

Introduction to the Symposium: The Search for the Spiritual in Saul Bellow

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One of the great American writers of the latter-half of the twentieth century, if not the greatest American writer of that era, is Saul Bellow. Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976 and other numerous awards, Bellow's place in both popular and academic cultures is secured, with nearly over thirty volumes and fifteen hundred essays written about his work. His appeal resides in his precise diagnosis of the malaise that afflicts modernity – rationalism, existentialism, modernism – and his affirmation of religious and social values in a secular world. Rather than deriding the modern world or celebrating its fragmentation and disorder, Bellow writes about the comedy inherent in life and the possible paths of spiritual fulfillment. For Bellow, life is not a wasteland or a trial to be endured but a journey to be enjoyed with the hope of being able to make sense of it.

This roundtable explores this theme of faith and spiritual fulfillment in Bellow's own life and works. The first essay, Gloria L. Cronin's "Bellow's Spiritual Quest," is a review of Bellow's own attempts to find spiritual enlightenment. At various points in his life, Bellow became a disciple of the works of Wilhelm Reich, Rudolph Steiner, and Owen Barfield in his search to find meaning in the world. What is confirmed to him intellectually by these thinkers is his own belief in the spiritual capacity of language that places him in opposition to the modernist tradition of Joyce, Eliot, and Hemingway. This opposition stems from a continual love of British Romanticism, American Transcendentalism, Eastern philosophy, and, most importantly, his Biblical Judaism. It is from this source, as a Jew, where he could literally dream and imagine himself out of his European ghetto ancestors to find dignity and meaning in a hostile world.

The second essay, "The Search to be Human in *Dangling Man*," is my continuation of a theme raised by Joseph Baim that the protagonist, Joseph, is seeking spiritual fulfillment – to find what it means to be "human" in the present age. However, unlike Baim, I argue that Joseph remains trapped in his "ideal construction" of reason and therefore is not able to accept reality's life-affirming nature even when he experientially encounters it at the end of the novel. In fact, the various archetypes offered to Joseph – reason, romanticism, stoicism – all fail to provide a path towards spiritual fulfillment. But it is the very failure of his reason that preserves Joseph, for reality is too diffuse and complicated to be conceptualized entirely. Bellow therefore suggests to us that the meaning of life is to be experienced and not conceptualized whatever form it may take.

In the third essay, "Society, Self, and Spirituality in *Herzog*," Elyse Zucker explores how Herzog overcome a reductive and utilitarian culture to find spiritual meaning. What Bellow concludes is that human nature is too mysterious and complex to become exhausted by empirical methods to find existential meaning. Instead of finding refuge in the works of Heidegger or

Kierkegaard, one should find meaning within one's own soul and its encounter with God. The paradox is that such meaning cannot be conveyed in language: it cannot be directly spoken on but only spoken about. Once Herzog recognizes this, he becomes liberated from the constraints of language and begins his search for spiritual enlightenment.

The fourth essay, "Bellow, Kierkegaard, and American Estheticism," is Julianne Romanello's adoption of Kierkegaard's philosophy of the esthetic, ethical, and religious life to interpret *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. According to Romanello, Bellow, like Kierkegaard, did not think the task of discovering an authentic self was neither inevitable nor impossible in modernity, and that such a self is to care for others which require knowledge of the divine and one's relations to it. We see the characters Margotte, Shula, and Elya show Sammler to recognize that knowledge is not the end of life itself; rather, it is to act with compassion and love in order to find one's true meaning.

The final essay, "Immortality in *Ravelstein*," is Stephen Block's Straussian exploration about the theme of immortality in the novel and how this theme is drawn from the Platonic dialogue, *The Symposium*. Interestingly, the question of immortality for Ravelstein is not a serious one as a philosopher. But for Chick it is a continual and viable one, forcing us to choose between faith and philosophy. The question of the "return" that is raised at the beginning of the essay is therefore a return to immortality whether in the form of philosophy and its study of great texts or faith with its rituals and mysticism.

Of course, this roundtable is not comprehensive in its treatment of the theme of religion and faith in Bellow's works. Certain non-fictional works, like *To Jerusalem and Back*, as well as seminal novels like *The Adventures of Augie March* and *Humboldt's Gift*, are absent from this roundtable and could have further contributed to our understanding of religion and faith in Bellow's thought. Perhaps this could be a project for the future. In the meantime, we invite the readers to reflect what we hope to be a starting point in a conversation about religion and faith in Bellow's own works.