

## Bellow's Spiritual Quest

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“The Truth, whatever it is, is strange”

–Saul Bellow

All of his life Bellow sought the “strange truth” of what might lie behind the appearances of life. His immersions in such thinking began with his mother, Lescha Bellow, who carefully chose Hebrew teachers and charged him with memorizing the Torah in the original language. By age of four he had already committed large portions of it to memory. However, the New Testament was originally given to him by a missionary who visited him during a long lonely childhood stay in a Montreal hospital. He was instantly enchanted by it and described himself as having fallen in love with the figure of Jesus. Feeling guilty about this he studied it secretly, fearing discovery by the family. This began Bellow's lifelong study of the Bible. James Wood, Bellow's teaching companion at Boston University, reported that shortly before Bellow died in April 2005, there was a very worn-out copy of the New Testament on his bedside table.<sup>1</sup>

However, the full depth of Saul Bellow's lifelong immersion in Hebrew and Judeo-Christian sacred texts has come to light with Ruth Wisse's and James Wood's accounting of biblical, Yiddish, Jewish, and other religious references throughout his works. Both have provided a careful critical testimony of Bellow's singular contribution of religion to the language of the late twentieth-century novel. Wood describes Bellow's his prose as “Dickensian, Tolstoyan, Lawrentian, Conradian,” but ultimately “biblically English.”<sup>2</sup> He points out Bellow's run-on sentences, loose melodic compounds, repetitions, semantic parallelisms, obtrusive overflowing lyricism, vaguely antique ring, and amassing of adjectives, all of which he calls “a perfumed overflowing antique prose, all faithfully carried over from Hebrew into the King James version, and down into Bellow's Yiddishly inflected American works.”<sup>3</sup>

Bellow therefore wrote his works literally out of the roots of this Judeo-Christian tradition and brought it into deliberate comic collision with the secular world of late twentieth-century America. The zany American street language that has become his literary hallmark is not only compounded of Yiddishisms, polyglot immigrant languages, and WASP speech, but also with the deliberately nuanced voice of the Bible. Hence Bellow's masterwork spiritual comedies read more like spiritual autobiographies in the tradition of Job, St. Augustine, and Cervantes. Out of this mix Jewish scripture, Yiddish culture, and the twentieth-century crisis of faith, we find threaded throughout Bellow's works his seemingly quixotic spiritual quest.

This quest was motivated in part from the historical events of his time. For Bellow, the human soul was trapped in a condition of nihilism and lived in an age of ideology which made events such as the Holocaust possible. The projects of the Enlightenment, liberalism, and humanism had

failed to stop the mass slaughter of wars and exterminations.<sup>4</sup> Understanding the meaning of death therefore became the key to all the puzzles posed by the various religious and philosophical systems for Bellow. He lamented to Ignatieff in an interview that “ignorance of death is destroying us.”<sup>5</sup> Modernism had left metaphysics and religion, not to mention secular society, without a viable understanding of death.

This attempt to understand death was also personal for Bellow, as he was traumatized by the dying children he had befriended during his childhood hospitalizations. These experiences were compounded by watching, as a four-year-old, the endless black-clad funeral processions of victims of the 1919 influenza epidemic that moved beneath the Bellow family's upstairs window. Finally, the death of his mother left seventeen-year-old Saul to the mercy of his verbally-abusive father and unsympathetic brothers. The emotional consequences of the break-up of his family during his childhood echoes throughout his novels as his protagonists desire to recover their families and fail to do so. Describing this period in “The Old System” found in *Mosby's Memoirs*, Bellow writes:

One after another you gave over your dying. One by one they went. You went. Childhood, family, friendship, love were stifled in the grave. And these tears! When you wept them from the heart, you felt you justified something, understood something. But what did you understand? Again, nothing. It was only an imitation of understanding. A promise that mankind might – *might* mind you – be a divine gift, comprehend why it lived. Why life, why death.<sup>6</sup>

How to understand death was the question for Bellow and sparked his spiritual and imaginative convictions. As his son, Adam, recalls:

My father believed strongly in the soul – in its powers, its eternity, and above all its connection with loved ones. He believed that parents and children were parts of the same soul, and that we are reunited with our family after death. When he talked about this I used to listen respectfully and inwardly roll my eyes. Now that he is gone, however, I finally begin to understand what he was talking about.<sup>7</sup>

Bellow's surrogate son, the British writer Martin Amis, reported similar conversations to a *Sunday Telegraph* interviewer. On the subject of the afterlife he reports Bellow saying:

[I]t's impossible to believe in it because there is no rational ground. But I have a persistent intuition [...] call it love impulses. What I think is how agreeable it would be to see my mother and my father and my brothers again, to see my dead. [...] In death we might become God's apprentices and have the real secrets of the universe revealed to us.<sup>8</sup>

This habit of personal and philosophical speculation about the afterlife was a constant with Bellow, who had no qualms about initiating metaphysical conversations with strangers. Leon Wieseltier encountered Bellow at the height of his theosophical period and recalls his initial amazement that he had finally encountered a “Lawrentian Jew”:

“The truth, whatever it is, is strange.” I can still hear Saul’s voice, for a few moments absent its gaiety and wickedness, gently pronouncing those emancipating words. It was a summer afternoon in 1977. We were sunk in Adirondack chairs on the grass behind the shed of a house that he was renting in Vermont, and sunk also in a sympathetic discussion of Owen Barfield’s theories of consciousness. Chopped wood was piled nearby like old folios, dry and combustible. When I met Bellow he was in his theosophical enthusiasm. The legend of his worldliness went before him, obviously, not least in his all-observing, wised-up books, which proclaimed the profane charisma of common experience. Since I have a happy weakness of metaphysical speculation, a cellular certainty that what we see is not all there is, I thought I detected in some of his writings signs of the old hunt for a knowledge beyond knowingness, for an understanding that is more than merely brilliant. I was not altogether surprised when our first meeting moved swiftly toward an unembarrassed conversation about spirituality. [...] I had never before encountered a Jewish intellectual of his generation who could say “spirituality” without choking. And as Saul discoursed on the lawn, in an engineer’s cap, about “living significantly,” I celebrated my friend’s unlikely interest with incredulity. Saul’s particular combination of intellectuality and vitality was not paradoxical, it was category-shattering.

He was a Lawrentian Jew, an impossible creature. Energy was, in a way, his very theme.<sup>9</sup>

Part of Saul’s “cellular certainty” was that he was “God’s apprentice,” appointed to write and perform appointed spiritual tasks. To Gray, White, and Nemanic, Bellow openly revealed his sense of Karmic fate:

I was brought here by my parents at the age of nine. Accident? I am reluctant to speak of “my karma.” Yet I do sometimes feel that I was stuck here, assigned to the place, shackled to it by one of those phantom intelligences that Thomas Hardy invokes his “Spirits Sinister and Ironic.” Mine would be a Spirit Comedic. In my late sixties I am able to share the joke with my tutelary spirit.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly at this point he had begun to better manage the problem of death and its larger metaphysical ramifications. But how did he get there?

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Bellow's career as a writer existed during a period which historians of philosophy refer to as the "post-positivist era" where radical skepticism was the dominant school of thought. Richard Rorty explains that the 1950s were marked by philosophical skepticism and a distrust of language.<sup>11</sup> According to these philosophers, language was socially contingent and therefore incapable of transmitting anything transcendent or universal. Writers consequently would have to forgo looking for a morally responsible self or authority from the beyond.<sup>12</sup>

To Bellow's mind, this philosophical climate undermined epistemological, linguistic, religious, and metaphysical certainty, as illustrated in his novels, *Dangling Man* (1947), *The Victim* (1947), and *Seize the Day* (1956). However, Bellow found such skepticism intolerable. Rejecting these philosopher's claims, Bellow argued that literature can provide the "true impressions" of reality. As he puts it:

This is the best we can do just now. It is a sort of latter-day lean-to, a hovel in which the spirit takes shelter. A novel is balanced between a few true impressions and the multitude of false ones that make up most of what we call life. It tells us that for every human being there is a diversity of existences, that the single existence is itself an illusion in part, that these many existences signify something, tend to something, fulfill something; it promises us meaning, harmony, and even justice. What Conrad said was true: Art attempts to find in the universe, in matter as well as in the facts of life, what is fundamental, enduring, essential.<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately, these post-positivist skeptics impelled Bellow to seek other thinkers who would admit the spiritual viability of language, the existence of the human soul, and worlds beyond mere appearances. Inevitably they would not be mainstream philosophical thinkers: Wilhelm Reich, Rudolph Steiner, and Owen Barfield. Bellow deeply invested himself in the systems developed by these thinkers and their spiritual exercises, only to emerge after each phase passed as chastened, but a free agent beholden once more to no-one's system, and eager to try other avenues.

In the 1940s Bellow read Reich's book, *The Function of Orgasm*, which argued that bourgeois society was so repressed that it needed to be liberated by embracing our erotic and orgiastic nature. Sexual intercourse was the mystical portal towards transcendence. But after Reich was arrested for fraud by the US government in 1954 and found guilty in a highly-publicized trial, Bellow and others quickly distanced themselves from Reich's ideas. However, Bellow was able to convert these experiences into comic material for the cynical Dr. Tamkin and the romantic Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day*, and King Dahfu and Eugene Henderson in *Henderson the Rain King* (1956).

Bellow's next transcendental guru was Rudolf Steiner, a philosopher and head of the German Theosophical Society.<sup>14</sup> Seeing Steiner as a true polymath and fascinated by the fact that Steiner

had become deeply interested in the occult, Bellow was influenced by Steiner's ideas as revealed in *Humboldt's Gift* (1975) and *The Dean's December* (1981) where the protagonists pursue Steinerian ideas until they reach an impasse. At the end of Bellow's Steinerian period, his acquaintances and family all marveled how he could have tolerated for so long such odd ritual proceedings and formal liturgy, e.g., the Socratic sessions, séances, and Ouija boards. Bellow seemed far too Yiddishly pragmatic for such esoterica, and yet family members report that during this period there were Steiner reading materials left open all over Saul's apartment, as if he has just gotten up from reading one of them. He also kept a portrait of Steiner on his campus desk for many years.

Once the lengthy Steinerian phase was over, Bellow was still on the old hunt and this time he found Owen Barfield, another anthroposophist. In interviews with Clemons and Kroll in 1975, Bellow confessed that he had spent the previous winter reading Barfield's *Saving Appearances* (1965), and that he had even taken a special trip to England to meet Barfield himself.<sup>15</sup> For Barfield, humanity had lost its connection with its inner nature, devalued romantic poetry, and no longer could understand the meaning of words: "the full meanings of words are flashing, iridescent shapes like flames – ever flickering vestiges of the slowly evolving consciousness beneath them."<sup>16</sup> For Bellow, he "was impressed by the idea that there were forms of understanding, discredited now, which had long been the agreed-upon basis of human knowledge."<sup>17</sup> He had another intellectual's confirmation about the spiritual capabilities of language.

Bellow's belief in the spiritual and imaginative capability of language can be placed in opposition to the modernist tradition of Eliot, Conrad, Lawrence, Joyce, and Hemingway, as well as modern philosophical rationalism. This opposition came from his continual love of British Romanticism, American Transcendentalism, Biblical Judaism, Eastern philosophy, and nineteenth- and twentieth-century anthroposophy. Nor does he reject his Jewish roots. Few have credited him with a historically and personally rooted *telos* in his anti-modernist intellectual methodology in transcending his terror of death. He engaged Jewish covenantal issues, such as being our brother's keepers, and clung to the tarnished traditions of Judeo-Christian liberal humanism, wrestled in theodical thinking, and employed philosophical tools to engage the philosophical and religious challenge of modernity.

Perhaps his entrance into wisdom and the seriousness of what would be his last phase of spiritual pursuit is best accounted in 1994 in Sanford Pinsker's classroom when Bellow spoke openly of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectual tradition of metaphysical skepticism:

I think a person finally emerges from all this nonsense when he becomes aware that his life has a much larger meaning he has been ignoring – a transcendent meaning. And that his life is, at its most serious, some kind of religious enterprise, not one to do with the hurly-burly of existence.<sup>18</sup>

It is in this last phase of his life that Bellow the mandarin writer and intellectual's intellectual provides a very surprising revelation as a new self-identification as a religious thinker. By now he has long since reclaimed some of the customary and moral world view of the traditional Orthodox Judaism of his childhood, if not its belief system and ritual practices. But having finally come to terms with the Holocaust as well he finds his passage out of the tyranny of modern history:

My Jewish history gives me an entirely different orientation. The heavens in all their glory can open up above a ghetto sidewalk, and one doesn't need Gothic or Renaissance churches, Harvard University, or any of these places, in order to condemn the nihilism of the modern age from a viewpoint sufficiently elevated.<sup>19</sup>

This is no longer the speaking position of a cultural historian, Nobel Laureate, and student of metaphysics, but the speaking position of a ghetto Jew, perhaps even a pre-Holocaust figure. In this lies his final spiritual statement of triumph over the skeptical twentieth century, as a man with a lineage of two thousand years of Jewish persecution who nevertheless manages to maintain the spiritual power of the imagination over the exigencies of a life. Now he is dreamer and ghetto dweller.

Skeptical of the seriousness of any of these commitments, Roger Shattuck labeled these bouts of spiritual inquiry as intermittent "fits of noticing [...] just that – fits."<sup>20</sup> But he sells Bellow short. They were not "fits" but lifelong endeavors pursued with great hope. Similarly, biographer James Atlas suggests that by this time in life Bellow's skepticism was overshadowed by his yearning to believe and that it was really the Emersonian soul residing within of which Bellow he was speaking.<sup>21</sup> But in Bellow's own words, and those of his family members and friends, do not bear this out. When Melvin Bragg asked him if he believed in God he got a prompt and firm "Yes."<sup>22</sup> As for his prayer habits, Bellow told interviewer Jack Miles that his was a "casual checking in at universe headquarters, at night, as I pull up the covers."<sup>23</sup> Bellow remained a biblical theist for whom his dead were not truly dead, and positioned himself finally as a ghetto Jew whose imagination could triumph in any ghetto.

The net result of Bellow's lifelong quest through Western philosophy, literary romanticism, and the American carnivalesque was his remarkable body of fiction, essays, and numerous awards culminating with the Nobel Prize. Capturing the essence of Bellow's Yiddish and romantic inclinations toward the transcendent, Leon Wieseltier wrote:

Saul liked his profundities vernacular. [...] He never lost the freethinker's delight in a good blasphemy. But Saul blasphemes equitably, and all around: he was a recreational savager of pieties. There is the view that finally he was a comic writer, the quarrelsome master only of the American urban carnivalesque [...] [capable always of] an operatic Bellovian laugh. [...] His laughter was the sound of a snatched victory.<sup>24</sup>

This “snatched victory” literally re-inscribed the transcendental quest in contemporary fiction. Upon the occasion of Bellow’s death in 2005, the writer of the *Australian* obituary reminds us that Bellow, who was not a conventionally religious individual, had once described himself as “a religious man in a retarded condition.” Retarded condition or not, perhaps only fellow writer Marilynne Robinson truly recognized just what Bellow’s spiritual contribution was: “He was a writer of the highest seriousness. [...] The scale of his interests, of his meditations, were in the highest traditions.”<sup>25</sup> But it was high seriousness easily missed. At the end we have neither a biblical Job nor T.S. Eliot’s Fisher King: just the tearful metaphysical lamentations of his classic Jewish *eine kliene mensches* or Jewish little persons. It was a profane metaphysical comedy that was literally seized from the twentieth-century intellectual wilderness, and, in the end, Bellow placed himself with his European ghetto ancestors who could literally dream and imagine themselves out of degradation.

## Notes

1. Wisse 1996, 129–30; Wood 2005, 12–13.
2. Wood 2005, 32.
3. *Ibid.*
4. For more about the historical, philosophical, and literary influences on Bellow, please refer to Chavkin 1984; Cronin 1989 and 2007.
5. Ignatieff 1994, 228.
6. Bellow 1968, 82–83.
7. Bellow 2005, 21.
8. Qtd. in Sanderson 2005, 12.
9. Wieseltier 2005, 38.
10. Gray, White, and Nemanic 1994, 205.
11. Rorty 1997, 1–3. Representative works of the post-positivist period are Wittgenstein 1953 and Quine 1953.
12. Bellow encountered some of these philosophers, like Van Orman Quine, who argued about the indeterminacy of translation because language is so contingent on social context and social contract (Quine 1953, 97). Wittgenstein asserted that human linguistic agreements derive principally from what human beings say in socially contingent and agreed-upon social practices, therefore there is no certain system of transcendent referentiality behind language itself (1953, 96–7).
13. Bellow 1994, 97.
14. See Steiner 1972. Bellow also knew Steiner’s *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* (1894), *Occult Science: An Outline* (1913), *Investigations in Occultism* (1920), *How to Know Higher Worlds* (1904), and *The Ahrimanic Deception* (1919).

15. Barfield's *Poetic Diction* was especially influential to Bellow's thought (Barfield 1928).
16. Barfield 1928, 43.
17. Clemons and Kroll 1994, 130.
18. Pinsker 1994, 96.
19. Gray, White, and Nemanic 1994, 220–21.
20. Shattuck 1975, 21–25.
21. Atlas 2000.
22. Bragg 1975, 675–76.
23. Miles 1989, 8–9.
24. Wieseltier 2005, 38.
25. Qtd. in Sanderson 2005, 12.

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