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The Obedient Bellow

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Saul Bellow: Letters

edited by Benjamin Taylor

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In almost everything he wrote, Saul Bellow asserted his authority as artist, thinker, moralist, and lover. His admirers rejoiced in his authority and celebrated a new kind of dominant voice in American fiction: expansively ambitious, philosophical, and demotic, the voice of a moralizing comic hero unlike anything in the genteel or frontier traditions. “Someone has to stand up for Jews and democrats,” he said in a letter, “and when better champions are lacking, squirts must do what they can.” His detractors, meanwhile, rejected his authority, writing whole books denouncing him as if he were a lecherous and corrupt literary tyrant.

Both sides misunderstood him. His letters make clear what was always implicit in his fiction, that he asserted his authority half-unwillingly and only as a last resort—because those who ought to be in charge had failed in the job, or had given it up entirely. In *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970), he writes:

Mr. Sammler was testy with White Protestant America for not keeping better order. Cowardly surrender. Not a strong ruling class. Eager in a secret humiliating way, to come down and mingle with all the minority mobs, and scream against themselves. And the clergy? Beating swords into plowshares? No, rather converting dog collars into G strings.

Bellow accepts a friend’s judgment that he is an outlaw, but adds: “In outlaw bravado I have no interest. I only meant that I wish to obey better laws.” That celebrated rebel Augie March, Bellow explains to another friend, has the same wish to obey:

Augie misses the love, harmony and safety that should compensate our obedience.... To me Augie is the embodiment of willingness to serve, who says “For God’s sake, make use of me, only do not use me to no purpose. Use me.”...Surely the greatest human desire...is to be used.

In his letters Bellow is always conscious of his position in a chain of command. To a Jewish friend or colleague, he writes from a superior height, either affectionately

(“Remember you occupy one of the top compartments in my heart”) or contemptuously (“Coventry, pal, is not the place”). To any gentile whom he suspects, usually rightly, of anti-Semitism, he writes in Olympian disdain. But to a Protestant who embodies “love, harmony and safety”—Robert Penn Warren, Ralph Ellison, John Cheever—he writes in courtly gratitude, as he does when he first writes to a future wife, though his tone to his wives changes afterward.

And to Owen Barfield, the English writer of spiritual speculations to whom Bellow offered himself as a disciple, he writes in forelock-tugging servitude, never noticing that Barfield had no use for it or that he was bewildered both by Bellow’s initial self-abasement and by his subsequent revolt against Barfield’s authority—which Barfield never guessed he had embodied in Bellow’s eyes.

1.

Solomon (later Saul) Bellow was a Canadian, born in a Montreal suburb in 1915 to Orthodox Jewish parents who had fled from Russia two years before, and who slipped illegally into Chicago nine years later. His father had worked in Russia as an importer, in America as a bootlegger and baker. As a child, Bellow spoke Yiddish, English, and French, and memorized biblical passages in Hebrew.

When he was eight years old he came down with pneumonia and peritonitis and began a six-month stay in the hospital. Sixty-eight years later he wrote:

Then a lady came from some missionary society and gave me a New Testament to read.

Jesus overwhelmed me....I was moved out of myself by Jesus, by “suffer the little children to come unto me,” by the lilies of the field. Jesus moved me beyond all bounds by his deeds and his words.

But he also learned “the charges made in the Gospels against the Jews, my people.... In the ward, too, Jews were hated.” That hatred was unjust, always to be rebelled against. “My thought was...: How could it be my fault? I am in the hospital.”¹ For the rest of his life he was always aware that Christians had betrayed the Christian ideal, that their hatred of the Jews was at the core of their betrayal. They would deserve authority and service had they lived up to that ideal, but, as Mr. Sammler understood, they had failed, and the world was in chaos because no one worthy was in charge.

The earliest letter in this book, and the first of Bellow’s many anathemas, is a letter he wrote at seventeen to a girlfriend who had found someone else. “Yours is a Young Communist League mind,” he tells her. His ambivalent eulogy for her sixty-six years later, also in the book, makes the same complaint in gentler words. At twenty-two he graduated from Northwestern with a degree in anthropology and sociology.

Anthropology excited him. He briefly studied it in graduate school, and dramatized it in *Henderson the Rain King* (1959). Sociology bored him. He listened to sociologists

with every effort to be fair and understanding but I can't make out their Man. Surely that's not *homo sapiens, mon semblable!* The creature the theologians write about is far closer to me.

By his early twenties he had begun to write letters in the scholar-gangster style that he first deployed in his fiction in *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), a dozen years later. A friend's letter, he writes in 1941, is

just the sort of letter I have been awaiting from you; one in which you could be a little more recognizable than the Oscar of "cons" and cold-owl trips to see a girl who fucks.

"Cold-owl" alludes to a more poetically erotic trip than Oscar's, Porphyro's journey to Madeline in Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes," when "the owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold."

This style is Bellow's most enduring invention. In all his mature novels, the narrator's voice, rather than the compromising or defeated characters, is the true, indomitable hero. Bellow's vestigial plots exist mostly to give his narrators something more to talk about than cultural complaints and philosophical speculations.

Bellow's combination of wise-cracking wit and seigneurial authority could not have existed without the precedent set by Damon Runyon's gangsters and molls, whose speech was as artificial as that of the Arcadian shepherds and shepherdesses on whom they were modeled. Bellow transformed Runyon's language into an artificial style suited to an urban-pastoral dystopia, the voice of a Jewish *besserwisser* who could outtalk even the most eloquent gentile. Like T.S. Eliot, Bellow had the characteristically American ambition to master European culture while also seeking beyond culture and beyond ambition for some transcendent spiritual truth.

2.

This handsome edition of Bellow's letters is capaciously selected and sketchily annotated by Benjamin Taylor, who adds an introduction, a chronology, and sixteen pages of stiffly posed photographs. Some reviewers have complained that all the letters are performances. That is precisely what makes them exhilarating. Bellow was most himself when performing, but he never performed merely to display himself. One of the riches of this book is Bellow's mastery over an epic range of tone and manner. He calibrates his style to each of his correspondents: to his elders, deferential and ingratiating; to young writers, encouraging and sympathetic; to intimates and friends, either chattily relaxed or volcanically abusive. He writes incidental character sketches as comic and exact as

anything in his novels, and when he takes offense at real or imaginary slights, he doubles the force of his contempt by the skill of his rhetorical flourishes.

Bellow's pleasure in his own virtuosity is as infectious in his letters as it is in his fiction. He tells a friend, "It's harder for me to write the insurance company than to do a story." But these performances left him dissatisfied. He was always troubled by the gap between his peacock's display of words and the self that his words half-concealed. He points to his "talent for self-candor which so far I have been able to invest only in the *language* of what I've written"—not in the content. He never stops wishing for a way to speak directly instead of performing. Late in life he describes himself as

a loner troubled by longings, incapable of finding a suitable language and despairing at the impossibility of composing messages in a playable key.... By now I have only the cranky idiom of my books—the letters-in-general² of an occult personality, a desperately odd somebody who has, as a last resort, invented a technique of self-representation.

A still small voice is audible beneath the comic panache of Bellow's letters, insisting that his bravura is a last resort, an inadequate substitute for the security and calm that he despaired of finding.

3.

Bellow published two novels in a taut, laconic style before he found the courage to go public in his fiction with the style he had perfected in his letters. *Dangling Man* (1944) records five months in the life of a Jewish- American counterpart of Dostoevsky's underground man, keeping a diary while he waits to be drafted. Like his more garrulous successors in Bellow's fiction, Joseph is alienated from his wife, startled by his own anger, hungry for philosophical answers, and lost in the universe. At the end, he rushes gratefully into the army, writing:

Hurray for regular hours!
And for the supervision of the spirit!
Long live regimentation!

Bellow said at the time, "I was only making an ironic statement," but the irony covers his deeper wish for someone else to take charge so that his inner chaos might be soothed.

That wish drives the story of *The Victim* (1947), another Dostoevskian variation, this one on *The Eternal Husband*. This second novel has none of the expansive self-display of Bellow's later ones, but it may be his most self-revealing. Asa Leventhal's wife has been away from home tending her mother. In her absence, Asa is psychologically tormented by a down-at-heels New England aristocrat named Kirby Allbee. Allbee has an obscure grievance against him that Leventhal worries may have some half-mad justice. Leventhal

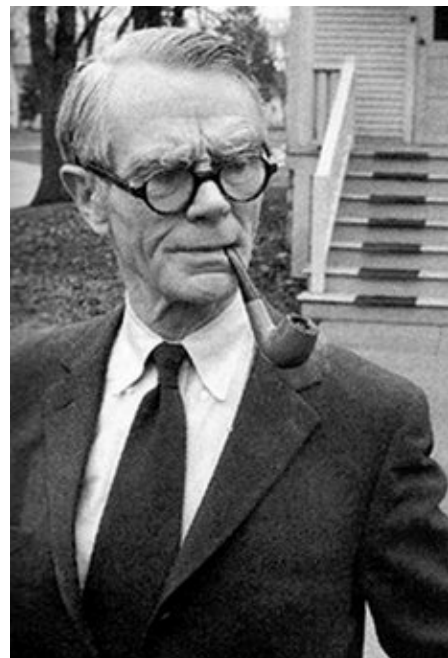
is a Jew who nearly convinces himself that a WASP, no matter how repulsive, deserves his service and ought to be in charge. As Bellow did with *Dangling Man*, he spoke of the “ironies” of *The Victim*, but the book arose from sources too deep for its author to confront:

I ought to have given Leventhal greater gifts. I’m trying to understand why I showered so many on Allbee instead.

In everything but his gender, Allbee is the first and most fully drawn of the tyrannical, avenging wives or ex-wives who populate Bellow’s fiction. Margaret in *Seize the Day* (1956), Madeleine in *Herzog* (1964), Matilda in *More Die of Heartbreak* (1987), and Vela in *Ravelstein* (2000) take their distinctive looks, mannerisms, and breasts from a real woman whom Bellow married, but Kirby Allbee is the psychological archetype for all of them.

In 1956 Bellow divorced his first wife after eighteen years of marriage. Four more marriages and three divorces followed. Bellow writes about his marriages—all but the last—as if they were power relations more than erotic ones. Joseph in *Dangling Man* says of his wife Iva: “I had dominated her for years; she was now capable of rebelling.” Bellow writes to a friend about his second wife: “When I was weaker there was some satisfaction for her in being the strong one. But when I recovered confidence...she couldn’t bear it.” (This is fictionalized in *Herzog*: “There was a flavor of subjugation in his love for Madeleine.”) Bellow’s letters portray a recurring pattern in his marriages. He worships a woman, then marries her; then, a few years later, she reveals herself as the power-mad fury she had secretly been from the start. It seems unlikely that this should have been inherent in all their personalities; but in all marriages, each partner’s fantasy image of the other has the Pygmalion-like power to make the image real.

Bellow wrote *The Adventures of Augie March* in “a jail-breaking spirit” that also motivated *Henderson the Rain King*. But in both novels, Bellow’s stylistic assertiveness never entirely obscures his characters’ insistent wish to be obedient and of use. Between these books he also wrote *Seize the Day*, a brief vision of subjugation and defeat that rendered the bleak world of his early novels in the vigorous style of his later ones. *Herzog* is a cornucopia of comic protests against the unworthy powers, to whom Moses Herzog composes accusing letters in his head. Those powers rule a society that spends billions on warfare “but would not pay for order at home.” Like Bellow in his letters, Herzog would prefer spiritual love, and wants to write a book “showing how life could be lived by renewing universal connections; overturning the



The lawyer and critic Owen Barfield, the 'greatest

last of the Romantic errors about the uniqueness of the Self; revising the old Western, Faustian ideology.”

*English disciple' of Rudolf Steiner, with whom
Saul Bellow corresponded*

In 1967 Bellow got himself commissioned by *Newsday* to report from Israel on the Six-Day War. In the *Letters* he says almost nothing about the war—he was too busy reporting—but he seems to have been electrified by its outcome. The Jews in Israel had done what, in his eyes, the WASPs in America had not: they had taken charge; they had put down rebellion, disorder, and chaos. Bellow was not, however, the bloodthirsty hawk he was taken to be after he wrote a book about Israel a few years later, *To Jerusalem and Back* (1976). In *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, no American authority can defeat the black pickpocket who threatens Mr. Sammler by displaying his enormous penis. It takes a half-mad Israeli, Mr. Sammler's son-in-law, to restore order by beating the pickpocket almost to death. But Mr. Sammler, watching in horror, expresses Bellow's own dismay at the needless violence.

4.

Bellow was driven throughout his life by his search for some ultimate and invisible spiritual reality. He thought he had begun to find it when, in his late fifties, he encountered Rudolf Steiner's writings about the shaping power of the spirit, and studied him as avidly as Charlie Citrine does in *Humboldt's Gift* (1975). Twenty years later Bellow was still quoting Steiner, whose books, he said, “I've read by the score.” Bellow's most enthusiastic admirers, who celebrate his masculine style or his “Jewish intelligence,” are clearly embarrassed by this insistent strand in his writings, and invariably ignore or dismiss it—although his own emphasis on it suggests that their whole perspective on his life and work might need to be adjusted.³

Steiner (1861–1925), inspired by Goethe's anti-Newtonian science, taught that history and nature are shaped by the spirit, that each individual life is part of a single universal process. One needn't believe a word of this to understand why Bellow was transfixed by it. Public and private chaos had erupted because, he thought, no one was guiding the course of history. Marxists in the 1930s had promised that history itself would take charge through the force of violent revolution. Bellow was untempted by that prophecy, but he was grateful when he found in Steiner a peaceful and beneficent alternative, a future in which the spirit would take charge of the world and shape it through inner vision and imagination.

Steiner's greatest English disciple was Owen Barfield (1898–1997), a lawyer and critic who was a close friend of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. In 1975, shortly before he turned sixty, Bellow read Barfield's *Unancestral Voice* (1965), in which an English lawyer named Burgeon chances upon a book about a sixteenth-century Jewish mystic through whom an inner voice, the Maggid, spoke in Hebrew about ultimate realities. Burgeon soon begins to hear an inner voice speaking to him in English about ultimate realities. He names it the Meggid because it is both like and unlike the one that spoke

four centuries earlier. The Meggid is the servant of great spiritual forces whom it names Gabriel and Michael. On their behalf it explains how the spirit has created and shaped the material world, how it transforms everything from quantum physics to human sexuality, and how its greatest transforming act was the incarnation of Christ.

Bellow found in Barfield's book what he had found in himself: a Jewish inner voice proclaiming a Christian mystery. He wrote to Barfield to ask for a meeting: "I'd be very grateful for the opportunity to talk to you about the Meggid and about Gabriel and Michael and their antagonists.... I am, I assure you, very much in earnest." A few days later he flew to London. Barfield came down from Kent to meet him.

Barfield, when I met him shortly afterward, embodied, in a quietly memorable way, serenity and invulnerability. These were the same qualities that provoked Bellow to erotic worship when he found them in a young woman. His letters to Barfield display an almost stammering discipleship unlike anything else in his life. "This makes little sense to you perhaps." "I'm a bit ashamed to present such a picture of confusion." "It is all too bewildering."

In the *Letters*, Bellow's relations with Barfield over the next few years read like a muted version of his first four marriages. After a period of deference, he protests against Barfield's slights, criticizes Barfield's deficiencies as a master, and declares his independence—although he never explicitly breaks off relations and remains courteous even in rebellion. The one reviewer of the *Letters* who noticed this incident calls Bellow's revolt "a stirring moment.... He will have no more of the other side's condescension to this side."

This episode, like Bellow's marriages, appears in the *Letters* only with Bellow's side of the story. But Bellow's relations with Barfield, unlike his marriages, are documented elsewhere from both sides. The entire interchange was published five years ago in a biography of Barfield by Simon Blaxland-de Lange,⁴ and it tells a very different story from the one suggested by Bellow's letters alone.

After their first meeting, Bellow writes deferentially, accepting what he took to be a rebuke:

It must have struck you as very adolescent. You asked me how old I was. "Sixty," I said. Then you smiled and said, "Sixteen?" It was the one joke you allowed yourself at my expense, and it was entirely justified.

Barfield answers:

You evidently read into that "sixty" and "sixteen" exchange a whole lot of meaning that simply wasn't there. All that actually happened was that I did for an instant actually *hear* "sixteen" and thought the error ludicrous enough to be worth sharing.

He admits he wasn't "held by" *Humboldt's Gift*, but he blames himself: a child of the Victorian era, he has limited tastes and can't see what everyone else sees. He had the same difficulty with a book by another friend, *The Lord of the Rings*. He knows he may be more jealous of Bellow's success than he consciously perceives, but he is baffled by the intensity of Bellow's reaction:

I doubt if you have been much more troubled by anything I have said about your novels than I was by what you say about its effect on you. You speak of my judging them. I thought I had made it clear that I did not feel confident enough to do anything of the sort.... I still do not understand how you can have got the impression that I found anything "false" either in *H.G.* or anything else I read. Not the shadow of a dream of anything of the sort.

Maybe you have not fully realized what a Nobel prizewinner feels like from outside. I wrote as breezily as I did because I supposed that any lack of appreciation from this quarter could do about as much damage as a peashooter will do to an armoured car.

A few years later, Barfield reviewed *The Dean's December* (1982) in an obscure magazine. He quoted the autobiographical hero's report of his Steinerian interests: Corde, the dean, "was, more or less in secret, serious about matters he couldn't even begin to discuss...for instance, the reunion of spirit and nature (divided by science)." But Barfield wondered whether Corde's "extreme interior self-awareness" and "abnormally vivid external" awareness held him back from a "leap beyond" them to the reunion that he sought.⁵

These were also Bellow's questions, but he wrote a courteously defensive response, telling Barfield he was perhaps too English to understand that Corde's self-consciousness was a form of passion. Corde is militantly angry at American society, "but he is far more concerned to purge his understanding of false thought than to protect himself." One could only take the "leap beyond," Bellow continued, if one had "dependable and certain knowledge of what the leap will carry you into"—and then, realizing that "certain knowledge" about the spirit was impossible, he added:

"Certain knowledge" isn't it either, but it would have to be a leap into a world of which one has had some experience. I have had foreshadowings, very moving adumbrations, but the whole vision of reality must change in every particular and the idols dismissed. Then one can take flight.

Corde's passionate anger is his last-resort substitute for the mystical flight he is too earthbound to attempt.

5.

Benjamin Taylor's edition of the *Letters* is the fruit of heroic research and lucky discoveries. His six-page "Editor's Note and Acknowledgments" has the variety and excitement of a picaresque novella. The edition itself seems half-finished. The notes that follow some of the letters tend to leave large questions unanswered or answer questions that the letters never raise. Some of Bellow's correspondents are identified only by name, others by brief summaries of their later careers—without a word about how he met them or what they meant to him. Bellow first excoriates a friend, then praises him, while the notes say nothing about context or motives.

Bellow's fiery, comic anathema against Jack Ludwig reads as motiveless malignity if you don't know that Bellow's wife had been having an affair with him—a fact mentioned only in the chronology, on a page that isn't listed in Ludwig's entry in the index. Few readers will know that *PM* was a left-wing New York newspaper; the index vaguely identifies it as "(journal)." None of the letters is printed with Bellow's signature, but it matters whether he signed himself "Saul," "Saul Bellow," or "Daddy."

Like some other editions of unpublished writings, *Saul Bellow: Letters* is a victim of the Facsimile Curse. This curse decrees that whenever an edition includes a facsimile of a manuscript transcribed in it, the facsimile will reveal mistakes in the transcription. In this book, the frontispiece photograph of an early letter reveals three trivial transcription errors and the silent omission of three paragraphs without the "customary ellipsis between brackets" used elsewhere to signify omitted words.

6.

In his last years, Bellow found at least some of the serenity he had been searching for. He seems to have experienced his fifth marriage, to Janis Freedman in 1989, as, in some paradoxical way, a marriage of equals. She was forty-four years younger and had worked as his secretary, but Bellow's sense of age and weakness seems to have balanced his status and authority. Two months after they married he wrote to a friend:

I am not one of Janis' problems, nor is she one of mine. Perhaps this shows that only an odd marriage can be a happy one. Janis speaks of us as an old married couple. I suppose this breaks down as: I am old, we are married.

His last novel, *Ravelstein*, was his slightest—serenity came at a price—but it unexpectedly revived his old comic energy. It has a tone of uncompetitive sweetness unlike anything in his earlier books, and he no longer felt the old expansive impulses that had driven them:

It's difficult for me now to read those early novels, not because they lack interest but because I find myself editing them, slimming down my sentences and cutting whole paragraphs. ⁶

The last letter in this collection, written a year before his death in 2005, at eighty-nine, ends in a Proustian reverie prompted by his four-year-old daughter:

My mother coveted for me a pair of patent-leather sandals with an *elegantissimo* strap. I finally got them—I rubbed them with butter to preserve the leather. This is when I was six or seven years old, a little older than Rosie is now. Amazing how it all boils down to a pair of patent-leather sandals.

I send an all-purpose blessing...

Serenity, like love and sleep, evades its pursuers. But it lets itself be found, as if by accident, in a congenial marriage and a memory of childhood.

1. In the version of this incident reimagined in *Herzog*, Bellow omits the effect of his reading and remembers instead the "strained and grim" face of the woman who reads the Bible to him; Herzog is five years old, not eight, when it occurs, and can't read for himself. In the version in *Humboldt's Gift*, Charlie Citrine is eight when he goes into the hospital, and "day and night, I read the Bible.... I appear to have become a Hallelujah and Glory type." ↩
2. An archaic term of etiquette, meaning official or public letters, as opposed to private or personal ones. ↩
3. Frank Kermode's comment on an apparently irrelevant passage in *The Tempest* provides a model for any reader embarrassed at some aspect of a great writer's work: "It is a possible inference that our frame of reference is badly adjusted, or incomplete, and that an understanding of this passage will modify our image of the whole play." ↩
4. *Owen Barfield: Romanticism Come of Age: A Biography* (Forest Row: Temple Lodge, 2006). ↩
5. Owen Barfield, "East, West and Saul Bellow," *ToWards*, Spring 1983. ↩
6. "Afterword," *Collected Stories* (Penguin, 2001), p. 439. ↩