

The Mind's Blind Eye: Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet*

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Fiction, said Saul Bellow in his 1976 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "tells us that for every human being there is a diversity of existences, that the single existence is itself an illusion,"¹ but this single existence is an illusion to which most of the lonely intellectual buffoons of his novels subscribe in their efforts to impose stabilizing patterns of ideas from the private universe of learning upon the crowded, chaotic multiverse of contemporary reality. Perhaps the prime purveyor of the single vision in Bellow's fiction is the protagonist of his 1970 novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. "Intellectual man had become an explaining creature," says Arthur Sammler, realizing that he himself has "a touch of the same disease" that his friend and subject H.G. Wells suffered from: "the disease of the single self explaining what was what and who was who."² In this, as in Bellow's other books, the pressures of mass society force the thinker to retreat inwards into his own private intellectual center, where the furious mess of the world can be converted into something he can handle, while at the same time he struggles to prevent this inward movement from cutting him off entirely from the human community around him.

From his intellectual eyrie Mr. Sammler, a Holocaust survivor living in New York, casts a cold eye—one eye, in fact—on the life and death of the planet, surveying at a glance an obsolete, bankrupt Western intellectual tradition (which he himself is yet part of) and laying before us all its sinister ambiguities: Bloomsbury and Buchenwald, Wellsian Utopias and Auschwitz, civilization and its built-in barbarisms. Mr. Sammler is, importantly, a Cyclops figure, almost blind in one eye as a result of a wartime blow from a camp guard's rifle butt, and his impaired vision, it has been widely observed, is a fairly obvious metaphor for his state of mind.³ Sammler's eyesight, however, is an intricate trope, more complex and contradictory than is immediately apparent, and it has received surprisingly little close investigation. The primary suggestion appears to be that he has his one seeing eye fixed on events going on around him, while the other, blind eye is turned symbolically inwards towards introspection and analysis. But this is not quite—and indeed it may be the opposite of—what Bellow actually says: "Careful to guard his eyesight, he passed pages rapidly back and forth before his eye, the large forehead registering the stimulus to his mind. The damaged left eye seemed to turn in another direction, to be preoccupied separately with different matters" (27). It is in fact the damaged eye which, straining after long sight, is turned outward, "in another direction"—away from the books. This unseeing eye is still turned upon

¹ Saul Bellow, "The Nobel Lecture," *The American Scholar* 46 (Summer 1977): 25.

² Saul Bellow, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) 225. Subsequent references to the novel are given in parentheses in the text of the article.

³ See, for example, John S. Clayton, *Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979) 235-36; and Brigitte Scheer-Schazler, *Saul Bellow* (New York: Ungar, 1972) 118.

the world, as if still wanting to know what is going on there; as if endlessly distracted and fascinated by the violence and criminality that originally blinded it, though trained on a world that it cannot properly perceive. Meanwhile, the reading eye, which is the real inner eye, the eye of scholarship, is the eye that sees, though it has no explanation for what it sees and is unable to order it and make it cohere. Bellow deliberately confuses the issue, mixing up Sammler's two defective sightlines in order to indicate that his outward perception of the world is largely unseeing while the inward scholarly vision which governs and conditions it is at best myopic. It transpires, in fact, that both eyes—the external, observing eye and the informing, intellectual eye, the eye of the mind—are sources of deluded perception. Sammler is buffeted between their rival illusions, always at an erudite mental distance from reality but finally too susceptible to the distractions of the world to cultivate the scholar's pure, disinterested vision.

Sammler sees a great deal with his one eye, whether this be construed as the damaged left one or the short-sighted right one with which he ambitiously tries to "read" the world about him. Indeed, at times he sees, comprehensively, too much, and is seen seeing (by the black pickpocket whom he perversely pursues on crosstown buses). During the three days it takes him to cross the city to reach the bedside of the dying Elya Gruner, Sammler's one-eyed, inward-looking view of the world puts the reader in touch with a remarkable range of experience and incident from the teeming, tumultuous urban landscape: bizarre encounters with pickpockets, a heckling student at Columbia University, the pursuit of a stolen manuscript, the lunatic antics of his own and Gruner's children. In the course of this odyssey Sammler sees many things. But this does not mean that he sees correctly: that is, perceptively or interpretively. The problem with the one-eyed vision, as John Clayton points out,⁴ is that it flattens, distorts, and caricatures what it sees: it is not a fully rounded but a wall-eyed view that sees selectively, registering only what its owner disapprovingly looks at. In this one-sided vision, for example, American blacks are seen, stereotypically, as fantasy-metaphors for violence and white-envied sexual prowess. Sammler, possibly influenced by his reading of Norman Mailer's 1961 essay "The White Negro," transforms the pickpocket into a Phallic Prince, the universal aim, as he puts it, being "sexual niggerhood for everyone" (30). Hence it is ironic that Sammler himself half-consciously identifies with the pickpocket, reserving all his anger for his victims, and that the thief partly encourages this identification when he corners Sammler. He takes off his own dark glasses and then removes Sammler's, the protective screens by which both men keep out the brightness of reality; then he directs Sammler's one-eyed gaze down onto his own one-eyed sexual instrument. This bizarre episode is not so much a Schopenhauerian expression of the sovereignty of sex as the seat of the will; rather, it is a symbolic presentation of the idea that Sammler's cerebral, book-fed consciousness is as myopic as the sexual one attributed to the black. These rival modes of being are conceived in opposition—appropriately, it is indirectly Sammler's fault that the thief is apprehended and almost killed by his son-in-law—but the two characters are shown to be equally ignorant, equally afflicted by the "singleness" disease.

⁴ Clayton 235.

Sammler's picture of the libidinous excesses of the 1960s is as caricaturist as his portrait of the Negro. Everyone claims "the right to be uninhibited, spontaneous, urinating, defecating, belching, coupling in all positions, tripling, quadrupling, polymorphous, noble in being natural, primitive, combining the leisure and luxurious inventiveness of Versailles with the hibiscus-covered erotic ease of Samoa" (28). Sammler is composing a kind of sexual jeremiad here, in which the decadent romanticism of the present decade is seen as a continuation of the primitivism that twenty years earlier had found outlets in war and genocide, the new barbarism but a hangover from the old. In this Swiftian vision, of 1960s Yahoos by one just back from the intellectual Houyhnhnms, the contemporary sexual revolution is reduced to mindless promiscuous squalor. That the liberated sexual consciousness of the decade had intelligent, articulate defenders (Marcuse, Reich, Norman O. Brown—all dismissed as "worthless fellows") is not something one would ever guess from Sammler's narrative tirade. The intellectual position of these thinkers is represented only in travestied form by the militant "sexcrementalism" of the student who obscenely interrupts Sammler's lecture at Columbia.

In all of this, of course, Sammler is not the disinterested visiting consciousness, the disembodied interplanetary visitor, that he makes himself out to be. And if he proves to be a rather unreliable spokesman for the Bellovian idea of order, it is precisely because he himself has been a victim of, and therefore a part of, the disorder and is incurably contaminated by it. Sammler believes that, as one who has been counted dead, he should be free from worldly and bodily interests, when the truth is that he is constantly drawn back into the human condition which so appalls him, his one fierce, covetous, half-blind eye trained upon what he is excluded from. If Elya has "delegated" his daughter Angela to "experience the Age for him" (131), then Sammler, as Clayton astutely observes,⁵ has also, albeit unconsciously, delegated not only Angela but also his niece Margotte and his own daughter Shula to experience the revolutionary youth culture of the 1960s, at second-hand, on his behalf. Sammler lives vicariously, even voyeuristically, through others, and principally through those who confess to him their various exotic excesses and sexual fetishes (Angela, Bruch). Why else does he return to Columbus Circle, even though he has been warned, for a second time to watch the pickpocket, with whom he feels himself to inhabit "an adjoining region of recklessness" (7)? For the same reason, it transpires, that he fired a second bullet into the German soldier in the Zamhost Forest thirty years earlier: not to make sure that his adversary was dead but to reexperience, viscerally, the ecstasy of killing—as he says, to "try again for that bliss" (114). Now, as then, he "craves an illicit repetition," for "in evil as in art there was illumination" (11). Sammler is reseaking that special Tolstoyan "moment of truth," the lightning instant of illumination in extremity. These pure experiences—the ones that the inward, reading eye of the intellect has no access to and that cannot be converted into so much safe, diverting mental material—are the experiences that Sammler secretly hungers after. These are the things that we really live by, as distinct from the books we read and the opinions we hold.

But if Sammler's outward observing eye is but dimly perceptive, what comes to his mind's inner optics from the reading eye of scholarship is no less misguided.

⁵ Clayton 236.

Sammler may be right in his idea that history repeats itself, running in cyclic orbits like planets, and that everything is therefore derivative, making it impossible for anything original to happen. Thus the 1960s cults are seen as parodic reenactments of earlier Dionysiac models, deliberate cultivations of false primitivisms. But what he fails to see is that his own ideas are part of this pattern of persistent repetition. After his wartime "death" in a Polish mass-grave Sammler proceeds, in his second life, to repeat the errors of his former existence. He continues to live according to obsolete ideas, reassuming the position of the withdrawn, disinterested Weimar-style intellectual of the 1930s, a position which is as derivative, and as irresponsible, as that of the contemporary youth cultures that he castigates, and as false to modern historical reality. Sammler's one-eyed Mandarin's angle on the world fails to register the fact that by the 1960s the position of the intellectual has changed. And it is precisely this obsolete position he has taken up—the standpoint of the Spengler-Toynbee school of intellectual historians—that enables him to forge spurious continuities between cultures (Nazis and Hippies) which are twenty years and an ocean apart.

Moreover, Sammler's ideas, so self-consciously book-derived, tend to be the kind that keep humanity at bay rather than make one more intimate with it. What carries him in his trek across New York is not only the urge to reconfront death but the purely notional pursuit of an idea about human solidarity and the need to reaffirm it with a dying man. Subsequently, he supposes that a daughter cannot look her father in the eye and let him die without reconciliation and forgiveness. But Sammler has got this idea, like most of his ideas, from a book. It is, in fact, based on what happens to Pierre Bezukhov in *War and Peace*, and is a literary notion, like the idea that evil is perpetrated only by misshapen monsters like Richard III, not by ordinary people. It did not serve Sammler well in the Zamhost, where the Nazis did look you in the eye and then killed you, and it does not serve him now either.

Angela Gruner does not want forgiveness or reconciliation, and Sammler, pursuing some transcendent humanist ideal, a timeless absolute of human love and atonement, tries to affirm solidarity with the father while denying it to the daughter, whom he can only insult. In trying to realize a theoretic notion of solidarity with the dying, Sammler violates what solidarity he still has left with the living. It is no accident that he is prevented from reaffirming his spiritual bond with Elya by numerous collisions with the material world on the way across New York: by mad capers with a stolen manuscript; a son's lunatic search for his father's hidden Mafia money; street brawls with a pickpocket; his daughter setting fire to his shoes. And it is no accident that when he arrives Elya is already dead and beyond his concern, so that his attention is recalled to the living. Sammler discovers, too late, that he has been so preoccupied by book-learned ideas about solidarity, fed him by the reading eye, that he misses the chance to encounter, with the observing eye, the thing itself as it actually happens in the world. He has the idea but misses the experience.