

Bellow's Characters: Reflections on Reality

The other day I began thinking about characters in Saul Bellow's novels, figures in his work who seem clearly identifiable as having been drawn from his life—wives, friends, lovers, enemies and the like. My interest was stirred because it became clear in Zachary Leader's new biography how often Bellow used the materials of his life when producing stories, which was far more frequently than I had imagined. I began wondering how these people reacted to appearing in print, in books that over the decades have attracted large numbers of readers and that may well be read for decades (or longer) to come. I began to consider the wider context, of those who had been brought into his imaginative universe and those who had been kept out, whether he himself was ever a character in someone else's novel—it seems that he was—and how he might have reacted to that.

Some were scandalized, embarrassed or offended by appearing in his work; others, unexpectedly, were pleased, even if the picture in the novels was far from flattering. Sam Freifeld, a friend from his high school years on the West Side of Chicago, seems to have been reincarnated in a number of Bellow's works as a disreputable lawyer who becomes progressively more unattractive in each succeeding book. His family, chiefly the father, is depicted in *Augie March*, and Freifeld himself gets a fuller and more exclusive treatment in *Humboldt's Gift*, appearing under the name of Alex Szathmar. James Atlas claims in his biography that Freifeld was delighted to figure as a central character in the novel, and bragged about it to friends, though few would relish being presented to the public as an aging chaser who exposes himself to nurses in hospital beds. Freifeld believed he was also a model for the corrupt, decaying lawyer Maxie Detillion in *The Dean's Decemeber*, published in 1981, an image that reportedly infuriated him. Bellow may have borrowed him for a final time in *The Actual* to create Jay Wustrin, yet another

seedy, sex-obsessed lawyer who is the deceased former husband of Amy Wustrin, the narrator's "actual." Had Freifeld lived to see *that* character in print he would have had serious grounds for complaint, but he died some years before the novel was published in 1997. The varieties of treatment the sexual theme receives in these stories is noticeable. The erotic enthusiasm of Alex Szathmar in *Humboldt's Gift* is an admirable manifestation of masculine energy and the source of light-hearted, jocular remarks. But succeeding versions of this characteristic offer the image of a degraded, loutish old man free from moral compunction.

I was also intrigued by the unexpected reactions of others besides Freifeld who received an unflattering treatment in the stories, people Bellow knew well who seemed strangely gratified to appear in his stories. A long-time friend, Keith Botsford, is reportedly the model for the deceitful Thaxter in *Humboldt's Gift*. When Atlas interviewed him for the biography, he says that "a tiny part of me had been transformed, magically, into a character in a novel, enlarged upon, recreated." The most remarkable reaction came from Jack Ludwig. Still alive today in his nineties and retired from his career as a college instructor, Ludwig is the buffoon Valentine Gersbach who is conducting an affair with Herzog's wife. Atlas claims that he "boasted to his students" that he was a central character in the novel and that he would become the object of scholarly interest for years or decades to come. That much is certainly true, though a reader marvels why Ludwig—if quoted accurately—would relish such status. (There is some evidence that he might not. When Zachary Leader was preparing his recent biography, Ludwig "politely declined" to be interviewed. One of his grounds was dissatisfaction with the version of the story Atlas offers in *his* biography.) Steven Ussher, an economist and an acquaintance of Bellow's, said in a talk before a small group in Chicago in 2007 that he once asked the author why at least some people were pleased to appear in his work, regardless of the friendliness of the

presentation, while others claimed to be models when they weren't. "Modern people," Bellow responded, "are desperate for a definition of themselves."

Three of Bellow's former wives—Sondra Tschacbasov, Susan Glassman and Alexandra Tulcea—received identifiable and harsh descriptions in the various novels. Madeleine Pontritter, the horrifying second wife of Moses Herzog in the eponymous novel, is a near-duplicate of Sondra, Bellow's second wife. The presentation of Glassman is comical but disagreeable in *Humboldt's Gift*, and Alexandra, wife number four, is cold, vain and heavy with affectation in *Ravelstein*. Anita Goshkin, his first wife, claimed to have seen herself in *Seize the Day* as Tommy Wilhelm's former wife, unsympathetic and hard. The figure appears at the end of the story and only for a few pages. His fifth and final wife, Janis Freedman, is safe: She is the delightful, much younger spouse in *Ravelstein* who revives an older man battered by divorce and the death of his closest friend. (Bellow's three sons, each the product of different wives, do not appear in his fiction, as far as I know.)

Not surprisingly, wives one through four were unhappy with the renderings. (Alexandra Tulcea appears in two novels, one written during, the other after, her marriage; the first portrait in *The Dean's December* troubled her as an intrusion on her privacy but the offense provoked by the second was far worse. I'll return to that shortly.) Bellow always claimed that he sought a truthful presentation in these productions—the truthfulness of imagination, not fact— but it is difficult to believe he was indifferent to the opportunity for revenge. Philip Roth sent him the manuscript of *I Married a Communist* some time in 1997, a year before it was published. The novel amounts to Roth's revenge on Claire Bloom, his former wife, for presenting him in such an unflattering light in her memoir, *Leaving the Doll's House*. Bellow read the document and faulted Roth in a letter for lacking "a certain detachment from a writer's own passions,"

immediately adding that "I speak as one who committed the same sin in *Herzog*." Bellow says that he had hoped the novel's jokes would protect him from charges of vengefulness, but concedes that "I crossed the border too many times to raid the enemy camp."

Others not as close to the author found themselves showing up in a Bellow production, surprised and unhappy with the results. Joan Ullmann, recognizable as the mistress of a famous art critic in the novella "What Kind of Day Did You Have?," writes in the online magazine *Tablet* that she was "horrified" when she discovered the story; it appeared in the February 1984 issue of *Vanity Fair*. The piece not only intruded on her privacy, but was also somewhat demeaning. There were other considerations: The art critic in the novella was an obvious rendering of Harold Rosenberg, dead for six years when the story came out. A very public figure, Rosenberg's fictitious double would have been immediately recognized by his surviving wife and children and a great many readers. The family members cannot have been happy to see their lives opened up for public inspection, the wife exposed as the victim of a chronic and shameless adulterer. The treatment of Vanessa, the critic's daughter in the novella, is also rather unflattering. Ullmann considered a suit against Bellow, but her lawyer advised her against it: Litigation would only attract attention to the piece.

Bellow's close friend David Pelz, a builder who developed properties on the South Side of Chicago, appeared in manuscripts that Bellow worked on in the 1960s, material that he showed to his friend and asked for the right to publish—a rare occasion (perhaps unique) in which the author went to a source for approval. Pelz was troubled less by his appearance in the manuscripts than by Bellow's use of material he had hoped to use for himself in his own editorial projects (none of which has ever been published, so far as I know). Bellow relented, against the advice of his agent and publisher, and set the material aside. Pelz himself later gave way, and

some of the stories that Bellow had borrowed were redeployed in *Humboldt's Gift*, published in 1975. I'll return to that in a minute. (Pelz was brought back to life yet again in 1981, when he appeared as the character Woody Selbst in the short story, "The Silver Dish.")

Bellow's most explicitly autobiographical work—also his most somber and bereft of the comedy inseparable from his oeuvre—is *The Dean's December*. With some justice, John Updike began his review of the novel in *The New Yorker* by declaring that "the good thing" about *The Dean's December* is that it is by Saul Bellow; "the bad thing" about the novel that it is *about* Saul Bellow. The story is the one occasion I know of when Bellow used material from his life in a way that he later regretted. The novel retells the story of the trip to Bucharest that Bellow made with his Romanian-born wife Alexandra Tulcea to attend to her mother on her deathbed. He describes his wife's extended family and friends in some detail. The visit took place in 1979, when the country was controlled by one of the severest Communist dictatorships in what used to be called Eastern Europe. In a letter from August 1981, several months after the book was published, Bellow laments to his friend Allan Bloom that his wife is "terrified" by the danger the novel presents to her family and friends in Bucharest, so plainly depicted in the story. One is obliged to infer the wider circumstances from the published edition of his correspondence, but Sanda Loga, a physicist Alexandra knew, evidently felt especially threatened. Bellow was unsure whether he should publicize the book in TV appearances (which he reluctantly did) or work quietly with his political contacts (surprisingly extensive) in order to protect the woman. "How could I face Sanda if I increase fame and fortune while she. . . [ellipsis in the original] I could use some wise advice," he continues. "In this world there seems no way to do right except in obscurity and modesty. Doing wrong will cause severe suffering in every way. . . ." Bloom's advice, if offered, is not indicated. Alexandra, long after her marriage to

Bellow had ended, complained to Atlas that she felt "violated" by the portrait of her life in *The Dean's December*, but far worse was to come in *Ravelstein*, the final novel. Vela, the mathematician married to the narrator, is about as unattractive as Moses Herzog's former wife.

A woman Bellow was very close to for decades, Maggie Staats Simmons, had yet another objection to becoming a character in a novel. She appears as Demmie Vonghel in *Humboldt's Gift*, the woman whom the narrator Charlie Citrin is having an affair with early in his career. Bellow found it artistically expedient to have the character die in a plane crash in Venezuela, and Simmons, who had struggled with cancer in the years when Bellow was writing the book, was disturbed by the turn the novel took. She wrote the author and told him so. In September 1975, some months after the novel came out, Bellow wrote her apologetically that "I don't know how I ever came to believe that a death-comedy had to be written." The narrator of *Humboldt*, somewhat like Bellow himself, is tormented by *timor mortis* and considers the subject at length in the novel. "Of course I might have spared you," Bellow writes, "but we were bound together in this comical death-complex, were appalled together and laughed together. . . .It didn't occur to me that you would be affected so strongly." Here Bellow comes close to interpreting themselves as characters in a co-written novel.

I said initially that the new Zachary Leader biography stimulated my interest in this question of an author's use of characters from his life. It was also spurred by my discovery of a recorded panel discussion on the Internet of Bellow's last novel. C-SPAN taped a conversation among a number of well-known scholars in May 2000 who weighed Bellow's decision to write about Allan Bloom, his former co-instructor at the University of Chicago; as many readers know, he placed him at the center of *Ravelstein*, which was published in 2000. Many may remember the sharp debate the novel provoked even before it came out, discussing as it did Bloom's

homosexuality and the cause of his death, which was HIV/AIDS. Werner Dannhauser, the lead speaker on the C-SPAN panel, had seen a draft of the novel and argued with Bellow over the factual character of the manuscript. In the C-SPAN discussion he publicly—and sharply—criticized him for publishing it. Dannhauser, who died in 2012, had been one of Bloom's closest friends and considered the novel a gross intrusion on his carefully maintained privacy. Bloom had a distinguished scholarly career, as a translator of Plato and Rousseau and as the author of a famous book on American education, *The Closing of the American Mind*. That could all be overshadowed by the disclosure of sensitive and personal details which no one had the right to disclose. Or so Dannhauser believed.

Responding to his complaint, Bellow told Dannhauser in a letter from October 1999 that he was experimenting with a technique he had never tried before. He hoped to produce a hybrid literary document that combined a factually accurate rendering of a character--Allan Bloom--with other figures who were more purely fictitious (though I have the impression that nearly all the characters in the book, save the narrator, are factual renderings of people Bellow knew or remembered in this phase of his life). The novel, in other words, would be part memoir, part fiction. Bellow claimed that Bloom had explicitly instructed him to prepare a posthumous sketch which would document his life and character and which would omit nothing of relevance, no matter how unattractive, private or sordid. Whether this was to take the form of a novel or a memoir was something Bellow never said. In his letter to Dannhauser, Bellow refers to his novel from 1981, *The Dean's December*, his most autobiographical work. "He [Bloom] objected to the false characterization of Alexandra and didn't spare me one bit," Bellow writes. "But now the shoe is on the other foot and I saw no reason why I should do in *Ravelstein* what Allan had so strongly objected to in the earlier novel. . . .I was trying to satisfy Allan's wishes, and I couldn't

have it both ways." (In the novel, Ravelstein declares to the narrator, "You know, Chick, you sometimes say there's nothing you can't tell me. But you falsified the image of your ex-wife. You'll say that it was done for the sake of marriage but what kind of morality is *that?*")

In the C-SPAN panel discussion, Dannhauser casts doubt on Bellow's claim and comes close to calling him a liar. No one among Bloom's closest friends, most of whom Dannhauser knew, could confirm Bellow's claim that Bloom had instructed him to write a memoir. Nor had Bloom said anything to Dannhauser about the matter. He concedes the possibility that encouragement may have been privately given. Curiously, he reports that Bloom confided to him that he feared becoming a character in a Saul Bellow novel when the two began co-teaching their seminar around 1980. *There* was a man who knew the danger of entering into the life of a novelist, but the anxiety diminished as the friendship deepened over the next ten years.

In that same letter from October 1999, Bellow all but pleads with Dannhauser not to let the manuscript affect their friendship. And ever since the letters were published in 2010, I have wondered if Dannhauser had agreed to drop the matter and let the friendship stand. *Ravelstein* was published at a moment of acute distress for the author. He was about to become a father, a difficult moment for many men, and Bellow was having the experience for the fourth time at the age of 84. Bellow was also deeply alarmed by the impact of James Atlas's forthcoming biography, which he feared was going to be seasoned with unflattering details about *his* private life. (Sauce for the goose, sauce for the gander?) He needed all the support he could find, and I had hoped that Dannhauser would offer him some. But the C-SPAN video indicates that my hopes were misplaced. Dannhauser's criticism, presented in a public forum while Bellow was still alive, strongly implies that he brought the friendship to an end, a decision that doubtless played a role in the emotional breakdown Bellow shortly underwent, which he refers to in an

undated letter to Philip Roth written in 2000. If there is a potential cost to entering the orbit of a novelist, the writer himself can pay a price when others react. Dannhauser attended some of the seminar discussions that Bellow and Bloom had taught, and I had gotten to know him slightly because I was attending them too as a graduate student. He appears in *Ravelstein* under the name of Herbst, a widowed scholar with a taste for gambling and pursuing women—details which do not seem to have bothered him in the least.

There is no way of knowing, but my hunch is that Bellow was telling the truth when he said that he was simply fulfilling Bloom's wishes. My assumption is partly guess work—I don't think he would lie about something like that. We also know that Bellow wrote about many other characters in his life, some of them well known, others obscure, but all with a reasonable claim to privacy. He never shrank from disregarding this claim, save for that one exception regarding David Pelz. Bellow wrote about other famous men he had known, including Delmore Schwartz, who plays a major role in *Humboldt's Gift*, and (as I mentioned) Harold Rosenberg. The forgotten Isaac Rosenfeld, an important literary figure from the 1940s and 1950s, was to be a central figure in a novel that Bellow never got off the ground, a story that would have covered the Greenwich Village years of the 1940s. (The novel appears in condensed form in the short story "Zetland: By a Character Witness," which was published in 1984, while elements of the abandoned manuscripts were fitted into *Humboldt's Gift*.) Some readers who remembered Schwartz claimed that Bellow's portrait was inaccurate, but I do not recall anyone accusing him of intruding on his privacy; when the novel was published, Schwartz had been dead for nearly a decade. When Joan Ullmann wrote Bellow to complain about "What Kind of Day Did You Have?" Bellow produced a typically clever response. A young English woman two centuries before, he wrote, complained to Pope that she had been used as a model for "The Rape of the

Lock." Producing a self-defense that has been copied by writers ever since, Pope protested that the character of Belinda resembled his angry correspondent "in nothing but beauty." The figures of the poem, Pope insists, are entirely fictitious. Bellow adds, "I felt extremely lucky to find in a great master the total clarification of a diabolically complex problem." That sounds a bit glib, and Ullmann was not appeased. Pope may have been a great master and the problem diabolically complex, but I doubt it has received total clarification.

Bellow was certainly aware of the punitive power of his typewriter. In a February 1991 letter to Ruth Wisse, a scholar of Jewish and Yiddish-language literature, he writes of editors at *Commentary* magazine, including Norman Podhoretz, who had ignored his work when scheduling book reviews. "They review Gore Vidal and they ignore me," he laments, and goes on to describe the editors' decision to publish a short story by Joseph Epstein. A Chicago writer who had once had friendly relations with Bellow, he seems to have ransacked his knowledge of the author to produce every unflattering detail he could imagine. "I could make those people very unhappy by describing them," Bellow says in his letter, but concludes in Yiddish, "*Ober es geyt mir nit in leben*," which I freely translate as "it wouldn't get me anywhere." "And besides," he concludes, "it wouldn't really amuse me." From this perspective, revenge can appease irritations that should be disregarded; the offending parties were unimportant and played too small a role in Bellow's life to justify the effort.

American fiction of the last century often has a strong biographical quality. Diana Trilling, in an essay from the 1950s, comments that "For the advanced writer of our time, the self is the supreme, even sole referent. Society has no texture or business worth bothering about; it exists because it weighs upon us and conditions us so absolutely. . . .The present-day novelist undertakes only to help us define the self in relation to the world that surrounds us and threatens

to overwhelm it." Specialists in the literature of earlier centuries argue that only our greater knowledge of our contemporaries makes this claim plausible. They assert that authors have taken material from their lives and the lives of others extensively since at least the advent of the modern novel in the late eighteenth century; we are simply less knowledgeable about the circumstances of their lives and works. But Bellow himself might challenge this argument. Michael Kotkin, a student of his from the 1960s, lent Zachary Leader notes from a course he took, where the author remarked that "the novel of the twentieth century becomes more personal—the writer trying to solve in his books the troubles he is trying to solve in his life." Leader describes this as "a claim that clearly applies to *Herzog*."

In June 1980, Bellow began receiving letters that seemed to last for years from Dean Borok, the illegitimate son of his older brother Morris. Borok was then living in Montreal and was pained because his father refused recognition of him. Morris Bellow by then had entered into a second marriage, moved to Atlanta, and seems to have foresworn all contact with his relatives in Chicago. Bellow presumably passed on this information to console Dean Borok, by then a middle-aged man, for his father's refusing contact. "He sees none of us," Bellow wrote back, in a sympathetic note. "Brothers, sisters, or his two children by his first marriage, nor their children. Neither does he telephone or write. He has no need of us. He has no past, no history."

In the story "Him With His Foot in His Mouth," published in 1984, the narrator's older brother Philip has left Chicago for Houston, where he claims (in a visit by the narrator) to have forgotten nearly everything about his family origins on the West Side of Chicago. Near the end of his letter to Borok, Bellow concludes "If you can find the right way to do it, perhaps you should write the story of your life. To get rid of it, as it were. In writing it successfully, you will

forgive everyone in the process. Yes, all of those who sinned against you will be forgiven. That's what I call a successful effort to get one's life down on paper."

This adds a new perspective on Bellow's decision to write about his life and the people who were part of it. The element of revenge recedes, at least a bit, and attempted mastery becomes part of the picture. By including himself and his past in his work, Bellow takes at least partial control of his story, appeases the rage and distress, distances himself from the emotional damage, and seeks "to forgive" those who have injured him.

I think that Bellow's fundamental belief was that almost anything from his life could be used if it advanced an artistic purpose. He had the true gifts that he felt had been denied to so many who claimed to have them. The gain for the public and posterity in the production of true literary art outweighed the cost others might pay by seeing it produced. His achievement, Bellow believed, was hard won, the product of great labor over the many years he spent mastering his craft. That at any rate is my interpretation of a letter that he wrote to David Pelz, who as we have seen, was troubled by the use of factual materials from his life. Bellow's response is valuable enough to quote at some length. It comes from a letter of July 1974, when excerpts of *Humboldt's Gift*, published a year later, began to appear in various magazines:

The name of the game is Give All. You are welcome to all my facts. You know them, I give them to you. If you have the strength to pick them up, take them with my blessing. Touch them with your imagination and I will kiss your hands. What, trunk-loads and hoards of raw material? What you fear as the *risk* of friendship, namely that I may take from the wonderful hoard, is really the risk of friendship because I have the power to lift a tuft of wool from a bush and make something of it. I learned, I paid my tuition most painfully. So I know how to transform common matter. And when I give that transformation, that has no value for you? How many people in Gary, Chicago, the USA, can you look to for that, David? As for me, I long for others to do it. I thirst for it. So should you."

I am less convinced now than I was ten years ago about the justification for publishing a novel, *Ravelstein*, which combines so much factually accurate information with invented (or fictitious) material; the question seems to me more problematic now than it did before. As I described in my essay on *Ravelstein*, Elizabeth Bishop argued the matter with her friend Robert Lowell, who was writing and publishing poems about his recent marriage to Caroline Blackwood and his separation from Elizabeth Hardwick, his second wife; the material was appearing in literary publications in the early 1970s and was later gathered in the 1973 collection *The Dolphin*. In a letter from 1970, Bishop cites a letter Thomas Hardy wrote in 1912 denouncing the practice of preparing *romans a clef*—novels that add elements of fact to an invented story, perhaps with the belief that "insiders" will identify the parties "from life" who have been recreated and often lampooned—and his argument strikes me as more persuasive now. (Hardy was not himself strictly faithful to this injunction. Some scholars claim to see a picture of his wife and other women in his life in the character Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure*.) Everything becomes open to conjecture because of the reader's awareness that much of the story is indisputably factual. To take one example among many: In *Ravelstein*, Vela, the narrator's wife, approaches him in their apartment entirely naked while he is reading and brushes her pubic hair against his face. When the narrator responds "as she knew he would," she abruptly walks out of the room, apparently transmitting the message that he can no longer make any sexual claims on her. Did that happen? Did the fourth Mrs. Bellow taunt him in such an offensive way? There is no way for a reader to know, though many readers will assume that she did, and it illustrates Hardy's argument over the danger of mixing fact and fiction.

Bellow himself is thought to have appeared in at least one novel, Philip Roth's *The Ghostwriter*. The story recreates Roth's friendship with Bernard Malamud, and Bellow makes an

inevitable appearance as the famous novelist Felix Abravanel. The author is from Los Angeles, and seems to capture much that was true of Bellow: the charm and good looks; the multiple marriages; alimony, as one character in the story says, "the size of the national debt"; with "famous friends and famous enemies." The images of the remote, older writer encountering a youthful acolyte on the University of Chicago campus in the late 1950s seem to mirror Roth's own contacts with Bellow before his career got underway. The material seems fairly neutral if a bit sardonic, and not the kind of material that even the famously touchy Bellow would be offended by. I am not aware of his reaction to the novel, but his ties with Roth, fluctuating between acquaintanceship and friendship, lasted until the end of his life.

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