

The Choice of his Own Planet Over the Moon and Reason Over Lunacy in Saul Bellow's, 'Mr. Sammler's Planet'

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ABSTRACT

Of all the American – Jewish writers who have poured forth their creative efforts, none has achieved more recognition from his literary peers than Saul Bellow. Born in Quebec in 1915, raised in Montreal and Chicago, he received a trilingual heritage of Yiddish, English and French. The Yiddish culture, Bellow's protestations to the contrary, permeates all his writing. He has become the great success that all his less popular and less materially successful Yiddish compatriots tried for, yet failed. Bellow represents the generation of American – Jews where secular education was not only as good as their Gentile neighbors, but whose digestion and interpretation of American culture was markedly superior. Armed with this treasure of knowledge, yet familiar with a Yiddish tradition that still resonated in his inner ear, Bellow possessed every gift for success, and every success was realized. All Bellow's works indicated his gift for understanding and describing the acute condition of humanity. From Chicago (Adventures of Augie March, 1953) to Africa (Henderson, The Rain King, 1959) Bellow explored the themes of alienation, loneliness and man's bewildering quest for knowledge and spiritual discernment. Reading Saul Bellow is an education into the mysteries of the universe, taught by a fellow Jew, whose mission of the possibility of human greatness and the penchant for human failure is singularly distinct and penetratingly clear. Mr. Sammler's Planet is Saul Bellow's most Jewish novel, in that he uses a theme and characters from recent Jewish history, namely The Holocaust and these Jewish protagonists and dilemmas become vehicles for Bellow's most forceful defense of humanism.

1. Introduction

'Mr. Sammler's Planet' (1970) is in full harmony with Bellow's earlier works. The protagonist Artur Sammler, a "domestic philosopher", for whom constant meditation about life – with excursions into the past and the future – is a human need, is placed in the thick of major events, such as the flights to the moon where astronauts open new horizons to the inhabitants of the earth, and of minor events creating a human atmosphere.

Mr. Sammler's Planet is the most Jewish novel of Saul Bellow. Artur Sammler is a Polish Jew. He is a tall old man in his seventies, blind of one eye, born in Cracow. The novel deals with the most important events of Jewish history in this century – the Holocaust, the state of Israel and American Jewry's relation to both. Moreover, the major values embodied in the novel, basic tenets of Jewish life, a reverence for life and an unwavering belief in human survival under any circumstances; an emphasis on reason and human intellect, part of a long tradition of interpretation and commentary on scripture; a preference for good deeds and actions over contemplation.

Essentially, Mr. Sammler is living a second life; he was shot by the Germans in 1940, together with his wife and many other people in occupied Poland. By a miracle he survived and dug himself out through a mountain of corpses filling a mass grave which the victims had dug for themselves before they were shot. Sammler, blind on that day in one eye by a blow with a rifle butt, dug the grave alongside his wife.

The thing that crawled out from the bloody ditch and hid in a nearby forest was not the former Artur Sammler – an intellectual, a European, the friend of H.G. Wells and the

Bloomsbury Group. He fought with the partisans in a group and alone, hid in a crypt, rotted in a camp for fugitives. His discovered within himself profound human instincts whose existence he had never suspected and forgot almost everything that had once seemed natural and important with time. Sammler came back to life, began to think again, resurrected his human attachments, and most importantly, developed intensive interest in life.

His whole life has been marked by irremediable catastrophe and he is an alien in America, a European with a lot of intellectual baggage and a considerable store of historical memories. Sammler has religious feelings which seem to him a necessary part of his existence. People around Sammler see him as a wise man and bring all their motley, at times, strange troubles and questions to him. Sammler cannot resolve all human problems but is simply an old gentleman, who knows how to listen, has a broad mind and retains the internal and external breeding forgotten by and unknown to modern Americans. Despite his objectivity, he does not want to be untouched by the transgressions of his fellow men and the fate of the planet. He seethes with constant inner turmoil. He feels himself a small island in the calamities and antagonisms of the modern world, and at the same time responsible for events in that world.

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Mr. Sammler's Planet is a polemic or discourse commenting on man and always searching for "what is normal for human life", through one of his assertive, strenuously speculative dangling men or victims. But always somehow a

resilient survivor, this time it's Sammler, a refugee via Poland and two decades in England, now in Manhattan. Sammler has only one good eye but it's "full of observations" as is Bellow's for the particulars which gave his words such a crowded restless vitality. Sammler is a septuagenarian, an admirer and a friend of H.G. Wells, he often wonders how long this earth will be the only hope of man and whether "this liberation into individuality" has failed. And of course at seventy, death is just a whisper away.

Mr. Sammler's Planet is a realistic novel and presents an accurate picture of life in New York and satirizes the vices of the people moving in the streets of this big city. Sammler is tormented by what he believes is a lunatic civilization, worshipping sex, excrement and madness. In some respects the novel is a complex Jewish version of the American, innocence and European experience. Lionel Trilling's observation is well applicable to this novel which runs like this:

"... the doctrine that madness is health, that madness is liberation and authenticity; receives a happy welcome from a consequential part of the educated public."¹

Sammler's Jewish struggle with modernity is present all the time. He becomes a seeker and he is seen questing through the streets of New York, surrounded by rogues, cheats and depraved people. In some scenes we see the sexual license found even among Mr. Sammler's close relatives, the Gruner's; the moral and intellectual anarchy of the great majority of young students, the cupidity and the frenzy for business, all aspects of the lack of spirituality in this mercantile society.

Mr. Sammler is quite vehement in his denunciations of the western civilization and culture and disapproves the ways of younger generation of these days. P. Siv Kumar calls Sammler a prophet as he says:

"This protagonist of 'Mr. Sammler's Planet' is a prophet figure, standing aloof haranguing the western world for all its ugly and vulgar manifestations"²

But for a person who has miraculously escaped the Nazi death camps, the perspective on life is bound to be harsh, particularly where he observes life denying attitudes among people. His harshness shows his pure interest and a genuine concern. His impatience with those who do not recognize the value of life is largely due to his intimate experience of death during the Second World War. The death consciousness forms the bedrock of his existence and of his reflections on life around. He appears to live in the inspired condition which is defined as "to know truth, to be free, to love another, to consummate existence, to abide with death in clarity of consciousness" (205)

Other characters in the novel like, Walter Bruch and Eisen, Sammler's son-in-law, like Sammler, are also survivors of Nazi massacre. Walter Bruch has experienced many of the same indignities as Sammler during the war, but he spends his time now in such foolish activities as holding mock funerals or endlessly reminiscing. The experience of concentration camps has remained with him as a sickness, turning him into a psychopath, leading to psychic regression to childhood. During

his confessions to Sammler, he "wept because he felt he had lost his life."

Eisen is turned brutal and inhuman due to the effect of the death experience he has. As an artist he paints the living as dead. His memory of the concentration camps has made a cynic of him and taught him unjewish passion for violence. He has a ferociously brutal urge for killing when he is called upon to rescue Feffer from the black-pick pocket. The war experiences have a brutalizing effect on Eisen, just as they have a degrading effect on Bruch. Acute suffering had scarred the humanity in Eisen and Bruch, leaving them decapitated for normal behavior. But this same experiences make a die-hard humanist of Sammler and it is here that one has to observe how a given frame of values turn the otherwise destructive suffering into creative effect.

Sammler loved British views and was snobbish about his high connections. Sammler's intellectual courtship with the Bloomsbury Group implied a rejection of his history and cultural past because the aesthetic culture of the Bloomsbury negated the Jewish commitment to life. The war had shattered his complacency and forced him to return to the values he had earlier abandoned. After the war he was virtually reborn into the Jewish traditions of thought for he now affirms values which, though not typically Jewish are basic to Jewish faith. In embracing the aesthetic culture and in adopting the British views in his early pre-war life, Sammler was trying to flee his heritage. He was unjewish in wanting to free himself from his people, his grandparents, aunts, cousins, with whom "he had never had much to do". (76). But he has come full circle in wanting to stay on this planet when the choice to fly to the moon is open, insisting that life on this earth should be perfected first. His admiration after the war, for Dr. Elya Gruner's intense family feeling, for his passion for family genealogy reveals that he has come a long way from his up rootedness before the war. Sammler's mature assessment of the British phase is conveyed in one of the most poignant moments of the novel:

"Till forty or so I was simply an Anglophile intellectual Polish Jew and a person of culture – relatively useless." (303)

The change that he notes here is an avowal of an authentic Jewish self that becomes his mainstay after the war. By dying he has learned to live an authentic life, to live with abiding knowledge of death. It is in the death camps that Sammler comes face to face with the ultimate reality of life. What he learns in the war has given him the moral authority, acknowledged by almost everyone around him. At the age of seventy two, he takes a hazardous trip to the battleground to renew his familiarity with death, violence and suffering as these have a sobering effect on humanity and he is forced to consider the importance and value of life. The individual, whose life is being disastrously, affected by the war, which "people take as a most minor affair, in modern experience, so very little, nothing at all". (252)

The moment of death is "the moment of truth" (260) and this strips him pin clean of lies and falsehoods. Death consciousness compels the movement of the soul in the direction of truth and sanity. Referring to the old Jewish custom

of sewing one's own shroud, Schlossberg has explained in 'The Victim':

"There is a lot to say for it (The Jewish Custom)... At least they knew where they stood and who they were in those days".³

Having been in the middle of the whole war and having come face to face with death, Sammler seems to have learned the meaning of life.

It should be noted that Sammler's Jewishness is as important as his suffering because the values he inherited endow meaning to his experiences. His Jewishness gives a 'queer edge' to his perception of the pagan behavior he observes everywhere. He knows that he cannot get rid of it even if he wished it.

He questioned whether release from the long Jewish mental discipline, hereditary training in lawful control, was obtainable upon individual application. (72-73)

Many of his insights are the consequence of the interaction between his Jewish sense of the life and experiences. After crawling out of the Nazi burial pit, Sammler hid himself in the Mezvinski Vault and for about three months he lived in the tomb completely cut off from the world outside. It was a kind of living death for him in that it did not yield any meaning. The insight that it is not the metaphysical freedom but community of selves which makes man human is truly a Jewish belief. Sammler's insight recalls what Joseph has said in 'Dangling Man':

"And goodness is achieved not in a vacuum, but in the company of other man, attended by love".⁵

In the profoundest sense this is one of the basic tenets of the Jewish faith. Another important event in his war experiences relates to his unjewish act of killing a German soldier. The soldier begs for life, but Sammler pulls the trigger and shatters his head. This event shocked him with its violence, brutality and callousness. It continues to haunt his memory and torments him corroding his soul. He finds that "to murder with impunity", the "Power to kill", is a "mighty enjoyment", and is a "luxury" that is being cherished, admired and worshipped by people. Sammler is more a "visiting consciousness" (73) on this planet than a person. Sammler realizes that a man's hard won freedom and leisure have brought him only misery by increasing demands on him.

All the madness that Sammler observes in people is the result of their rejection of any limits on their desires; man's failure to come to terms with his bounded self is at the root of his present misery. The only person who lives up to, his idea of virtue is Dr. ElyaGurnner, who comprehends the strength of doing one's duty which makes saints and heroes of us. But all the other characters in the novel have fantasies about higher states; and therefore it has led them to madness, mad religions, suicide and crime. Wallace for example, who hoped to get rich quickly without having to work for it, is busy finding the hidden money, that his father had earned in illegal abortions, without paying attention to his father who is dying. The ethic that Wallace represents is described by Sammler:

"You've been brought up to think that for your health you have to throw a father down". (101)

Feffer, who is another man subscribing to Wallace's code is more unscrupulous in perusing his aims than Wallace. In their pursuit of unlimited ambitions they do not hesitate to sacrifice others. Sammler thinks that the barbarities of these people are making life intolerable on this planet. This glorious planet is being defiled and poisoned by the Wallaces and Feffers and Angelas so that life can no longer be possible here. Man's flight to moon in the present circumstances of madness and person can only become as Sammler calls, a "Scorched earth strategy", rather than a "Faustian aspiration". (135).

In spite of so much bleak evidence, Sammler does not behave that man is totally lost and that the situation is hopeless. Despite his criticism of the ways of the younger generation he thinks that the moral nature of man will triumph and that things might change, although he is faced with chaos and disintegration, he believes that the centre can hold. He has faith in "the archetypes of goodness". (130) He does not feel that man has reached the end of his tether. The novel testifies to the faith in the nobility of man.

"One of the larger purposes of the novel is to represent virtue and to lay open certain of the common falsehoods about virtue. The book is not exclusively given to debunking cultural mores".⁵

Bellow has made his most human character in Mr. Sammler's Plant, ElyaGrunner, a man sensitive to the sufferings of others. Sammler is a survivor of Holocaust but he does not indulge in glorification of this own suffering.

"Jews by and large, did not revel in suffering". Writes Robert Alter, "But in contrast to fashionably modern views of Angst, existential despair and the like suffering was not generally thought of as a means of fulfillment. (sic), as a condition of indispensable to human life."⁶

Conclusion

Being a Jew, Artur is shocked at the ways of the New Yorkers, but he does not abandon New York. Rather he tries to accept the reality and tries his best to adjust himself to the norms of modernity in America. He chooses his own planet over the moon and reason over lunacy. His quest is typical in the sense that he chooses to adjust himself to the modern present day society of America, despite the fact that he is a Jew with his own notions.

"But the earth is his planet all the same, and he defends it along with human discipline and decency although it isn't easy in this place at this time."⁸

Sammler, who strongly opposes leaving for other worlds, thinks that persons like Gruner have provided reason to oppose such "gorgeous Fautian departure for other world" (184) ElyaGrunner took immense pleasure in doing what is charity in Yiddish culture. It is basic to defining a real Jew. To sympathize with sorrow is a typical Jewish characteristic. ElyaGrunner's moral strength also comes from this intense family feeling which is also distinctly Jewish. He often goes to Israel to visit his old relatives there. Sammler also believes in the fundamental "Capacity" of man to be human.

Sammler feels that is possible to bring the Kingdom of heaven upon earth with the help of order. One of the reasons for Sammler's opposition to the colonization of the moon also

lay in his belief in the moral perfectibility of man on this earth. The belief in the moral perfectibility of man is strongly Jewish in that Judaism conceives of man as a "Little lower than the angels" in contrast to the Christian view of men as a condemned sinner.

It is again the Jewish faith in him that insists on remaining on earth and on achieving justice here rather than escape to other planets in fear of the imminent doom. His considered view is:

"If it, (the moon expeditions) were a rational matter, then it would be rational to have justice on this planet first."
(337)

Samuel Sandmel notes:

"Judaism has been defined and redefined in virtually every age as man's obligation to God to be solicitous for and just and helpful to his neighbor."⁸

This is essentially a Jewish concept of justice and its reverberations could be caught clearly in 'Mr. Sammler's Planet' especially in its insistence on the justice on this planet first. Sammler has a faith in man's "capacity" to fulfill this humanness against the battering of bitter experiences. In no other novel does Bellow portray a character, which is as frank and direct as in 'Mr. Sammler's Planet' in what he attacks and what he upholds.

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