

Sunday Book Review

‘There Is Simply Too Much to Think About,’ Saul Bellow’s Nonfiction

By MARTIN AMIS

Saul Bellow, in 1964. Credit Jeff Lowenthal/Lebrecht Music & Arts

“The flies wait hungrily in the air,” writes Saul Bellow (in a description of Shawneetown in southern Illinois), “sheets of flies that make a noise like the tearing of tissue paper.” Go and tear some tissue paper in two, slowly: It sounds just like the sullen purr of bristling vermin. But how, you wonder, did Bellow know what torn tissue paper sounded like in the first place? And then you wonder what this minutely vigilant detail is doing in *Holiday* magazine (in 1957), rather than in the work in progress, “Henderson the Rain King” (1959). It or something even better probably is in “Henderson.” For Bellow’s fictional and nonfictional voices intertwine and cross-pollinate. This is from a film review of 1962: “There she is, stout and old, a sinking, squarish frame of bones.” Two decades later the image would effloresce in the story/novella “Cousins”:

“I remembered Riva as a full-figured, dark-haired, plump, straight-legged woman. Now all the geometry of her figure had changed. She had come down in the knees like the jack of a car, to a diamond posture.”

In 1958 a Gore Vidal play was adapted into the famous western “The Left Handed Gun” (which starred his friend Paul Newman); and it has often been said that when writers of fiction turn to discursive prose “they write left-handed.” In other words, think pieces, reportage, travelogues, lectures and memoirs are in some sense strained, inauthentic, ventriloquial. In Vidal’s case, literary opinion appears to be arranging a curious destiny. It is in the essays (or in those written before Sept. 11, 2001) that he feels right-handed. His historical novels, firmly tethered to reality, have their place. But the products of Vidal’s untrammelled fancy — for instance “Myra Breckinridge” and “Myron” — feel strictly southpaw. Bellow, by contrast, is congenitally ambidextrous.

He is also a rampant instinctivist. In this respect Bellow is quite unlike, say, Vladimir Nabokov and John Updike, to take two artist-critics of high distinction. In his voluminous “Lectures” Nabokov is idiosyncratic and often verbally intense, but he is always a sober and serious professional: a pedagogue. And Updike, in his equally voluminous collections of reviews, makes it clear that critics, unlike novelists, are somehow “on duty”: They have to wear their Sunday best, and can never come as they are. Bellow comes as he is. He is closer to D. H. Lawrence, and closer still to V. S. Pritchett. “Let the academics weigh up, be exhaustive or build their superstructures,” Pritchett writes: “The artist lives as much by his pride in his own emphases as by what he ignores; humility is a disgrace.” This is Bellow’s way of going at everything. No tuxedo and cummerbund, no



gowns and tasseled mortarboards. Whatever the genre, Bellow's sensorium, it turns out, is whole and indivisible.

Bellow riding the elevated train. Credit Michael Mauney/The Life Images Collection — Getty Images



Inherent in this approach is a candid opposition to the ivory tower. Although he taught literature throughout his adult life, Bellow was always and increasingly suspicious of the universities — long before ideological jumpiness had turned them into what he privately called “anti-free-speech centers” (his short essay “The University as Villain” is dated 1956). He is infuriated, maddened by the sort of commentator who wants to tell you what Ahab’s harpoon may or may not “symbolize.” In “Deep Readers of the World, Beware!” (1959) he imagines a classroom conversation:

“Why, sir,” the student wonders, “does Achilles drag the body of Hector around the walls of Troy? . . . Well, you see, sir, the ‘Iliad’ is full of circles — shields, chariot wheels and other round figures. And you know what Plato said about circles. The Greeks were all made for geometry.”

“Bless your crew-cut head,” the professor replies, “for such a beautiful thought. . . . Your approach is both deep and serious. Still, I always believed that Achilles did it because he was so angry.”

Critics should cleave to the human element, and not just laminate the text with additional obscurities. The essential didactic task, Bellow implies, is to instill the readerly habits of enthusiasm, gratitude and awe.

To accuse novelists of egotism is like deploring the tendency of champion boxers to turn violent. And Bellow, naturally and enlighteningly, relies on his own evolution to establish core principles. “Everything is to be viewed as though for the first time.” Assume “a certain psychic unity” with your readers (“Others are in essence like me and I am basically like them”). Accept George Santayana’s definition of that discredited word “piety”: “reverence for the sources of one’s being.” Cherish your personal history, therefore, but never seek out experience, or “Experience,” as grist: Some writers are proud of their “special efforts in the fields of sex, drunkenness” and poverty (“I have even been envied my good luck in having grown up during the Depression”); but “willed” worldliness is a false lead. Resist “the heavy influences” — Flaubert, Marx, etc., or what Bellow, citing Thoreau, calls “the savage strength of the many.” The imagination has its “eternal naïveté” — and that is something the writer cannot afford to lose.

Bellow’s nonfiction has the same strengths as his stories and novels: a dynamic responsiveness to character, place and time (or era). All are on display in the marvelous vignette “A Talk With the Yellow Kid” (1956). The Kid is an octogenarian Chicago swindler: All his life he has “sold nonexistent property, concessions he did not own and air-spun schemes to greedy men.” Bellow is altogether at ease in this company, but he has the deeper confidence to acknowledge the Kid’s elusive mystery: “It is not always easy to know where he is coming from,” because “long practice in insincerity gives him an advantage.” And you wonder — what other highbrow writer, or indeed lowbrow writer, has such a reflexive grasp of the street, the machine, the law courts, the rackets? But then Bellow is abnormally alive to social gradations everywhere, in Spain (1948), in Israel (1967), in Paris (1983), in Tuscany (1992). This is from “In the Days of Mr. Roosevelt,” the days being those between the crash and the war:

“The blight hadn’t yet carried off the elms and under them drivers had pulled over, parking bumper to bumper, and turned on their radios. . . . They had rolled down the windows and opened the car doors. Everywhere the same voice, its odd Eastern accent, which in anyone else would have irritated Midwesterners. You could follow without missing a single word as you strolled by. You felt joined to these unknown drivers, men and women smoking their cigarettes in silence, not so much considering the president’s words as affirming the rightness of his tone and taking assurance from it.”

That relay, that gentle gantlet of car radios, perfectly encapsulates what F.D.R. had to give to America and Americans: continuity in troubled times.

“There Is Simply Too Much to Think About” is a slightly pruned, and then greatly expanded, version of “It All Adds Up,” Bellow’s nonfiction compendium of 1994. “Distraction,” “noise,” “crisis chatter”: Persistent enough in the earlier book, these themes have now become pervasive. “The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.” This bothered Wordsworth around 1802, and it bothered Ruskin in 1865 (“No reading is possible for a people with its mind in this state”); meanwhile, unsurprisingly, things have not quieted down. “The world is too much with us, and there has never been so much world,” Bellow writes in 1959. In 1975 he goes further: “To say that the world is too much with us is meaningless for there is no longer any us. The world is everything.” And there is no escape, even in rural Vermont: “What is happening everywhere is, one way or another, known to everyone. Shadowy world tides wash human nerve endings in the remotest corners of the earth.” Yes; but “it is apparently in the nature of the creature to resist the world’s triumph,” the triumph of “turbulence and agitation” — and Bellow’s corpus is graphic proof of that defiance.

One of the most audacious essays in the book is a seemingly modest little piece called “Wit Irony Fun Games” (2003, and quite possibly the last thing he ever wrote). Elsewhere describing his own novels, or many of them, as “comedies of wide reading,” Bellow here insists that by a very considerable margin “most novels have been written by ironists, satirists and comedians.” I have been thinking that for years. Look at Russian fiction, reputedly so gaunt and grown-up: Gogol is funny, Tolstoy in his merciless clarity is funny, and Dostoyevsky, funnily enough, is very funny indeed; moreover, the final generation of Russian literature, before it was destroyed by Lenin and Stalin, remained emphatically comic — Bunin, Bely, Bulgakov, Zamyatin. The novel is comic because life is comic (until the inevitable tragedy of the fifth act); and also because fiction, unlike poetry and unlike all the other arts, is a fundamentally rational form. This latter point is not the paradox it may appear to be. In the words of the artist-critic Clive James:

“Common sense and a sense of humor are the same thing, moving at different speeds. A sense of humor is just common sense, dancing. Those who lack humor are without judgment and should be trusted with nothing.”

THERE IS SIMPLY TOO MUCH TO THINK ABOUT

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Martin Amis’s most recent novel is “The Zone of Interest.”

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