Reading People's Mail Should Be Fun — Not This Time

written by Michael Wreszin | June 30, 2011

I FOUND THIS VOLUME of edited letters disappointing, particularly so since I agree with the critics, that Saul Bellow was a great writer, one of very best in the second half of the 20th century. Alfred Kazin compared him to Melville, and Norman Podhoretz declared that Bellow was "a stylist of the first order, perhaps the greatest virtuoso of language the novel has seen since Joyce."

There are brilliant moments in this volume of well over 500 pages. Despite these highlights, I found the letters often tedious. I am the editor of *A Moral Temper: The Letters of Dwight Macdonald* and must admit to finding it better edited, more interesting and entertaining than this collection. Interested readers will, of course, make their own judgments.

Bellow was the fourth child of Russian immigrants who fled to America, then Canada. Saul was born in 1915 and lived in Montreal until the family emigrated to Chicago in 1924 when Saul was 9 years old. He was a brilliant student but had to drop out of the University of Chicago when his father's business suffered during the depression. He transferred to Northwestern to study English literature. Bellow wrote and edited the student newspapers. He was awarded a B.A in Anthropology and soon taught both anthropology and English at a local teachers college. He wrote and read continually as he worked on a first novel. In 1941 the *Partisan Review* published a short story. After he abandoned two other attempted novels , *The Dangling Man* was published in 1944. His writing career was launched as he became known as a brilliantly articulate recorder of the devastating loss of confidence of liberal intellectuals in the postwar years. Edmund Wilson found it "one of the most honest pieces of testimony on the psychology of a whole generation who have grown up during the Depression and war." His next novel was *The Victim,* published in 1947. It also received laudatory reviews. *The Victim* is the story of a man awakening to his need to take more care and responsibility for others. He is driven by a sense of guilt which is finally overcome by an active commitment to a better world. It is a story of internal growth and maturity away from a life of self-absorption. It was the first of much complex metaphysical writing dealing with the darker side of human nature.

Bellow pursued his writing and teaching at the University of Minnesota. There he made a life long friend of Robert Penn Warren who gave him much support and inspiration. A constant reader of the classics and of much contemporary literature, Bellow developed into an erudite scholar, an intellectual respected by his colleagues and by a growing body of critics. He won a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1946 and traveled to Paris where he often met with Mary McCarthy, William Phillips of the *Partisan Review*, Arthur Koestler, Czeslaw Milosz, Albert Camus and Nicola Chiaromonte among other writers and intellectuals. He was now writing in several magazines including the *Partisan Review* and *Commentary.*

In September 1953 Bellow published *The Adventures of Augie March*, which was greeted with tremendous critical acclaim. He was invited to lecture throughout the country and to submit articles and stories to several publications. When rereading marvelous passages from *Augie, Herzog,* and *Seize the Day,* one is overwhelmed by his wildly fertile imagination and instinctual ability to come up with just the right word. Here from *Augie* is an obviously autobiographical account of a Chicago errand boy working for a fraudulent florist:

> And then it was an undertaker I was bound for, swinging my package overhead like a bass fiddler and making slow way through the beeping, grinding . . . . Once in a while I'd strike on a wake where there was a jar of bootleg red-eye passing round, in one of those offside green bungalows. . . . When you came upon one of those whisky-smelling mourning rooms with your flowers, why, nobody was so absorbed that you were ignored, as in other sorts of grieving I've seen and you were sure to come out with a buck or so in your cap. But anyway I preferred to be in the shop—in that Elysian Fields drift of flowers.

One is tempted to go on. Philip Roth remarked that Bellow's prose closed "the gap between Thomas Mann and Damon Runyon." Especially vivid were his detailed portraits of the characters he created. But most of this writerly excitement is often missing in this collection. His fervent admirers don't think so because they approach the volume with a preconceived demand that the letters reflect the mastery of his literature. They don't! He constantly complains about writing letters and dreads the obligation to respond. "I've never enjoyed writing letters. . . . I can write a small book more easily than a letter—why is that?. . . . When I am writing fiction I am geared up or fully mobilized. . . . Still I find letter writing difficult."

Many of these letters reveal broken friendships with David Bazelon, Isaac Rosenfeld, Alfred Kazin, Lionel Trilling — all for what he felt was unjust criticism. In most cases the targets were admirers of Bellow who found some faults in one of his novels or stories.

The put down of other writers is endless: "I loathe snobs," he writes to a publisher, and [Evelyn] "Waugh is one of the worst sorts." There is a strange and mostly incomprehensible put down of F. Scott Fitzgerald whom he met in Europe. The editor notes that Bellow's account is pure fantasy since Fitzgerald had been dead for nearly a decade. Bellow had little use for Norman Mailer, whom he saw as little more than an "ideologist." As for William Phillips, with some justification, he saw him as "always a devious rat" because he planned to publish Isaac Rosenfeld's journals, which contained some criticism of Bellow. Graham Greene is seen as an anti-Semite because he did not appreciate Bellow's total support of the State of Israel. He had nothing but contempt for Gore Vidal, also seen as an anti-Semite and worse. Vidal wrote for *The Nation*, a journal Bellow detested. It published Christopher Hitchens and Edward Said, both of whom Bellow saw as "Fourth Estate playboys thriving on agitation and Jews are so easy to agitate." It was impossible to learn anything from "these *Nation*-type gnomes . . . they drink, drug, lie, cheat, chase, seduce, gossip, libel, borrow money, never pay child support etc." Hitchens and his ilk represent "the silliest left-wing form" of political nihilism. The editor obligingly informs the reader that Bellow subsequently had cordial relations with Hitchens but doesn't explain that it was Hitchens' turn to the right and support of the Iraq war that changed Bellow's view. Bellow saw himself only as an artist and not an ideologue. He complained to Cynthia Ozick (a writer he did admire) that he got no pleasure being listed in PEN with the "Styrons, Vonneguts, Mailers, to say nothing of the academic specialists." These comments on his writer rivals are revealing but certainly not of any particular literary insights.

Bellow had become a fervent neoconservative by the 80s and his pet hatred was the youth of the 60s. His novel, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) was, as Alfred Kazin accurately remarked, "an autobiographical polemic." This outraged Bellow and ended their friendship. The novel brilliantly focused on the 60s and its youthful know-nothings. There is the famous scene in which, while giving a lecture at a University Bellow is verbally assaulted by a young instructor. Bellow insisted that there had been "something like a literary life in this country but the mad ferocious Sixties tore it all to bits." However, there is very little in this selection of letters that indicates any respect for the literary life in America prior to the 60s. In 1955 in a letter recommending a Guggenheim Fellowship for Bernard Malamud, whom Bellow thought was a *real* writer, he remarked that "Imagination has

been steadily losing prestige in American life, it seems to me for a long time. I am speaking of the poetic imagination. . . . It is upon writers like Mr. Malmud that the future of literature depends." He then denounced the writing community for bowing down to the demands of conformity during the postwar years. .

There were several writers in addition to Malamud that Bellow admired and he was always generous in his praise and support of them. In a memory of Bernard Malamud Bellow wrote:

> We were cats of the same breed. The sons of Eastern European immigrant Jews, we had gone early into the streets of our respective cities, were Americanized by schools, newpapers, subways streetcars, sandlots. Melting Pot children, we had assumed the American program to be the real thing: no barriers to the freest and fullest American choices. Of course we knew that it was no simple civics-course matter. We knew too much about the slums, we had assimilated too much dark history in our mothers' kitchens to be radiant optimists.

Phillip Roth was viewed as a first rank creative writer as was John Cheever, and he was particularly sensitive to the work and life of John Berryman. He could be warm and generous with those he admired like Cynthia Ozick and the philosopher Owen Barfied. With the latter he was downright humble, not to say obsequious.

There are some acute passages on writing.

> I think this is a fault of all American books, including my own. They pant so after meaning. They are earnestly moral, didactic; they build them ever more stately mansions, and they exhort and plead and refine, and they are insofar, books of error. A work of art should rest on perception. 'Here' in other words 'is my vision, be meaning what it may.'

But of course he admired all those who expressed admiration for his work.

Bellow won the Nobel Prize in 1976 "for the human understanding and subtle analysis of contemporary culture that are combined in his work." He was awarded the Gold Medal for Fiction from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and a Pulitzer in 1976 for his novel *Humbolt's Gift* and three National Book Awards. He called the winning of the Nobel "a mixture of glory and horror" because becoming an international celebrity invaded his time as a writer. He had only recently written a speech he gave at Purdue University entitled "Culture Now: Some animadversions, some Laughs." The obsession with politics in the country had driven out the writer of fiction. He unloaded his scorn on all of the New York intellectuals — Susan Sontag, William Phillips, and many more. There was, as his biographer James Atlas noted, "a deep tone of personal bitterness behind his animus." Despite all the awards and the praise for his work, Bellow was extremely sensitive to criticism. When Louis Simpson in *the New York Times* accused *Humboldt's Gift* of slandering the poet, Delmore Schwartz, Bellow complained to Ruth Miller, one of his many lady friends:

> I don't ask myself why the *Times* prints such miserable stuff, why I must be called an ingrate, a mental tyrant, a thief, a philistine enemy of poetry, a narcissist incapable of feeling for others, a failed artist. . . . Such things are not written about industrialists, or

> spies, or bankers, or trade union leaders, or Idi Amin, or Palestinian terrorists only about the author of a novel who wanted principally to be truthful and to give delight.

One can't expect an artist of great talent to be constantly amiable or to necessarily have a stellar character, but Bellow's whining self-pity, his blatant prejudices, his rampant misogyny (I have failed to deal with his five marriages but Bellow makes it very clear why four of them failed) can't help but diminish one's respect for his character. He also shows clear signs of racial prejudice in his repeated denunciations of black radicals as evidence of the decline of American civilization. This is also clear in *Mr. Sammler*, where the symbol of the cultural decline is the portrait of a black pickpocket who exposes himself to intimidate Sammler. It may not be fair to employ such criticism of a work of fiction but the right wing stance of Bellow in his maturity cannot help but leave an unpleasant impression.

The editing of this volume is skimpy. Frequently there is no explanation or context given to the details so that only a reader well versed in Bellow's life would have the faintest notion of what he is talking about. I resorted to James Atlas's biography to get the context of many of the letters. Often recipients are not identified and the same goes for organizations mentioned. I have been looking at the letters of Elizabeth Bishop for example and find them more compelling. Robert Giroux's explanatory notes make the context clear and understandable. And one can't help but think of the letters of Twain. For such a brilliant writer as Bellow, it is disappointing that most of the letters collected here do not do justice to his literary reputation.