

ENCOUNTERS

Saul Bellow

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“STYLISTIC ORGY!”

These were the stern red words stretched across my page. I never found out if it was Saul Bellow, the novelist and Nobel Laureate, who had written this reproach on my term paper, or if it was his graduate assistant, a mysterious twenty-something who looked, in his day-old beard and suede vests, like he had recently sprung from a ranch in Wyoming. But whether Bellow had issued this angry red ink himself, or if his rodeo grad student had served as his amanuensis, I took these words to heart. I never again wrote that *The Great Gatsby* “was a great bilious roar from the lion-throat of American ambition: the self being born from its own ahistoric platonic envisioning, announcing itself nosily into being.”

Oh, it was enough to make Sartre nauseated. And Bellow had caught me: he’d identified that infection peculiar to young academic writing, which tries desperately to distinguish itself, to put a ribbon on its mortarboard and insist on its literary-ness. That semester in 1998, I was a 16-year-old senior at an accelerated high school. I had petitioned, several times, for a spot in Bellow’s Boston University class, “Men on the Make.” Some loophole or margarine-hearted administrator had eventually let me in.

Bellow, then 83 years old but in some ways still “on the make” himself, kindly put a tourniquet on my adolescent prose-poetry. “Remember that 2-cent words often work as well as the \$500-dollar whoppers,” he said in class the following week. I was sure that he was staring straight at me when he explained that one needn’t have a *myocardial infraction* to have a heart attack. One needn’t be *perspicacious* or *sagacious* to be insightful or wise. As we read Balzac and Dostoyevsky, Fitzgerald and Dreiser, Bellow showed our class that a muscle-bound adjective could not make up for a weak-armed verb. Indeed, like any true Chicagoan, Bellow found an endless supply of metaphors in baseball. The predicate, for instance, had to be the fat-cat pitcher on the “team” of each sentence: all the dramatic play began with the spring of its arm. It was delightful, Bellow’s high-low range of diction: he was not below Hegel or above the Chicago Cubs. And I liked the idea that you could organize your grammar into a competitive team, all eight parts of speech playing in their assigned positions.

Like any dutiful student, I tried to do Bellow-homework while I took

his class. My grandmother, Margaret Treseler, who earned a bachelors degree in literature at the age of 65, had introduced me to *Henderson the Rain King* while I was still in middle school. Now, I was reading his other novels and trying, desperately, to wrap my small head around the author's complex legacy. I was intrigued by Bellow's 1976 acceptance speech of the Nobel Prize, in which he confessed a Whitmanesque affection for American variety.

It is as a writer that I am considering their [Americans'] extreme moral sensitivity, their desire for perfection, their intolerance of the defects of society, the touching, the comical boundlessness of their demands, their anxiety, their irritability, their sensitivity their tendermindedness [sic], their goodness, their convulsiveness, the recklessness with which they experiment with drugs and touch-therapies and bombs.

Good fiction, Bellow preached in class, was a mixture of philosophy and poetry, history and invention, unifying two impulses—to worry the human predicament and to lyricize it—into a symphonic whole, into the psychology of a narrative voice. The psychologies Bellow chose to narrate his novels were, by and large, Jewish male intellectuals less equipped for life as for thinking about living. They get caught up, none-the-less, in daily predicaments trying to woo and win women, make and hold onto money, and fit an artistic, philosophic vision around a fallen world.

Bellow's epic works, which include *The Adventures of Augie March* and *Humboldt's Gift*, also have an anthropological, Balzacian quality, as the narrators travel among socioeconomic classes, ethnic groups, and intellectual schools looking for their place in society. It wasn't surprising to learn that as an undergraduate at Northwestern, Bellow took honors in sociology and anthropology. He was clearly interested in the mechanics of success: what ambiguous combinations of education, family money, street smarts, grit, and wily charm might propel some robustly upward, others into dissolution, and a few into the sideways tilt of neither. His characters, while having some advantages, often have the tragic flaws of too much introspective intelligence, sensitivity, or a generalized neurosis about the everyday. When his characters derail, they gain costly self-knowledge, an ironic sense of triumph, or—at the least—genuine *jouissance* for the ride.

Indeed, in Bellow's broad limning of American personae, there's often a trace of what he called *animal ridens*, or man's primitive and necessary laughter. It's at the heart of his oeuvre: a laughter that finds its mirth in—and despite of—its experience of hardship, isolation, and the other, nearly ineffable concerns of the soul.

It seemed that the soul was the real, phantom subject of Bellow's

literature class, particularly young, ambitious, feckless souls like ours (the average age in the classroom was 18). Although the class was titled “Men on the Make,” we did, to my relief, study one Woman-on-the-Make. Early that February we read Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, a novel about an ambitious female actress who makes a Faustian bargain for a chance at wealth and success. Its realism broke my heart even more than the tragic play-acting in *The Great Gatsby*. And I think that was what Bellow was anticipating—that one of these classics would work its time-tested magic and give us, his twelve disciples, reason to pause: not something that often happens in our “wired” high-speed generation. I think Bellow wanted us to ponder why we should be ambitious (life is difficult; it’s wise to press all your talent and hope against it), but also the price of unchecked ambition and the dilemmas we might find in choosing a profession, a manner of living, a style of love.

I also began to think that Bellow’s class could have been subtitled “Books you must read so that you can better *read me*.” And this was part of Bellow’s program: to train a small corps of students to care about the fate of American literature. In teaching one class of freshman, hand-picked by the University each year, Bellow had the chance to recruit acolytes to his literary religion while we were still new to academia, while we were, for the most part, uninitiated into the often bloodless cult of literary criticism, or what Bellow tenderly called “the racket.”

So I don’t think it’s stretching the truth to say that Bellow saved me—a future literature major—from death-by-theory or some other ignominious end. Without his class, I might have become a perfunctory American history major and, finding comfort in its strict facts, gone on to teach them at some high school named after a former president or Western explorer. In my early taste of University literature classes, I had been disheartened by Marxists who read poems’ politics before they looked at the meter or rhyme scheme; by feminists who found mimicry in stones; and by a historicist who wanted us to read moral theory into a 19th century cookbook. There was too little pleasure, too little truth, too little heart in it for me.

But then Bellow taught me how to read. I don’t mean to be facetious. I had enjoyed, at that point, 12 years of formal schooling with extensive training in the alphabet, phonetics, and the basics of the Western canon. By age 16, I had two years of college courses under my belt. I had been privileged to study with several unusual scholars, including a classicist who liked to declaim Cicero’s orations to the squirrels outside our classroom window. But that spring, Bellow showed us a slow, interpretative, associative reading style that seemed to invite the whole mind—both Jungian halves—to traffic both into a text and from it. It amazed us, initially, that Bellow would spend up

to an hour on a mere 4 or 5 inches of text—about 1-2 longish paragraphs of a novel. One time he spent our entire 3-hour class on a single page of *Crime and Punishment*, focusing on the paragraph in which Raskolnikov murders his landlady with an axe.

Bellow made us look at the minute particulars of the scene: of how Raskolnikov dehumanizes his victim, seeing the helpless woman as a rat-like creature, small, slovenly, and docile under the blows that he gives her skull. And Bellow would extrapolate—from the manner of this crime, from Raskolnikov's cool malice and manic desperation—the plight of the urban underclass in his native Chicago, the collusion of desire and hopelessness that can instigate the most insane violence. To Bellow, the passage also seemed to represent—in microcosm—the human perversion that would allow for the horror of the Holocaust. In Raskolnikov's aggrandizement of his own worth, in his Nietzschean claim on another's life, and in mistaking himself for a blameless instrument of natural logic, he does indeed murder like a Nazi.

One might expect that someone with Bellow's sensitivity and commitments would appear wizened, wounded, beat-up by his intimate knowledge of suffering and the morbid underside of Western history. But he strode into class each Wednesday—a narrow, upper room on the fourteenth floor of the Theology building—with mild ebullience, with his young (and fifth) wife, Janis Freedman, and with a manila folder of notes. Typically, he was dressed in casual Oxbridge attire: khakis, a dress shirt, and a tweed jacket or dark sweater. Some afternoons, he wore a fresh silk necktie that bloomed up, between his neck-wattles, like an oddly placed Hawaiian flower. Otherwise, he looked like an advertisement for the dignified, well-decorated literary lion.

Indeed, at the age of eighty-five, when most seniors are circumscribing their activities, their acquaintances, and their ambitions, Bellow was writing new books and would soon (about a year later) father a child with Freedman. I was intrigued, of course, by this unusual and much-discussed match: Freedman had been Bellow's graduate student at the University of Chicago in the late-1980s. She looked no older than 35 and was indeed 44 years his junior (at the time of our class, she was 39). Bellow introduced his wife as a Montaigne scholar. I think we were all charmed by her long brown hair, her natural air of gentility, and the genuine affection she seemed to have for this genius who was old enough to be her father. Bellow, to his credit, had the full youth of brilliance and charm—it sparkled just as warmly from his brown eyes as it might from a debonair 20-year old. According to his biographers, Bellow had long attracted a mobile crowd of disciples: zealous students and intellectuals, members of the Russian, British, or publish-

ing nobility, present and prospective loves. All were eager to be near to his mind, his fame, or his legendary appetites for conversation and sex.

Our seminar class often had “visitors,” or non-student guests who came to watch the Wimbledon event of Bellow’s dialogic lectures. I was utterly intrigued by a tall, statuesque redhead who came to about half our classes. She wore a dazzling menagerie of suits, shoes, and heavy baroque jewelry that could have funded a small village’s water supply for at least a year. She must be a philanthropist, I thought, thinking I had seen others like her in the society pages of the newspaper, women whose cool facial geometry, whose precise triangular shadows of eye color and perfect ovals of gloss and rouge spoke of prelapsarian calm. A Cambridge lady with a furnished soul and unflappable sense of infinitude. Lady Redhead sat in the back right corner and hardly said a word all semester, but she and Bellow would nod at each other occasionally, as if they alone shared the neighborhood’s dark secret. In her comings and goings, Lady R. had a New York air of efficiency. I imagined that she hydrated her plants with Icelandic water (quickly, once a week, with a predetermined amount of water) and owned a Siamese cat that never shed its hair.

The counterpart to this silent icon was another woman we called “Lady Lavender.” Unlike the mysterious Manhattanite, the Lady L. had a lot to say, and it all sounded terribly smart with her accent and “*Wouldn’t you know*” tone of bemusement. Lady L. humbly sat with us students, her purple cashmere elbows brushing our cotton sleeves, her gray headdress of Susan Sontag-esque hair towering over the seminar table like ceremonial topiary. Indeed, Lady L. graced our classroom the way Queen Elizabeth might dignify a pool hall.

For a while I was almost as taken by this Circus-of-Bellow, this secondary audience of colorful women, as I was with Bellow himself. Sixteen, and sitting within inches of one of the great American luminaries, I spent the semester generally scared out of my socks. My nervousness manifest in a perpetually runny nose, such that I was obliged to bring a box of Kleenex to each class. I feared that Bellow might think I had some strange nasal disease, when really I was just mildly allergic to him, to sitting that close to literary fame. Through my father’s work in professional sports, I had met Olympic champions in most dry-land events. Although shy by nature, I had never been intimidated to the point of muteness by any of my father’s contacts. But Bellow was different—he represented a whole other echelon of prestige.

So in those four months, I hardly spoke a word. When I did give a presentation on Napoleon, I talked at such a breakneck speed that I probably sounded like the Jabberwocky on cocaine. After I finished, Bellow kindly

told me that I had done a “very fine job.” It took the remaining 2 hours of class for my blush to work down to a respectable pink.

I don't think Bellow had any idea that he, as a prophet of Logos, was enlightening me to the spiritual mechanics of language, and to what I might do with my life. He couldn't have known because—besides racing through the biography of one petite French dictator—I never said more than a sneeze.

So Bellow had no way of knowing anything about my personal life. He didn't know that earlier that year an accident and subsequent surgery had closed out my first ambition to be a professional runner. He probably didn't recognize my last name, or know that my father was an Olympic-level track coach and that I, from a young age, had trained in the sport with all a daughter's passion. That plan, that professional trajectory for my life had come to a halt in December, a month before Saul's class began. The orthopedic surgeon, the pioneer of hip replacement surgery, had come into my hospital room looking like some garish, Alice-in-Wonderland rabbit. I remember staring at his bright white mustache and the white hair poking out from under his blue surgical cap, wondering if the drugs were making me hallucinate as he explained, with antiseptic calm, that I would not run again.

In a talk that Bellow gave that year to a general audience at the University, he spoke of being dangerously ill when he was a child. At one point, he was hospitalized for an infection for over six months. After the extremis of the pain and the fever had passed, he began reading a Bible that a Christian volunteer had brought him. Bellow reported that it was his first encounter with the Gospels. Surrounded by death—other children in the ward who died at night were removed by flashlight—and with a newly-scarred belly, the young Bellow was moved by the account of Christ. He described it as a literary-spiritual moment, if not a religious one. Reading, Bellow explained, had always been a part of his life: it was a tradition, in his parents' house, to read aloud after dinner. As a teenager, he saved up his pennies to buy paperbacks from the local bookstore. And later, as a college student at the University of Chicago and Northwestern, he rode the El with the novels of Joseph Conrad in his lap, copying out Conrad's sentences and trying to improve upon their style.

There was no denying that books had defined Bellow's adult life in the most profound and daily ways. There was even the intimation, in class one day, that they had played an important part of his romantic life. One afternoon, as he looked for a passage in Rousseau's *Emile*, Bellow found an oak leaf pressed between two pages. It was perfectly preserved, in its autum-

nal color...all the brash red and gold of a New England season. "Do you remember when?" Bellow asked, turning shyly to his wife. "Oh yes," Janis said with a knowing smile and I pictured them picnicking in the Luxembourg Gardens or in a chic Chicago café. Maybe they had debated theories of *tabula rasa*, the formation of conscience in young college freshmen, or man's tendency to be wolf to man. Perhaps they had read Rousseau in bed together. I didn't want to think about that part too much.

But I did want to remember everything I could of that bittersweet spring, that semester I sat near Bellow and let my nose do all of the nervous running. The novelist had reminded me that books were—in their reassuring heft, in their license to other worlds—a reliable love. In time, it might outstrip my first infatuation with sport, with all its heady rigor and adrenalized performance. The tragic-comedies of "Men on the Make" helped abbreviate the pain of my own lost plans. It reminded me that books had, from my earliest years, cured my boredom and forced questions on my protected, suburbanite, anti-bacterial childhood.

Now that physical velocity was out of the question, I needed a new religion. I had grown up watching my father train, inch by bodily inch, the physiques and minds of Olympic and World Champions. I knew what a hamstring was and how to stretch it before most kids know how—or why—to tie their shoes. But now, with adulthood around the corner, I needed to find a vocation that would likewise require almost all of me, the way running had.

It would be years before I had the stamina—and the physical strength—to pursue literary work. I would have to leave school and American civilization for a while—like Huck, lighting out for the territory—to win back my health and the desire to try hard again. But Bellow's lessons were wrapped around me like a cleverly knotted necktie. So when I came back to school, to writing (with the help of a few orthopedic chairs), and to the career-start of a doctoral program in literature, Bellow was sitting up there in my head, his thin legs crossed, his veined hands resting on his notebook, as he warned against schoolgirl nervousness, stylistic orgies, and doing something that did not require concrete, spiritualized mechanics—or a Saul-like race after soul.