

## Greg Bellow's Anger

Saul Bellow managed publicity and his celebrity status with difficulty; perhaps it is true of many people who acquire vast and unexpected renown. A writer like Norman Mailer greatly relished his fame, but Bellow--less confident, prone to depression, concerned with protecting his privacy--was made uneasy by it. He wanted to earn money and achieve recognition, like all writers, but I doubt he expected to become a household name. He was sensitive to intrusions into his private life by the press and scholars and readers, and never wanted to emphasize his celebrity, which would have detracted from his work as an observer and writer. "The attention of the press and public is seldom pleasant," he told Martin Amis, "and with rare exceptions (the Pope, for instance), it gives no one a break." But he was also a promiscuous granter of interviews, and may have stimulated unwanted attention by projecting his life explicitly into his work. Bellow complained that people assumed his stories were simply autobiography, but enough has emerged in the last dozen years, from his correspondence and his biographer, to let us conclude that many details in *Humboldt's Gift*, *The Dean's December*, and *Ravelstein* were indeed taken directly from his life.

What he chose to publish was under his control; what others did was a different matter. "I don't like to read about myself--I recoil from it heart and bowels," he wrote to Daniel Fuchs, who wrote an excellent study of the novels, *Saul Bellow: Vision and Revision*. Fuchs needed (and obtained) Bellow's approval to study the various drafts of the novels in the Bellow archive at the University of Chicago. When he sent a copy of his work to Bellow, the subject responded, "I'm not ready for judgment, the facts aren't in; I know I've done wrong; we haven't got to the

pith and nucleus yet." Mark Harris had hoped to produce a biography of Bellow during the years of their friendship in the 1960s, but settled instead for a memoir, *Drumlin Woodchuck*, which depicts the author's efforts to elude Harris's net. An early fragment that offended Bellow came out in a 1978 issue of the *Georgia Review*. "The less I see about my life, the better," he told Harris, in a brief and blunt telephone conversation that announced the end of the project and their friendship.

Ruth Miller, a friend of Bellow and his first wife, Anita, during their student days at the University of Chicago in the 1930s, published a "critical biography" in 1991. At the time, she was an instructor in the English Department at the State University of New York, Stony Brook. "I understand that a book of which I am the subject is about to appear," he wrote to his future biographer James Atlas in September 1989, when they were still on speaking terms. "I'm thinking of taking sanctuary in a remote part of Madagascar until it is reviewed, discussed and forgotten." The book that Miller published included private material that she believed would cast light on the novels; Bellow saw the manuscript before it was published and threatened legal action if passages he found offensive were not removed. Copies of the book had gone out to reviewers before the excisions were made, however, and readers who took any interest in the subject were alerted to the changes.

Harriet Wasserman published *her* memoir *Handsome Is . . .*, some years after Bellow replaced her as his agent; she could not have endeared herself with the volume, which Martin Amis has charitably described as "superfluous." This is a tactful way of describing a text that is entirely devoid of interest.

But those interviews! From an early stage of his career Bellow sat for countless, many of considerable length. Some were filmed, others were taped, many written down by hand. A

writer like Cormac McCarthy sharply limits his contact with the press and professional scholars, letting his books speak for themselves; that would never be said of Bellow. In the excellent series *Conversations With. . .*, which assembles collections of interviews with well-known authors, the University of Mississippi Press volume on Bellow weighs in at nearly 300 pages, one of the lengthier collections the press has published.

In the eleven years that passed between the final interview in the book and his death, Bellow continued to talk to reporters and scholars. These discussions appeared in literary publications but one showed up in the May 1997 issue of *Playboy*, whose interviewers often press for private material. An interview that appeared posthumously in the fall 2007 issue of *Salmagundi* runs to a preposterous *eighty pages*. Roused by a personal question in the *Playboy* interview, Bellow complained, "Why do interviewers ask people questions that they wouldn't ask their neighbor for fear of being punched in the nose? Like, 'Why are your bowel movements such strange colors?' Or 'Why do you piss through your ears?'" A few pages later in the discussion, he lamented, "I'm a public commodity . I'm listed on the Amex." Determined, if not desperate, to make himself understood and also pressed to make the usual publicity rounds after a book came out, Bellow would agree to talk to almost anyone, though he often detested the process and regretted the results.

But the big and nearly scandalous work that attracted the most attention was the one written by James Atlas. The manuscript and published book, *Bellow: A Biography*, has a contorted history. Atlas produced a biography of the poet Delmore Schwartz in 1978, a study he began to research after graduating from college. Bellow, whose friendship with Schwartz is documented in *Humboldt's Gift*, was interviewed for the study and reportedly approved of the published volume. Nearly a decade later, in the summer of 1987, Atlas queried Bellow about

writing his biography, encouraged in part by Adam, Bellow's son, a figure in New York publishing. Several years into his research, in the summer of 1995, Atlas wrote a brief account of working with Bellow that appeared in the *New Yorker*. He wanted Bellow's explicit consent to prepare the biography, which he needed to quarry the Bellow archive at the University of Chicago and to quote from the massive correspondence; he also thought that semi-formal approval would encourage friends, colleagues and others Bellow had known to sit for interviews. According to Atlas, Adam said that his father would never agree to "an authorized biography" but would do nothing "to hinder" Atlas should he try to produce a book on his own without a formal endorsement. Indeed, Adam said his father would be "very unhappy" if nobody cared to write such a study (a curious remark, if true, inasmuch as others had already tried).

Bellow gave his legal consent to the project, but in the decade or so that Atlas spent researching the book, there is evidence that his subject had doubts about what Atlas intended to write. In October 1993, Atlas visited the aged Zita Cogan, a woman Bellow had known as a boy growing up in Humboldt Park. He had hoped to read letters and notes that Bellow had sent to her, but discovered that before his visit, Bellow had inspected them with his wife, Janis, and had taken nearly all of them away. A furious Atlas writes in his journal, "She saved every scrap, including handwritten notes of five words, but the *only* letter [left], amazingly enough, is one in which I'm referred to disparagingly, and in which B makes clear his position about the book."

As the manuscript approached production, and the subject gained more knowledge of what it would hold--presumably from the people Atlas interviewed--his doubts metamorphosed into something approaching panic. I think he expected a portrait as sympathetic as the study of Schwartz, but the material the indefatigable Atlas uncovered apparently shocked him. The book presents in extensive detail stories of Bellow's sexual life and infidelities, and in a letter to his

friend Werner Dannhauser penned in October 1999, Bellow expresses anxiety over what he terms "the messy explosive mixture James Atlas is preparing for me in the form of biography." Another friend, Richard Stern, advised him not to read the book when it was published in 2000, and Bellow assured him that he did not intend to. "There is a parallel between his book and the towel with which the bartender cleans the bar," he wrote Stern. "What strikes me uncomfortably about Atlas is that he has a great appeal for my detractors. He was born to please them." I doubt the author and his biographer had any contact after the book was published, and communication probably ceased well before then.

Presciently, in *More Die of Heartbreak*, a Bellow novel from 1987, Ben Crader, the botanist at the center of the story, offers a pertinent remark about seeing oneself reflected by another. A minor character in the novel confronts Ben angrily near the end of *Heartbreak* with stories about women he had been seeing since the death of his first wife. "I was shocked about the amount of information he had about the women in my life," Crader tells the narrator, Kenneth Trachtenberg. "When you get an outside view of your behavior, it looks horrible. Is it you that's horrible, or the viewers? Your torment is left out." Bellow's last novel, *Ravelstein*, offers further commentary about the difficulty of keeping one's private life private.

To this rising collection of Belloviana comes *Saul Bellow's Heart*, a father-son memoir by Greg Bellow, the oldest of the four Bellow children and the product of his first marriage. It is a regrettable contribution to Bellow studies. Poorly written, stricken with interpretive and factual errors, padded out with shopworn anecdotes, filled with vacuous generalizations, it is largely an outburst of rage from a man who felt abandoned by his father and neglected by his father's family. There is some interesting material about the end of Bellow's life--assuming it's

factually accurate--and the efforts of his fifth wife, Janis, to assume legal and financial control of the great man's legacy. Otherwise this book strikes me as worthless, except as evidence of disturbance in Bellow's highly fragmented family life.

Errors galore, some admittedly small. Paolo Milano, a long-time friend of Bellow's, has his name misspelled on page 67. Forest Hills, the section of Queens where the son lived with his mother after his parents separated, gets lowercased on page 94, suggesting (along with other textual errors) little or no editing. Various dates are given for Bellow's return to Chicago in the early sixties--1961 and later 1962--when he began teaching at the University of Chicago. (According to Atlas, the father received a five-year appointment in the summer of 1962 and began teaching that fall.) Bellow broke free of a severe depression during a stay in Paris in 1948, not when fruit and vegetable vendors were hosing down the streets, but when, as he told Philip Roth, he observed that the gutters in Paris were "flushed every morning by municipal employees who open the hydrants a bit and let the water run along the curbs. I seem to remember that there were also rolls of burlap that were meant to keep the flow from the middle of the street. There was a touch of sun in the water that strangely cheered me. . . .flowing water, freeing me from the caked burden of depression that had formed on my soul."

The correct date for the publication of *Humboldt's Gift* is 1975, not 1973, and *The Dean's December* came out in 1981, not 1987. Kenneth Trachtenberg, the narrator of the Bellow's *More Die of Heartbreak*, is not, by traveling from the Middle West to Washington state, pursuing "an ex-wife who does not love him," but a lover with whom he had a child. The North Side of Chicago is not "a veneer of luxury lakefront buildings" concealing dangerous neighborhoods a few blocks away. Some lakefront areas, especially far to the north, are

somewhat dangerous, and some stretches of the city a mile or more from Lake Michigan are reasonably safe.

Plato did not argue that "men and women were once physically united and their long-lost union underlies their mutual attraction." This is a myth attributed by Socrates to Aristophanes, presented in Plato's *Symposium*. And if Greg Bellow ever takes the time to read Allan Bloom's interpretation of *The Symposium*, he will learn that Bloom did not believe that "there is a perfect match out there"--whatever "out there" might mean--"waiting to be made" between men and women. The further claim that Bloom encouraged Bellow to leave Alexandra Tulcea, his fourth wife, and marry Janis Freedman, originally one of his students at the University of Chicago, is nothing more than unsupported assertion. There are many such in the text involving the sensitive topic of relations among Bloom, Bellow, Janis and Alexandra. The interpretive errors of the book are too extensive to catalogue. As a representative example, consider this by-now shopworn anecdote of a young Saul Bellow starting out as a writer in the thirties and in Hyde Park coming upon Nathan Leites, a Soviet expert and European expatriate. Let me offer the entire passage from Greg Bellow's book, because it captures so much of what is wrong with it. The reader will note the author's somewhat jarring habit of referring to his father as "Saul":

In 1980, in Chicago to celebrate Saul's sixty-fifth birthday, I learned a bit more about my Saul's youthful optimism. My father and I were taking a walk and encountered the aged Nathan Leites, who greeted us stiffly on the street and then passed on. As we continued walking, Saul told me that he was the former professor who, forty-five years earlier, greeted him in Hyde Park with the friendly question, "And how is the *romancier*?" Even decades later, Saul remained mystified that Leites could have so mischaracterized him as a romantic. To the contrary, I was mystified that my father could not see, or could no longer see, that his youthful idealism had been readily apparent to his teacher.

Bellow tells this story in the Jefferson Lectures of 1977, Atlas repeats it in his biography, and Greg Bellow misinterprets it in so many ways. *Romancier* is French, of course, but for

*novelist*, not romantic, and Leites was not identifying Bellow's youthful idealism, which is a fantasy of Greg Bellow's, but instead was aiming a sarcastic shaft at a young man claiming to be a novelist who had no reputation or work to speak of. GB somehow reads *The Victim* and *Dangling Man*, Bellow's first novels, as evidence of optimism and idealism, but both were produced in what Bellow has aptly called "the decade of horrors." This would be the 1940s, which included the war, the Holocaust, the advent of Stalinism as a world-wide force, the destruction of Poland, the beginning of the Cold War. *Dangling Man* captures the privations and grayness of Chicago during the war, and *The Victim* bears the weight and difficulty of life in New York just after the war. Bellow, we know from interviews and letters, felt obliged to move to New York after his discharge from the service, to establish himself as a writer. But he also regarded New York as an acute danger to be survived, with "challenge and injury around every corner," as he told Philip Roth. And the passage I cited illustrates a larger problem, which is that the son shares so little of the life of the father. Beyond what is required of a college undergraduate, Greg Bellow seems to have read little philosophy or literature, perhaps has limited experience of foreign travel. His chosen career as a clinical social worker and therapist only compounds the difference, because Bellow senior deplored the social sciences and formula-ridden psychology in particular; his correspondence has derogatory references to the subject, and so do his books.

Note to Greg Bellow: Anthroposophy is not a method of psychotherapy. I have written in previous essays about Bellow's contact with Rudolf Steiner's books and disciples, and I refer interested readers to material available elsewhere on my Website. Let me say here that Bellow did not take up the subject "to ward off his deepening pessimism" about modern life or as a means of "spiritual self-improvement" or as a way "to cleanse his soul" because he sought "an

antidote to the contamination wrought by fame and fortune." Greg Bellow is a clinical therapist, and perhaps it is unavoidable that he interpret his father's attention to Steiner as a method of self-help. But the claim is altogether misguided. Bellow saw the western world as crisis-stricken and moribund. His last two novels and the correspondence make this clear. His search in the final decades of the century was for any possible means of regeneration, any teaching or school that offered the hope of reversing a condition of unstoppable social decline. Steiner could be extremely esoteric and odd, and Bellow had serious doubts about anthroposophy. But there was enough in Steiner that corresponded with his metaphysical intuitions to justify continued study. "Conscious existence," he writes at the end of *Heartbreak*, "might be justified only if it was devoted to the quest for a revelation, a massive reversal, an inspired universal change, a new direction, a desperately needed human turning point."

Some of the antipathy the son bears for the father stems from a sense of political betrayal. To use Greg Bellow's awkward formulation, the ideals of a "young Saul" were replaced by the conservative views of the "old Saul." Greg presents himself as a battler for the values of the sixties. Approaching 70, he has never surrendered his support for underprivileged and unrepresented minorities. The "old Saul" had lost his faith "in the ability of collective action to better mankind and had adopted his father stance of paternal authority." "Old Saul" is supposedly against the young, against American blacks, against women.

Was Bellow a conservative? The question is too imprecise to admit of the simple answers that his son claims. "Old Saul" had this to say to his *Playboy* interlocutor in that 1997 interview:

At the moment, the push-button reaction to me is that I'm a conservative. But that's just foolish labeling--they [his detractors] don't know whether I'm a conservative or not, they've just heard that. Everything is rumor, all opinion is rumor. People simply react to rumor by repeating it as though it were true. There's nothing I can do about that.

I think Bellow was wise to side-step the issue this way. There was never any need for him to defend or disclose his political preferences, and any answer beyond the one he offered would have been distorted by his detractors in any case. The question of Bellow's politics is too complex to be treated in an essay-review. Bellow was a cultural conservative to the extent that he favored the classics of literature and philosophy over the contemporary. The classics in the seminar he co-taught with Allan Bloom included Jane Austen as well Henry James. He was an early booster of *Invisible Man* and wrote an introduction for an expanded version of Ralph Ellison's essays published in 1995. He offers a powerful description of the dispossessed of Chicago in *The Dean's December*. Bellow's novels and stories represent his most important public "statements," and if they fail to disclose a "position," the reason is clear--the answer to our social ills is art, not party affiliation.

David Cohen © June 2013