

Saul Bellow's Correspondence--Part II

In my initial look at Bellow's correspondence, I criticized the clumsy editorial apparatus surrounding the documents but found great interest in the letters themselves. In this second look at the collection, I want to consider the aesthetic questions introduced by two novels of the late period, *The Dean's December* (1981) and especially *Ravelstein* (2000), which comes the closest in the Bellow canon to a purely factual presentation of a major character that the author knew, one that existed in "real life" and not only in the writer's imagination--in this case, of course, Allan Bloom. Both books stirred a public reaction unrelated to their status as novels--works of art independent of source material--and the response to *Ravelstein* was especially furious. Many of Bellow's readers knew when the book was published that Allan Bloom was not simply "the model" for Ravelstein but that the character in the novel was a full and apparently factual rendering of Bloom. There was, in other words, a complete identification between the character in the novel and the person of Bloom, the University of Chicago alumnus and professor who taught seminars with Bellow to students in the Committee on Social Thought at Chicago.

If the publication of *Letters* establishes anything it is that Bloom died of AIDS or complications from the disease. Bellow was harshly faulted for disclosing this in the novel, as well as the fact that Bloom was gay, matters that were mostly unknown to the reading public at the time of Bloom's death in the fall of 1992. Circumstantial evidence had been building for years after his death casting doubt on the official university line, according to which Bloom had been felled by obscure intestinal ailments; Martin Amis for one, very close to Bellow in the 1990s, states simply in his autobiography *Experience* (1999) that Bloom was HIV positive. And

now we have the "Chronology" at the beginning of *Letters*, which says that Bloom "dies in October [1992] of complications from AIDS."

No more than a few words, that description of Bloom's death, but what a ferocious storm it provoked when *Ravelstein* was published ten years ago. I dealt with this subject in an essay from 2008 ("Notes on *Ravelstein*"), and I do not plan to revisit the subject now: the material disclosed here does not impel me to revise my opinion. But I do have a new understanding of how acutely distressing the ordeal was for Bellow, and the way others were given a chance, perhaps only briefly, to affect the composition of the novel; the letters Bellow prepared involving this topic are painful to read. The issue, of course, was whether Bellow infringed on the privacy of his beloved co-instructor by disclosing Bloom's homosexuality and HIV-related death, and if he was encouraging Bloom's enemies by giving them scandalous material amidst the culture wars of the day. An October 6, 1999 letter to Werner Dannhauser suggests the scale of the controversy stimulated by drafts of the manuscript which the author had put into circulation as well as by reviewers' copies that had been sent to various publications. Bellow's epistle indicates that Dannhauser saw an advanced draft of the novel and that Bellow rewrote parts of it in response to criticism he offered. Readers cannot tell from the letter what Dannhauser, close to both Bellow and Bloom, considered "objectionable" in the draft, but it is clear that Bellow found the process of revising it in response--novel-by-committee, so to speak--"highly unsatisfactory." The rewrite Dannhauser asked for lacked what Bellow enigmatically calls "the elasticity of sin," but whether the revisions made their way into the published novel is impossible to say. Dannhauser himself appears in the novel under the name of Morris Herbst, but I doubt that provoked his dissatisfaction with the document. More likely it was the information about Bloom's character and inclinations, the violation of his privacy--if that is what it was--and the

possibility that Bloom's enemies, which were legion, would use the information to attack his person and his intellectual legacy.

When rewriting the manuscript of *Ravelstein*, Bellow says in his note to Dannhauser, he remembered "how displeased Bloom had been with the *Dean's December*. He objected to the false characterization of Alexandra"--Bellow's wife from 1975 to 1986--"and he didn't spare me one bit. But now the shoe was on the other foot, and I saw no reason why I should do in *Ravelstein* what Allan himself had so strongly objected to in the earlier novel." In a fresh addition to the story, Bellow appears to substantiate the claim--which I doubted in my earlier essay on the subject--that Bloom asked, or demanded of him, a full-scale portrait to be prepared after his death. "I was trying to satisfy Allan's wishes," Bellow continues, "and I couldn't have it both ways. I couldn't be both truthful and camouflaged. So I did as I think he would have wished me to do." And the epistle takes a painful turn when Bellow pleads with Dannhauser not to end their friendship over the matter.

Probably similar letters, not included in the published collection, were exchanged between Bellow and various correspondents. The only other document in the book that touches on the issue is a distressing note to Martin Amis dated February 2000. By then, heated debate over the just-published novel was feeding newspaper columns, Internet discussions, and doubtless private conversations as well; the whole discussion was rapidly overflowing the banks of conventional literary debate. Bellow had known Amis by then for about ten years, and something of a father-son attachment seems to have developed; Bellow in any case freely confided his acute anxiety over the intensifying uproar the novel was provoking. "I'd never written anything like *Ravelstein* before," he concedes, "and the mixture of fact and fiction has gotten out of hand. There are other elements besides, because the facts are so impure." Bellow

then begins to elaborate on the question of "fact," journalistic fact, academic facts, and the way that awkward material can be converted into scandal and eventually driven into "the medieval territory reserved for plague. I was not prepared to hear the leper's bell ring at the cross-roads of affection and eccentric charm." When a reporter from the *New York Times* called to discuss the matter, Bellow continues, he simply panicked: "At this point," he writes, "I lost my head; when *The New York Times* called to have it out with me I fell apart--I was unable to outsmart the journalists." Bellow goes on to develop the central point that rendering Allan Bloom in a novel was an obligation to his art as well as to the deceased professor whom he had loved. "I couldn't have faced myself if I had turned aside from a character of Ravelstein's stature," he says, erasing the distinction between the character and the Allan Bloom. But explaining that to an admiring, younger novelist who can be relied on for a sympathetic understanding is one thing; hoping for an informed, intelligent reaction from a collection of hostile reporters providing material to a public avid for scandal is another matter entirely, and Bellow found the experience more than he could bear. Trying to cope with--blunt or deflect--widespread misunderstanding and attributions of malicious intent "depresses me beyond all boundaries of former depression," he writes. For someone as prone to depression as Bellow, this is a serious and painful admission. "I get what comfort I can get from reflecting that at my age the shop is in any case about to shut its doors"--and he proceeds to describe the fantasy he entertained the week before while on flight to Cincinnati to visit his older sister: "...[W]hen I heard the news of the crash of an Air Alaska jet off the Pacific coast I thought, 'Why not Delta Airlines as well, into the Ohio River?' But no. I landed safely and was driven out to the luxury funny farm where my sister lives."

What--to return to the central issue--was going on in *The Dean's December* that provoked Bloom's disapproval? As a reader familiar with *The Dean* and *Ravelstein*, I assume that Bloom

felt the character Minna, the astronomer-wife of the protagonist of the earlier novel, was presented too favorably. "You know Chick, you sometimes say there's nothing you can't tell me," Ravelstein says in the later novel. "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*?" Chick, the narrator in *Ravelstein*, concedes that his friend has spoken fairly: "That's perfectly true," the narrator replies. Alexandra Tulcea, Bellow's fourth wife, appears in both novels, and the treatment in the first is as generous as the treatment in the second is harsh. By presenting a gay Ravelstein with AIDS alongside an unflattering depiction of Alexandra, it seems as if Bellow sought to square his debts in different ways. Bloom is presented "truthfully" while the picture of Alexandra is reversed entirely (though many would doubtless argue that Bellow was settling a score with a former wife as well). Because the novel involves a number of identifiable personages--Bloom, Alexandra, Janis, other less important characters--why did Bellow not simply create a memoir? He would probably have answered that as a novelist he works with invented and actual facts and that the picture he hopes to offer emerges most effectively when the two are combined in a fictional world.

In other correspondence over *The Dean's December*, Bellow takes up the question of factual accuracy, its need or superfluity, from a different perspective. An editor and writer he knew, Robert Boyers, visited Northwestern University after the book was published in 1981, and evidently drew a hostile reaction from students displeased with the picture the novel offered of race relations in Chicago. The crimes Bellow recounts in the story--an atrocious rape-murder and the murder of a University of Chicago student--are described in some detail, and come straight out of the Chicago press. Bellow's comment on Boyer's experience at Northwestern is worth quoting at length:

I quite clearly understood what I was getting into when I wrote the *Dean*. Characteristic of those young people at Northwestern to accuse me of distorting the facts--such facts as surround them and may be read daily in the papers, heard daily in the courts (where, however, they never go). *The facts themselves shouldn't much matter in a novel* [emphasis added], but I went carefully into this particular case, talking to the lawyers and reading the materials in their files. I'm sure the Northwestern kiddies didn't do that, they just told one another over and over that I had misrepresented the facts and out of the repeated telling they made a case and convicted me. ...No one was willing to face the simple proposition or question: Is this the way we live now or isn't it?

This issue becomes troublesome in a number of ways and seems to justify Thomas Hardy's comment--cited at the beginning of my earlier essay--that "infinite mischief" follows from the mingling of fact and invented details in the life of an "actual person." The question is whether truth is derived from an imaginative reconstruction of a story, situation or personality, or whether it is necessary to present it "literally." In both novels--*The Dean* and *Ravelstein*--recognizable facts from the author's life are present. We know that Bellow traveled to Bucharest with his wife near the time of his mother-in-law's death, and those of us who lived in Chicago in the late 1970s know that the capital crimes presented in *The Dean* are taken from well-reported cases. In the case of the murdered University of Chicago student, they involve the author's employer and his own neighborhood. But the narrator of *The Dean* is somewhat like and somewhat unlike Bellow. In truth, he is similar to many of the major characters in Bellow's novels that are often mistaken for the writer himself--slighter, less imposing and significant, certainly less accomplished. Abe Ravelstein is not "modeled" or "based" on Allan Bloom; he *is* Bloom, albeit with an assigned fictitious name. But the narrator of the novel, Chick, is not very much like Bellow, even if the outward characteristics of his life--the former wife, borrowing from the real Alexandra, the current one, derived from Janis Freedman, the

university occupation and the near-fatal illness on a Caribbean vacation--are similar. In other words, Chick serves as a foil to Ravelstein.

The story of *Ravelstein* is hardly the first time Bellow has borrowed the personality or life of a famous friend for artistic purposes. *Humboldt's Gift* draws on the sad life of Delmore Schwartz; the splendid novella "What Kind of Day Did You Have?" presents an image of Harold Rosenberg, the famous art critic; and the fragment "Zetland: By a Character Witness," is recognizably about Isaac Rosenfeld, Bellow's childhood friend who established himself as an important writer in the 1940s. Critics may or may not approve of these stories, but I don't recall them faulting Bellow for deriving them from an "actual person." Bellow believed that the Bloom/Ravelstein narrative is about "scandal," "impure facts" and the "elasticity of sin." He pushed the boundaries of this type of borrowing to an extreme and drew an unfavorable reaction for doing so. Still, simply as a very loosely told story, the novel succeeds, and should it find any readers in the decades to come, the biographical borrowings are unlikely to matter very much.

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