

Leader's Saul Bellow

Some preliminary thoughts (more forthcoming) on the second volume of Zachary Leader's just-published biography of Saul Bellow. Volume one, which appeared in 2013, brought the reader up from Bellow's birth in 1915 to the publication of *Herzog* in 1964, the novel that established his preeminence in American letters. It is generally considered Bellow's most important novel. Volume two of the biography covers the next forty years, up until the author's death in 2005, in the decades when he produced *Humboldt's Gift* and *More Die of Heartbreak*, a pair of novellas, a handful of short stories, and the last novel, *Ravelstein*, which was part-memoir and part fiction. The book produced a sharp reaction against the author for exposing details of Allan Bloom's life. Volume two also includes three more marriages that followed the first two, ruinous divorce settlements that almost bankrupted Bellow, and a nearly fatal trip to the Caribbean. (He was served toxic fish at a seaside restaurant.) Severe personal criticism of Bellow himself over the publication of *Ravelstein*, the appearance of a hostile biography, and a fresh experience of paternity at age 85 all brought the author close to a breakdown.

The great strength of Zachary Leader's two volumes is the thoroughness of his research. These two volumes come to nearly 1,600 pages, and the endnote section of volume two alone is over 80 pages long. The endnotes for both books, in fact, are a rich source of reading material, and include a few citations that take up an entire page. Interviews Bellow gave that appeared in obscure publications and sessions with students are brought to light and add to the interest of the text. But not all of these stories are equally interesting, and some readers will find them fatiguing. I'm not sure how many will care to learn the details of job applicants to the department at the University of Chicago where Bellow taught for thirty years, or why some succeeded and

others did not. But Leader is indefatigable. We even learn from his interview with Janice, Bellow's fifth wife, that he wanted a banana added to his breakfast cereal, carefully cut into seven pieces.

Inevitably, Leaders' work will be compared to the first biography of Bellow that was published in 2000. This would be the James Atlas biography. (Ruth Miller, who knew Bellow from his early years in Chicago, wrote her own book, but that is mostly a work of critical history.) Atlas, in fact, features prominently in volume two of Leader's work and has himself written quite a bit on the experience of preparing a biography of Bellow. (See, in this regard, his 2018 work *The Shadow in the Garden*). I think that Bellow disliked the idea of a biography, but was hoping for a favorable one from Atlas. If the story had to be told, he wanted it told chiefly from his own perspective and without unflattering details. He argued, with some justice, that biographies should not appear while the subject is still alive, but decided to take a chance on a literary journalist who seemed determined to write the book. Atlas had, after all, produced a sympathetic biography of Bellow's friend Delmore Schwartz, a talented but tormented poet who died prematurely young. I think Bellow was hoping for similar treatment.

But Atlas simply compounded the grief of author's final years. The tone of his book is malevolent and offers interpretations—I'll describe these in a later essay—that are intensely hostile and distort the picture of his subject. It was easy to be sympathetic to Schwartz, a disturbed man who died in wretched poverty after prolonged decline into obscurity. Bellow was almost comically successful, gathering nearly every prize and award—including a Nobel—that exists in the world of arts and letters. For much of his career, certainly after the publication of *Herzog*, he was probably the most famous novelist in America, perhaps the entire English-speaking world. Atlas has had a successful career as a writer, but never became the novelist he'd

hoped to be, and certainly never achieved anything approaching Bellow's status or recognition. (In the second half of the twentieth century, who did?) So envy is part of the story behind the biography, and some years into Atlas' research, it became clear to Bellow that he was not going to get the version of his life that he wanted. He backed away from the project, but only after he'd opened the door to a lot of research.

There is some irony in all this. Bellow drew on the facts of his life to produce his fiction, and as Leader points out in volume one, people were often unhappy with the version of themselves they found in his books, not to mention the assumptions of privacy that the author disregarded. Former wives are treated sometimes comically, often harshly. Casual contacts are seldom flattered. *Ravelstein* is especially marked—damaged, I would say—by this approach. The stand-in for his final wife is placed on a pedestal, Allan Bloom is generally admired, and Bellow's fourth wife is crucified. There is a rewarding friends and punishing enemies tone to the final book, which impairs its value.

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