version' (201). Later in that

same review he concludes that her book shows 'the intellectual perversity that can result from the pursuit of brilliance by a mind infatuated with its own agility and bent on generating dazzle' (206). Sammler's quarrel with Arendt is Podhoretz's too: he believes that she trades on historical suffering for the purpose of promoting ideas from the German philosophical tradition.

However, the novel grounds Margotte and Sammler's positions, both of which are drawn from the disputes of the day, in their own human failings and damaging attachments – a practice which in turn limits the public reach of their thinking. Margotte's defence of Arendt is connected to her unfinished mourning for her husband, Arkin, who was a political theorist. 'Sammler noticed how his widow tended now to impersonate [Arkin]' (*MSP* 16). Sammler's memories of war seem to be limiting his faith in abstract knowledge at all. He imagines that what has been lost out of human experience is now irrecoverable, to the point that explanation and argument are themselves inadequate for understanding our situation and relationship with the past. For Sammler, most systems, including theoretical knowledge, squeeze the humanity out of us. It is in this spirit that he recalls a more humane time in Bloomsbury, before the 'human physics of the war' (*MSP* 19).

What is the effect, or indeed purpose, of situating a serious-minded political debate in these characters, with their petty resentments, quarrelsome behaviours, and occult beliefs? Those who come to the novel wanting to deepen their understanding of moral or political questions are caught in a system that, on the face of it, withdraws fiction from public political thought, and instead tends toward mockery and involution. Responding to the challenge of the novel asks that we think neither through abstractions of Margotte and Sammler's arguments, nor their relationships to intellectual history, but rather through the novel's shifts in voice and tone. Crucial to the effects of *Mr Sammler's Planet* is Bellow's handling of free indirect discourse, such that we are both inside and outside of Sammler's interior life, privy to his uneven sense of himself and his rather more unusual interactions with the life outside the mind. These subtle movements produce obliquely

comic moments, as his combination of unreason and hidebound academic logic irresistibly become part of the novel's wider reflections on the denaturing effects of the Holocaust.

There is the unusual moment in which Sammler urinates in the sink. By itself, the thought of Sammler urinating in the sink in order to avoid his niece is comic. It is only the more so when attached to his inflated sense of what this might signify: 'Rising on his toes to a meditation on the inherent melancholy of animal nature, continually in travail, according to Aristotle' (*MSP* 15). The 'meditation' is clearly Sammler's – 'continually in travail' is a locution that belongs to this downhearted Polish-Oxonian – but we cannot help but experience the image of him 'rising on his toes' as intensifying matters, a mock-heroic moment of address, akin to a clearing of the throat. In turn, in his argument with Margotte, we pause over his anger at Arendt, a 'woman professor', who is using the Germans to argue with the Germans. There is truth enough in the complaint about the kind of political theory in which Arendt was engaged, but it is madly overstated ('woman professor'), sounding at this moment like the complaint of a crank – a man whose life of the mind has become mixed up with trivial antipathies, odd fixations, and perverse behaviours.

3. Clown Routines

It is crucial to *Mr Sammler's Planet* that the protagonist's possible authority on Holocaust reception derives not only from his position as an intellectual, but also from his status as a survivor. This is both more troubling and more rewarding material than that which we have surveyed in the novel thus far (the reception of Hannah Arendt), as Bellow directs his comic strategies about this sink-urinating academic into the deeper political and moral terrain on which the work plays out. By the time Bellow was writing *Mr Sammler's Planet* in the late 1960s, acceptable ways of representing and understanding the Holocaust had already developed. One effect of this had been to privilege the

view that suffering itself generates insight. The treatment of Anne Frank in particular is central to this: the 1950s Broadway play, in which she declares, 'I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart', has been taken to be a statement of universal humanism and forgiveness. (Cynthia Ozick records the litany of opposition to such a recuperation – perhaps the most telling is Bruno Bettelheim's comment, 'if all men are good, there was never an Auschwitz' (86).) We might reasonably expect that Sammler's experiences, which we are told were 'beyond personal humbling', could allow him to speak with authority about the relative merits of strategies for remembering the Holocaust (*MSP* 7). However, they do not, for reasons that are specific to how this novel handles public thought through a series of deflating devices.

The knowledge that this novel explores is that which is necessarily mixed. In a series of unusual passages, Sammler's difficulty with the surrounding world is focalized as he walks around New York:

> Mr. Artur Sammler, confidant of New York eccentrics; curate of wild men and progenitor of a wild woman; registrar of madness. Once take a stand, once draw a baseline, and contraries will assail you. Declare for normalcy, and you will be stormed by aberrancies. All postures are mocked by their opposites. This is what happens when the individual begins to be drawn back from disinterestedness to creaturely conditions. (*MSP* 118)

The reflection that 'all postures are mocked by their opposites' develops earlier comments about 'Dutch drudgery'. Sammler, our latter-day Aristotle, is also thought to be a 'registrar of madness', someone who records how the external world is playing out on a troubled consciousness. If only, he seems to think, he were not pulled back from disinterested thought – the world of the *Partisan Review* – to this limited embodied life, complete with its urination and bodily decay. The mad world he registers includes his own Holocaust memory, which does not teach lessons but is rather part of a directionless insanity. In a bizarre yet haunting recollection, another survivor, Bruch, is reported to have 'loved playing corpse'. 'He and another German Jew, employed in Macy's warehouse, used to hold Masses over each other, one lying down in a packing case with dime-store beads wound around the wrists, the other doing the service' (*MSP* 57). There are further 'clown

routines', as the novel terms them (*MSP* 57). At one point Bruch reimagines Nazi mass meetings, 'using an empty pot for sound effects, holding it over his mouth to get the echo, ranting like Hitler and interrupting himself to cry "*Sieg Heil*"' (*MSP* 57–58). Sammler does not participate in the fun, as he thinks 'all that dreadful, comical, inconsequent, senseless stuff' leads to unfortunate reminiscences (*MSP* 58). One such reminiscence (Bruch's) is of when saucepans were offered for sale to prisoners in the camp, without apparent cause. 'And then a man fell into the latrine trench. No one was allowed to help him, and he was drowned there while the other prisoners were squatting helpless on the planks. Yes, suffocated in faeces!'(*MSP* 58).

In a devastating paragraph, which extends across several pages, we see Sammler unable to adopt the positions of 'judge and […] priest', which have been demanded of him by his friends and family (*MSP* 91). He decides he may not symbolize anything important at all: his story is not one of 'surviving', he thinks, 'it was only lasting' (*MSP* 91). These thoughts are woven in with the first extended memory we are given of how he escaped the massacre in which his wife was killed, and of subsequently hiding in the forest:

> He and sixty or seventy others, all stripped naked and having dug their own grave, were fired upon and fell in. Bodies upon his own body. Crushing. His dead wife nearby somewhere. Struggling out much later from the weight of corpses, crawling out of loose soil. Scraping on his belly. Hiding in a shed. Finding a rag to wear. Lying in the woods many days. (*MSP* 92)

This harrowing material is situated in the middle of Wallace Gruner's monologue about a gambling syndicate, and the 'special equation' he has developed to assist with his bets (*MSP* 88). Soon afterward, we are back with Wallace's mad money-making schemes – photographing country houses from aeroplanes, all for a fee, with the purpose of identifying the property's trees. (Neither Wallace nor his business partner actually 'know trees' (*MSP* 99).) The suggestion amid all of this is that Sammler's experiences in the Zamosht Forest cannot be translated into public, or indeed private, significance. Rather they remain both excessive and inappropriate for postwar living. It is

not simply that they are too serious, either. The camp inmates suffocating in faeces is indeed dreadful, comical, inconsequent, senseless stuff.

These uncontained materials ultimately guide the novel away from more pious thinking about the endurance of Holocaust memory. I have suggested that by situating an argument about Arendt in Sammler and Margotte's human limitations, the novel becomes difficult to rationalize into a clear set of thoughts about the relationship between bureaucratic modernity and the Holocaust. Here the novel is also refusing to adopt traumatic repetition as a privileged mode either. In other words, it is unwilling to accept the view that we must afford a special weight to Sammler's thoughts either because of his status as a survivor or because of how these views might have developed out of traumatic repetition. There are of course a number of passages in the novel which demonstrate the unsavoury invasion of thoughts and memories into Sammler's consciousness (the recollection of the events in the Zamosht Forest most obviously). However, in these obliquely comic exchanges, we see that trauma does not have a special grasp on public understanding, and nor is it a privileged place from which to address all that is baffling about contemporary American culture. Instead, the significance of the Shoah, both in Sammler's life and in general, is stranger than all of that, refusing to grant any particular thought. Being a survivor steers one away from being either judge or priest and into darker, more perverse territory.

In place of determinate public intellectualizing about the Shoah the novel offers a much more disturbing and specifically literary account of what it might mean in our lives, one that emphasizes the pleasure of cruelty amid the 'comical-tearful stuff' that we live with (*MSP* 174). Late in the novel, Sammler reports that he has read some of the books belonging to one of the characters, Wharton Horricker. The books are by 'Bataille and the other theorists', on the topics of 'transgression and pain and sex; lust, crime, and desire; murder and erotic pleasure'. Sammler says that they did not 'mean much to me' (*MSP* 299). Yet it is clear that he is one of the few to have been made to grasp what is called in the novel 'the magic of extremes': in a central episode

in the novel, he gains access to ecstatic registers of experience through a kind of sacrifice (*MSP* 146).

The episode begins when Sammler is recalled to 'confront certain insufferable things' (*MSP* 137). In this case, it is when he shot a soldier he had disarmed from close range. After he orders the man to take off his coat, tunic, sweater, and boots, the soldier 'asked for his life' (*MSP* 139). The soldier seemed to be dead even before Sammler pulled the trigger:

> The grime of the lip, the large creases of skin descending from his nose already lined with dirt—that man to Sammler was already underground. He was no longer dressed for life. He was marked, lost. Had to go. Was gone. 'Don't kill me. Take the things.' Sammler did not answer, but stood out of reach. 'I have children.' Sammler pulled the trigger. The body then lay in the snow. A second shot went through the head and shattered it. Bone burst. Matter flew out. (*MSP* 139)

Sammler is soon led to reflect on what place this holds in his life. 'To kill the man', he thinks, 'had given him pleasure'. His thoughts take troubling shape:

> Was it only pleasure? It was more. It was joy. You would call it a dark action? On the contrary, it was also a bright one. It was mainly bright. When he fired his gun, Sammler, himself nearly a corpse, burst into life. Freezing in Zamosht Forest, he had dreamed of being near a fire. Well, this was more sumptuous than fire. His heart felt lined with brilliant, rapturous satin. To kill the man and to kill him without pity, for he was dispensed from pity. There was a flash, a blot of fiery white. When he shot again it was less to make sure of the man than to try again for that bliss. To drink more flames. He would have thanked God for this opportunity. […]
>
> In the privacy of his bed he turned very briefly to that rage (for reference, he did it). Luxury. And when he himself was nearly beaten to death. Had to lift dead bodies from himself. Desperate! Crawling out. Oh heart-bursting! Oh vile! Then he himself knew how it felt to take a life. Found it could be an ecstasy. (*MSP* 140–141)

In the killing of a soldier, Sammler transfigures into something greater than either a traumatized neurotic, saintly survivor, or overwhelmed academic – he lives on an enlarged scale from the man who hid in a forest and a tomb, ate grass, and became a starved spectre of himself. This is not the realm of the kinds of ideas that Sidney Hook thought he could supply Faulkner, and these thoughts are of course deeply inappropriate for the terms provided by the dominant modes of Holocaust remembrance – they are neither a model of suffering, nor survival, nor reflection. Rather,

Sammler's experiences and recollections are momentarily a place from which no salutory thoughts on public life emerge. Soon, Sammler recounts the scene from *War and Peace* in which the French General Davout spares Pierre Bezhukov. 'A human look was exchanged, and Pierre was spared. Tolstoy says you don't kill another human being with whom you have exchanged such a look' (*MSP* 188). Sammler concludes that he does not hold out much hope for this idea: 'I wouldn't count on it', he says darkly (*MSP* 189). Yet even Sammler's hard-won insight is undermined in the novel's endless movements back and forth: if Sammler has come to understand something important about the human condition in this moment, it clearly has not flowed through into his life or thought in any meaningful way. Instead, the experience simply piles up, being one more excessive and catastrophic moment to add to the others, while this enervated man continues to inveigh against his relatives and urinate in the sink.

4. The King of Rags and Shit

Mr Sammler's Planet orbits issues in post-Holocaust thought, situating them in an ambivalently comic tone – the serious is constantly stalked by the unserious, and Sammler's experiences are never quite abstracted from his more human failings. The sense that all positions are mocked by their opposites is central to the novel's handling of public intellectual debates. The question of how Holocaust perpetrators such as Eichmann had thought about their actions – questions which were hotly contested at the time – are bound up in Sammler's inadequacy, to the point that the idea of quarrelling over Eichmann's interior life becomes faintly ridiculous in the life of a man who, continually in travail, hides in his bathroom and imagines himself a latter-day Aristotle. Once situated in character, there is no exteriority between these different experiences: the pleasure of killing the soldier disturbs thoughts about the endurance of Holocaust memory for Sammler, and appropriate forms of political redress for historic crimes become bound up in Sammler's sexist

and ultimately pathetic disdain for his niece (and landlady). There is the sense that none of this is entirely within our control, a feeling that matters are about to spiral out into what Sammler calls at the novel's end the 'degraded clowning of this life through which we are speeding' (*MSP* 313).

Described another way, what the novel is offering is an education – the kind he imagined high-minded scholarly endeavour is too stubborn to acknowledge – in the range and intelligence of comic treatments of the most serious of materials. It is not simply that there are funny moments in the text, but rather that there is a strategy of turning over intellectual and moral positions such that they reveal motivations inconsistent with the purposes to which these positions are being put. Sammler's hostility to Arendt emerges from all kinds of experiences and thoughts, ranging from a quarrel with her political philosophy, to his human failings, to the memory of shooting a disarmed soldier (who was begging for his life). There is an austerity to this practice, a refusal of the affects through which political claims may be made. The novel's movements of tone and voice around our protagonist do not provide us with a model of a better political community, though, or indeed a more appropriate way of understanding historical experience. Instead, it leads to a kind of awkward laughter, as we find ourselves overwhelmed in Sammler's company, unsure how we are meant to take the importance of his life and experience against the background of the Shoah.

By focusing on the novel's comic strategies, we also end up thinking differently about literary criticism. I have been suggesting that *Mr Sammler's Planet* seeks to undo the sense that its public force lies in the arguments it presents – the novel refuses to quarrel over propositional arguments from within the terms of those arguments. Rather, it handles such arguments by consistently tripping us up in our endeavours to turn these materials toward higher purposes. If there remains a tendency in literary criticism today to think of 'the literary' as some element that is added onto intellectual history, as indeed Bellow throughout his career had criticized any number of critics for believing, here we are encouraged to experience comic fracturings not as added, but rather as embedded and indeed diffuse. It is a way of thinking that is otherwise to the general run

of our scholarly attentions, departing from the rules of conduct that dominate our practices. It is dedicated to making fools of us. Yet it is here, with Sammler in the graves of the Zamosht Forest, that the most profound pleasure, intelligence, and significance of the book lies.

One final word of warning, however. The comic in Bellow's work is not secretly redemptive. A key interest in *Mr Sammler's Planet* is the alienation – from each other and from ourselves – that seems to have taken place in the baffling environment that Sammler is attempting to navigate. As may be expected, this is partly due to the Shoah. Sammler tells Govinda Lal, an author of a manuscript about the moon, about how he ultimately survived in the Zamosht Forest: 'By opening the tomb to me', Sammler says of a graveyard superintendent, 'he let me live. Experience of this kind is deforming' (*MSP* 230). Sometimes it is the moon landings that seem to indicate the finality of things, with everyone tasting, Sammler imagines, 'the flavour of the end of things-as-known' (*MSP* 278). Sammler thinks of himself as having passed over to another state: 'What Sammler was he could not clearly formulate. Human, in some altered way. The human being at the point where he attempted to obtain his release from being human' (*MSP* 251). The sense of the monstrousness of Sammler's life is integral to the novel's comic strategies – and it is specifically set against revealing the promise of redemption underneath it all.

Near the end of the fifth chapter, Sammler recounts the story of Rumkowski, 'the mad Jewish king of Lodz' during the war (*MSP* 230). This man, Sammler says, is as much a clown as a demon. 'A noisy, individual, corrupt, director of an orphanage, a fund-raiser, a bad actor, a distasteful fun-figure in the Jewish community' (*MSP* 231). The sense that he might be ridiculous and a figure of fun develops further in Sammler's account, as he has Rumkowski holding court over his kingdom, printing his own money and postage stamps (complete with his image). All this takes place even as children are being 'seized and deported for extermination' and a famine has led to the dead being left on the pavement (*MSP* 231). There were 'pageants and plays' in Rumkowski's honour, Sammler recalls, with this mad king 'presiding over the death of half a million people'

(*MSP* 231). 'Humour seldom failed to appear in [Nazi] pogroms', Sammler concludes, as they enforced a 'harshness towards clumsy pretensions, toward the bad joke of the self which we all feel'. Among all the others, this is a devastating recollection – this 'King of rags and shit' stays with us (*MSP* 232). There is a register of the comic – *king of rags and shit* – that does not redeem in *Mr Sammler Planet*, but instead leads to a stranger, sadder set of realizations. Being 'assailed by contraries' and 'stormed by aberrancies' – those old comic routines – means being repeatedly confronted with the very worst of human experience (Bellow, *MSP* 118). For us, and for Sammler, that is not an uplifting thought.

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