

Saul Bellow's Correspondence--Part I

The recently published correspondence of Saul Bellow succeeds in spite of itself. *Saul Bellow: Letters* presents us with a wealth of fascinating material and extends the process of discovering the author, the man behind the books. The University of Mississippi Press published in 1994 *Conversations with Bellow*, a volume in its valuable series of author interviews, and the one given over the Bellow is almost 300 pages long and rich in valuable disclosure. James Atlas published in 2000 his informative biography of Bellow, though it is marred by persistent spite and critics have called it factually inaccurate. While novelists and poets invariably argue that their works are autonomous--I cannot think of a single case in which an author has said knowledge of his or her biography is either essential or helpful in interpreting the literary product--I don't doubt that the background of a writer's life can add to our understanding the creative process and the author's works. Bellow in particular gave a large number of interviews to reporters and scholars, some of considerable length, and obviously felt compelled to explain himself and alternative ways of interpreting his many novels and stories.

His assembled correspondence adds to this process. Sadly, it is an amateurish production beset by so many flaws that I thought of returning my copy to the store shortly after I bought it. Benjamin Taylor, the collection's editor, reports in a note at the end of the volume that the book represents no more than two-fifths of Bellow's known correspondence. Other than presumed general interest and perhaps legal restrictions, there is no discernible principal guiding his selection of letters. The haphazard nature of the collection is a reader's first impression, which I'll return to in a moment. The second impression is the odd and inappropriate editorial apparatus accompanying the letters. The introductory "Chronology," apparently intended to offer a biographical frame, is by turns irrelevant, sentimental or simply silly. Readers can hardly be expected to care if "a very pregnant Janis"--Bellow's fifth wife--travels with him

to his boyhood home of Lachine, Canada in 1999. Nor do they need a laundry list of mostly unknown people who spent part of one summer with Bellow at his home in Vermont. An entry for 1986 records "deepening love for Janis"--whatever that may mean. Many of the letters do have italicized notes at the end describing the party to whom the author is writing or the issue the letter describes, such as an unfavorable book review. The tone of these notes should be neutral in order to avoid drawing attention away from the letters; to take one example, it is not necessary to describe J. Donald Adams as the "much-despised" book reviewer for the *New York Times* from the fifties. This is the note appended to a satirical letter-in-verse that Bellow penned for Alfred Kazin in 1955. A letter to Hymen Slate from 1961 is followed by an irrelevant description of Bellow's childhood friend as "a much-loved chess player and Socratic talker." But truly useful information, such as why Bellow would find it worthwhile to maintain a correspondence with Slate at all, is omitted; one has to try to infer that from the letters themselves. Ralph Ross, an instructor and administrator at New York University and later the University of Minnesota--schools where Bellow taught in the post-war years--is described as a "much-loved teacher," but the editor provides no information on his friendship with Bellow. Some correspondents receive hardly any identification at all. In the opening Chronology, one Louis Lasco is described as a boyhood friend of Bellow from their days growing up in Humboldt Park. Bellow knew many young men and women from his early years--why does this one receive so many affectionate notes with funny salutations ("Polykarp") and humorous farewells (from "Gapon Khorashevsky")? (I don't think there is a single reference to Lasco in the Atlas biography.) Louis Gallo, who apparently wrote for a publication Bellow helped edit, received a number of letters in the first half of 1961, but he is never identified. There is a note to Herbert Mitgang from the summer of 1996 that offers unflattering comments on the radio interviewer Studs Terkel. I dimly remember Mitgang as a literary journalist for the *New York Times* from the seventies and eighties, but Taylor has decided that he does not even merit

an italicized note at the end of the letter. Letters as important as those produced by Bellow deserve a more careful, effective, and scholarly presentation, comparable to Richard Ellmann's edition of Joyce's correspondence.

But the most serious fault by far of this production is the random, haphazard nature of the collection. Why include such perfunctory documents as a one-paragraph note to the president of Bard College in 1953 accepting a teaching position? Or a letter to Hannah Arendt from 1970 inviting her to teach a seminar at the University of Chicago? Other letters, including one composed for Cynthia Ozick dated July 19, 1987, concern Bellow's reaction (or what he faults as his non-reaction) to the Holocaust, and has great independent value and requires no explanatory context. But many letters, especially a series of them to a single correspondent, are obviously part of a larger story, and the editor of this collection leaves it vexingly up to the reader to try to imagine what that larger history is. A sequence of letters to his agent Paul Volckening from Bellow's Paris years, 1948-1950, presents moderately interesting information, but little more; they are chiefly of archival interest to biographers chronicling a life. (One of the letters includes a strange, extended, and frankly uninteresting fantasy of an encounter with F. Scott Fitzgerald on a trip to Geneva.) The notes to Volckening are not remotely as important as, to take one example, the letters from late 1953 to Lionel Trilling, Bernard Malamud and others, which strike me as indispensable source material for students of *The Adventures of Augie March*. (A critically important revision of Bellow's attitude toward the book comes in a September 30, 1995 letter to Martin Amis--apparently not worth listing under the title in the index, where it is conspicuously absent. Bellow describes the novel as "stormy," "formless," and "disconcertingly amorphous," adding that he cannot read a page of the book "without flinching.")

Other letters (or sets of letters to the same recipient) are not supported by an identifying context. Consider the lengthy sequence of notes Bellow wrote to Margaret Staats in the 1960s and

1970s. "Maggie," as he addressed her, seems to have met the author in early 1966, and while the two never married, they evidently began a love affair some time thereafter. She is an important figure in any biographical account of Bellow, and was apparently the model for the character of Demmie Vonghel in *Humboldt's Gift*. By the end of 1968 the affair seems to have run its course, for Bellow writes in December that "I respect you, I wish you every good, but I am trying to save my own sanity just now--probably my very life. I feel it threatened. It must stop. I can't go on without a breather." Now *what*, the reader wonders, is *that* all about? One can only guess from the text and the available biographical record, such as it is, and that does not help very much. Here is a note from February 17, 1984, to Midge Decter, wife of Norman Podhoretz, the former editor of *Commentary*, asking her to remove his name from a group called the Committee of the Free World. It sounds like the sort of conservative organization Decter and her husband would have been part of, but research would be required to establish that; there is no information about it in the text. "About Nicaragua we can agree," Bellow writes, "but as soon as you begin to speak of culture you give me the willies." What is it that elicited their agreement about Nicaragua--and their dispute over "culture"?

Bellow's letters are important for scholars and those who have carefully read his books; they add greatly to our understanding of the author's life and correct many misconceptions extended in the Atlas biography. It is a pity the editorial frame does not live up to the documents they seek to present.

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