

SAUL BELLOW AND THE ROLE OF THE INTELLECTUAL IN 20TH CENTURY SOCIETY

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In his preface to Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, Saul Bellow confesses: "...you do not always feel that you are writing for any of your contemporaries. It may well be that your true readers are not here as yet and that your book will cause them to materialize" (Bloom, *Closing...*, p. 15). One of the first impressions one gets from reading this statement is that any author should play an active role in the creation, modeling or reshaping of his/her auditorium, that intellectuals still enjoy the privilege of trying to bring society on the right track. Yet two pages later, hopelessness takes over and the same author wonders whether such an endeavor is still possible in the modern society: "Romantic poets and other edifying theorists of the nineteenth century had it wrong – poets and novelists will never be the legislators and teachers of mankind. That poets – artists – should give new eyes to human beings, inducing them to view the world differently, converting them from fixed modes of experience, is ambition enough. [...] What makes that project singularly difficult is the disheartening expansion of trained ignorance and bad thought. For to put the matter at its baldest, we live in a thought-world, and the thinking has gone very bad indeed. Therefore the artist, whether or not he views himself as an intellectual, is involved in thought-struggles". This is an on-going dilemma defining much of Bellow's work. Throughout his novels he seems to constantly commute between optimism and pessimism as far as his role in society is concerned, between thought and action, between fight and resignation. The overall feeling is that contemporary society has somehow gone bad. In countless instances Bellow portrays society as threatening, attacking the liberal thought and promoting mediocrity, the single most important condition for a system to work: "System demands mediocrity, not greatness. System is based on labor" (Bellow, *Sammler...*, p. 21). And although he generally speaks of American society, he points out a universal trend: "Of course in a sense the whole world is now U.S. Inescapable. It's like a big crow that has snatched our future from the nest, and we, the rest, are like little finches in pursuit trying to peck it". (Bellow, *Sammler...*, p. 187). The seeds for this decay of the contemporary society, encouraging ignorance and lacking sound moral values, while various and misleading, can be traced back to the early beginnings of the United States. For a long period of time the evolution of the American intellect/society was interpreted from two major perspectives (no longer able to grasp the present reality): that of Jackson Turner, who claimed that the democratic ideals and aspirations were the product of the frontier and Vernon Parrington's, who described the evolution of the American intellect as an ideological conflict where the liberals in the Jefferson – Jackson tradition tried to defend democratic values against the attacks of federalist aristocracy and rising capitalist oligarchy. The recurrent themes in philosophical debates on the condition of the American mind were largely those discussed by Ralph Gabriel in *The Course of American Democratic Thought*: the belief in the free individual (implying equality), the belief in the moral law (implying religion) and the belief in the American mission (implying nationalism).

All these perspectives undoubtedly have the same starting point: the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence which claims that: "all men are created equal and they are equally endowed with the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". Maybe this is the crucial moment which irremediably influenced the American culture and, by its echo, the worldwide civilization. It marked the dawn of a new era, it shaped the course of history as we now know it, fighting against slavery, against aristocracy, against all prejudices of religion, class or nationality. And while it ensured personal dignity: "the founders of the American republic, by basing a social system on a declaration of equality, provided a conscious philosophy for the American mind as healthfully and happily congenial to subconscious aspiration as the founders of Christianity

supplied in their doctrine of the general Resurrection. No nation whose citizens do not have as certain an assurance of their individual dignity can bring to bear upon the inimical realities of life such a thrust and muscle of egoistic confrontation and attack". (O'Higgins, *The American Mind...*, p.328), this approach is now showing its side effects. Its worst impacts had already been foreseen by Tocqueville in his portraying of the intellectual life of the Americans: the enslavement to public opinion and conformity: "Tocqueville found that Americans talked very much about individual right but that there was a real monotony of thought and that vigorous independence of mind was rare. Even those who appear to be free-thinkers really look to a constituency and expect one day to be part of a majority. They are creatures of public opinion as they are conformists". (Bloom, *Closing...*, p. 247).

Democracy thus implied a tendency, if not a necessity, to homogenize everything. The accent on personal rights slowly shifted towards acceptance of the others as different as they might be, equality slowly evolved into openness. The relativity of truth becomes the new dominant characteristic of the modern American society. A condition even of a free society: "the modern replacement for the inalienable rights that used to be the traditional grounds for a free society" (Bloom, *Closing...*, p. 25). Openness adds another twist to equality. Not only are we equal but we should also fight our narrowness and be open to what not long time ago seemed completely unacceptable. Sure, relativity of truth, openness, acceptance, all these are appealing concepts and to a certain extent viable and able to sustain a democratic society but the real danger is that in the very nature of these concepts there is a Trojan horse: "if democracy means open-endedness, and respect for other cultures prevents doctrinaire, natural-rights-based condemnation of the Soviet reality, then someday their ways may become ours". (Bloom, *Closing...*, p. 33). As compared to narrowness, which he doesn't see as incompatible with the health of an individual or a people, openness – Bloom believes - comes together with the challenge of decomposition. The individuals blend together in a collective consciousness which levels everybody to the point of extinction. When describing Gilbert's friend in *The Bellarosa Connection*, Bellow uses the following words: "The only life he cared to lead was that of an American. So hugely absorbing, that. So absorbing that one existence was too little for it. It could drink up a hundred existences, if you had them to offer, and reach out for more". (Bellow, *Bellarosa...*p. 99). Bellow is aware of the unavoidable evolution of concepts such as democracy, equality towards uniformization, mediocrity, loss of the self and, ironically, social alienation. The way people respond to this phenomenon is to unconsciously shut themselves from the outer world: "People withdraw into themselves, and then they work up imaginary affections. It's a common American condition" (Bellow, *Bellarosa...*, p. 94).

The new philosophy of openness is nothing else but a desperate effort towards legitimization. Almost exclusively a Western phenomenon, the interest in other cultures is not so much a search for better ways as it is a validation that the American culture *is* the better way. Based on concepts that are immediately comprehensible and powerfully persuasive to the majority of the human beings, the United States undeniably has now one of the longest, uninterrupted political tradition in the world. As Bloom puts it bluntly: "America tells one story: the unbroken, ineluctable progress of freedom and equality. From its settlers and its political foundations on, there has been no dispute that freedom and equality are the essence of justice for us. [...] All significant political disputes have been about the meaning of freedom and equality, not about their rightness". (Bloom, *Closing...*, p. 55). Yet there are voices that argue that while these two key concepts are inherently validated, their current interpretation, although in the process of looking for legitimization, are particularly harmful. It is the misinterpretation of these concepts that is potentially dangerous. Equality turned into conformity, openness turned into accepting everything and denying the power of reason, freedom which turns into living as one pleases - "In the end it begins to appear that full freedom can be attained only when there is no [...] knowledge at all" – (Bloom, *Closing...*, p. 28) - all these are tell-tales of the corruption of the contemporary society Bellow resents up to the point of giving up fight: "Accept and grant that

happiness is to do what most other people do. Then you must incarnate what others incarnate. If prejudices, prejudice. If rage, then rage. If sex, then sex. But don't contradict your time. Just don't contradict it, that's all. Unless you happened to be a Sammler and felt that the place of honor was outside". (Bellow, *Sammler...*, p. 69).

Bellow's work is filled with instances of intellectual struggles against the perils contemporary society confronts him with: rootlessness, breaking up with tradition, isolation, loss of the sense of personal identity, social alienation. His way out seems to be in the tedious, never-ending analysis, mental interpretation and re-interpretation of every aspect. His novels are seldom masterpieces of action. In *Herzog* (intended in its own creator's words to be "a comic novel"), for instance, almost nothing happens from the point of view of the chronological action outside the mind of the main character – the novel is an intricate network of thoughts and ideas gravitating around the fundamental contemporary issues: politics and moral, love and power, sex, individualism and collectivism. Modern literature, as Bellow himself noted in one of his essays (Bellow, *Where Do We Go...*, p. 213), is no longer interested in absorbing its readers in "what happens next" but rather in glimpses of ideas, images, moods, insights, revelations. From this point of view literature is increasingly addressing a smaller and smaller number of readers. Obtusenesses, lack of interest in genuine intellectual matters, the contemporary tendency towards comfort as opposed to mental effort prevent the dissemination of knowledge where it is most needed. The role of the author as a formative agent is harder and harder. Bellow admits: "I readily concede that here and there I am probably hard to read, and I am likely to become harder as the illiteracy of the public increases. It is never an easy task to take the mental measure of your readers" (Bloom, *Closing....*, p. 15).

The education system of the United States seems to be leading in a different direction. Alan Bloom, writing about the higher education in America, believes that "every educational system has a moral goal that it tries to attain and that informs its curriculum. It wants to produce a certain kind of human being [...] Always important is the political regime, which needs citizens who are in accord with its fundamental principle. Aristocracies want gentlemen, oligarchies men who respect and pursue money, and democracies lovers of equality". (Bloom, *Closing....*, p. 26). Aside from the political implication (the state, the system in itself controls the quality and tastes of its citizens), the increasing illiteracy appears as the result of the social context: "...the family has, at best, a transitory togetherness. People sup together, play together, travel together, but they do not think together. Hardly any homes have any intellectual life whatsoever, let alone one that forms the vital interests of life. Educational TV marks the high tide for family intellectual life". (Bloom, *Closing....*, p. 57-58). As contemporary readers constantly "lower the bar", writers tend to follow the same trend, thus creating a vicious circle. Their novels become more and more "unintellectual" in order to appeal to the common man. And this happens not as much because the writers wish to remain loyal to their readers as it happens out of fear of rejection. The role of the modern writer is therefore to resist the temptation of writing for the masses and to assume the higher responsibility of forcing the masses out of their ignorance. This of course is easier said than done and Bellow cannot help a touch of sarcasm when defining the work of his fellow contemporary writers: "A writer should aim to reach all levels of society and as many levels of thought as possible, avoiding democratic prejudice as much as intellectual snobbery. Why should we be ashamed of thinking? I do not claim that all writers can think, or should think. Some are peculiarly inept at ideas and we would harm them by insisting that they philosophize". (Bellow, *Where Do We Go...*, p. 218).

Fiction today remotely resembles the great novels of the 19th century. The mostly didactic writings of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman played their role at the right moment in the development of the raw American but they no longer manage to cope with the current state of development. Didacticism exhausted its powers and can no longer account for the corruption of society: "America is a didactic country whose people always offer their personal experiences as a helpful lesson to the rest, hoping to hearten them and to do them good – an intensive sort of personal

public-relations project. There are times when I see this as idealism. There are other times when it looks to me like pure delirium. With everyone sold on the good how does all the evil get done?" (Bellow, *Humboldt...*, p. 65); "Did an American exist who was not morally didactic? Was there any crime committed which didn't punish the victim for 'the greater good'?" (Bellow, *Sammler...*, p. 182). The reason for this is that the social context has changed. What could have been a valuable lesson for a particular community in a particular confined space at a particular moment in time fails now to reflect didactically the universal reality. The "real reality" has moved away from a local setting with limited horizons and familiar features, traditions, occupations, classes to a more universal one: "These old-fashioned local worlds [...] are no longer local societies as we see them in Jane Austen or George Eliot. Our contemporary local societies have been overtaken by the world. The great cities have devoured them and now the universe itself imposes upon us, space with its stars comes upon us in our cities. So now we have the universe itself to face, without the comforts of community, without metaphysical certainty, without the power to distinguish the virtuous from the wicked man, surrounded by dubious realities and discovering dubious selves". (Bellow, *Where Do We Go...* p. 214) The theme of the corrupting city is in fact recurrent in Bellow's novels. New York and Chicago are allotted vast spaces in his novels being generally described as overwhelming, cultureless, money-oriented and socially alienating. Here is just one example: "Perhaps if we were in India or Finland we might not be in quite the same mood. New York makes one think about the collapse of civilization, about Sodom and Gomorrah, the end of the world. The end wouldn't come as surprise here". (Bellow, *Sammler...*, p. 34)

Bellow believes that modern fiction moved "from external action to internal movement", a process which he traces back to Proust and Joyce, who dropped narration altogether. Bellow's novels are not easy to define as they propose extremely various themes, thoughts, characters, typologies, imagery in an attempt to grasp the universal condition of the contemporary individual. It is tricky to put a label on any of Bellow's character or novel or even on the author himself because there are lots of powerful well-represented dualities. It appears that the changing of perspective, the multiple points of view, the acceptance of opposite stands are keys to understanding the complexities of the modern intellectual. A paradoxical figure, Herzog can be briefly characterized as "rational student of irrationality, skeptical believer, calculating, middle-aged innocent, self-effacing egotist, erotic intellectual, Montreal-born, Russian-Jewish American" (Rovit, *Bellow...*, p. 180). Bellow managed to create a true modern hero out of a character who practically does nothing but think. In a subtle way, the action of the 19th century novels moved into thinking and then back into action as the world of ideas becomes connected with man's actions: "*to think* – even though it is possible only to think about oneself – becomes synonymous with *to act*" (Rovit, *Bellow...*, p. 181). In a way it is a mandatory process for the writer to stand a chance in his attempt to shape society. Here again Bellow is dualistic. On the one hand, there are instances proving his belief that thinking alone is enough for the survival of the individual, not necessarily followed by action: "Experienced people begin at a certain point to keep their own counsel and refrain from telling their stories to one another" (Bellow, *Bellarosa...*, p. 14), and six pages later: "Deeply experienced people – this continually impresses me – will keep things to themselves". On the other hand, in the same novel, thought without action leads nowhere: "One can think of such things – and think and think – but nothing is resolved by these historical meditations. To think doesn't settle anything. No idea is more than an imaginary potency, a mushroom cloud (destroying nothing, making nothing) rising from blind consciousness". (Bellow, *Bellarosa...*, p. 24). This is one of Bellow's greatest achievements as a writer, to have managed to allow opposites to co-exist, not to take definitive sides. The true novel of ideas "becomes art when the views most opposite to the author's own are allowed to exist in full strength. Without this a novel of ideas is mere self-indulgence, and didacticism is simply axe-grinding. The opposites must be free to range themselves against each other, and they must be passionately expressed on both sides. It is for this reason I say it doesn't matter much what the

writer's personal position is, what he wishes to affirm. He may affirm principles we all approve of and write very bad novels". (Bellow, *Where Do We Go...*, p. 220).

This embracing of opposite ideas can undoubtedly be linked to Allan Bloom's concept of openness. In Bloom's opinion, openness in itself is not bad, but one has to distinguish between two kinds of openness, one of indifference (which unfortunately characterizes the modern American society, he believes) and openness that invites us to the quest for knowledge and certitude. The huge difference between them is that while the second one is necessary for progress as it helps us to investigate what is good or bad in the rich diversity of cultures, habits, opinions, the first one suggests that we should be open to everything, respect all diversities. This is what modern relativism has taught us to do and, in Bloom's words, we are encouraged to "go to the bazaar of cultures and find reinforcement for inclinations that are repressed by puritanical guilt feelings. All such teachers of openness had no interest in or were actively hostile to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution". (Bloom, *Closing...*, p. 33). This is exactly what Bellow acknowledges and fears most about contemporary society: "Certain European importations were remarkably successful in the United States – psychoanalysis, existentialism. Both related to the sexual revolution". (Bellow, *Sammmler...*, p. 65); "Let us think only about our own part of the world. We have fallen into much ugliness. It is bewildering to see how much these new individuals suffer, with their new leisure and liberty". (Bellow, *Sammmler...*, p. 208); America has evolved into a "shared consciousness", individuality being suppressed and genuine emotions being possible only on a large scale: "When American Jews decided to make a statement about the War Against the Jews, they had to fill Madison Square Garden with big-name celebs singing Hebrew and 'America the Beautiful'. [...] How many people does the Garden hold? Well, it was full, and everybody was in mourning. I suppose the whole place was in tears. The Times covered it, which is the paper of record, so the record shows that the American Jewish way was to assemble twenty-five thousand people, Hollywood style, and weep publicly for what had happened". (Bellow, *Bellarosa...*, p. 59).

The role of the intellectual is therefore that of reorienting the self towards knowledge, exchange of ideas in order to create the ability to filter what an impure society might confront us with. The evolution from rights to liberty and from liberty to openness needs to be constantly adjusted and only the intellectuals can alert his fellow citizens of the danger behind the famous statement "the right to the pursuit of hapiness": that of transforming oneself into a simple consumer, getting satisfaction from a fake reality, a simulacra, complacent about himself/herself and always willing to choose the easiest way around. Most modern readers simply do not take the challenge, they just wish to be entertained. But entertainment without intellectual effort creates not a reality, but an illusion and Bellow is aware of the growing need for illusion of the contemporary society: "A great deal of intelligence can be invested in ignorance when the need for illusion is deep"; "You could see the suicidal impulses pushing strongly. You wondered whether this Western culture could survive universal dissemination – whether only its science and technology or administrative practices would travel, be adopted by other societies". (Bellow, *Sammmler...*, p. 34). Through his work, most notably through *Herzog*, Bellow managed to reassure intellectuality of its role in society. Towards the end of *Herzog*, the main character, comfortably seated in his lawn chair, exclaims: "I am pretty well satisfied to be, to be just as it is willed, and for as long as I may remain in occupancy". John W. Aldridge brilliantly interpreted this ending: "we sense that Herzog will be a long time in occupancy. For if it has been demonstrated that intellectuals have a corner on the world's love and compassion, it is probable that they also have a corner on the world's powers of survival". (Aldridge, *The Complacency...*, p. 209).

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