

# Book Review

Copyright © 2010 The New York Times



Cynthia Ozick



Saul Bellow

## On Whom Nothing Was Lost

By Thomas Mallon

**FOREIGN BODIES** By Cynthia Ozick. 255 pp. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. \$26.

Cynthia Ozick's longstanding and perceptive enthrallment with Henry James once made her declare the "pivotal truth" of his last novels to be "not that he chooses to tell too little . . . but that he knows too much, and much more than we, or he, can possibly take in." Among those books it is "The Ambassadors" that has most preoccupied Ozick, who admits that her first novel, "Trust," published in 1966, was "heavily influenced by compulsive reading and rereading" of it.

*Continued on Page 10*

By Leon Wieseltier

**SAUL BELLOW** Letters. Edited by Benjamin Taylor. 571 pp. Viking. \$35.

"We often stopped before a display of children's shoes. My mother coveted for me a pair of patent-leather sandals with an *elegantissimo* strap. I finally got them — I rubbed them with butter to preserve the leather. This is when I was 6 or 7 years old, a little older than Rosie is now. Amazing how it all boils down to a pair of patent-leather sandals." Saul Bellow recorded that ancient memory, stirred to it by play with his little daughter, in a

*Continued on Page 12*



# Saul Bellow

Continued from Page 1

letter on Feb. 19, 2004, when he was 88 years old. It is the last letter in this magnificent book. The old master died a year later.

The "it" to which those talismanic shoes refer is what might be called the vernacular sublime, which was the object of Bellow's inner exertions all his life. The story of his avenues and approaches and attacks in his campaign for it composes the plot of this collection. Everything leads to the epiphany of the sandals, and its triumphant creatureliness. The man is all here in this book, in his stunning, almost baffling plenitude. Bellow's letters are — as anybody who corresponded with him must have expected them to be, and here I must disclose, or confess, or boast, that the volume includes also some gorgeous letters to me, written in the fullness of our friendship decades ago, when we used to worry over metaphysics and the novel as we chopped wood — one of Bellow's greatest books. Benjamin Taylor records that it contains only two-fifths of what Bellow called his "epistling," but its riches are nonetheless immense. Taylor has selected and edited and annotated these letters with exquisite judgment and care. This is an *elegantissimo* book. Our literature's debt to Taylor, if our culture still cares, is considerable.

"I have a certain feeling for reality," Bellow wrote in 1961; and in 1974, "I know how to transform common matter." As with those sandals, the poetry of his prose, its force of consciousness, lay always in its fidelity to the concrete. In the appearances of things and circumstances and psyches, he discerned the revelatory details. Bellow was a giant of description, and he knew it. About the editors of a certain magazine he wickedly remarked, in 1991, that "I could make those people very unhappy by describing them." Perhaps it was the same scruple that made him confine so much of his shatteringly accurate portraiture to the dead.

As with his novels, the reading of his letters leaves one amazed by how much Bellow saw. He was always glancing and glimpsing. In a letter to a former student, in 1955, he cautioned her about "American books, including my own" that "pant so after meaning. They are earnestly moral, didactic; they build them ever more stately mansions, and they exhort and plead and refine." He instructed her, instead, that "a work of art should rest on perception." In 1957, criticizing a story that Philip Roth had sent him, he scolded the young writer that "I have a thing about *Ideas* in stories." And Bellow was just as vigilant about the arrogance of form. To Alfred Kazin, in 1950, he complained about the prevalence of the notion that "to write a story is to manipulate symbols," and warned against

**Leon Wieseltier** is the literary editor of *The New Republic*.



*The unruliness of existence was Bellow's lasting theme; but while he studied it, he never quite ordered it. In fiction and in life, he seemed to believe in the fecundity of disorder.*

"what happens when literature itself becomes the basis for literature and classics become crushers." About "The Adventures of Augie March," he wrote to Bernard Malamud that "a novel, like a letter, should be loose, cover much ground, run swiftly, take risk of mortality and decay. I backed away from Flaubert, in the direction of Walter Scott, Balzac and Dickens."

Bellow's cause was actuality, the wholeness of it. His ideal was wakefulness. Writing to an old schoolmate in 1948 — his lifelong devotion to the people of his youth is one of the most moving features of this book — he declares, almost creedally, that "the man we bring forth has no richness compared with the man who really exists, thickened, fed and fattened by

all the facts about him, all of his history." In 1956, in the aftermath of the early death of his cherished friend Isaac Rosenfeld, he professes in a melancholy letter to Delmore Schwartz's ex-wife that in his writing he has "tried to make a little more reality, or tried to reclaim a little of infinite unreality."

The justly celebrated vastness of Bellow's metaphorical field was owed to this fight for veridical observation, this longing for true knowledge. Metaphor is the juxtaposition of disparate elements of the world in which an unsuspected commonality, an illuminating partial likeness, has been discovered, and the more unlikely the juxtaposition, the greater the consequent sensation of the unifying of the world; and so the range of a writer's metaphor is a measure of the range of his cognition. The novelist, Bellow proclaims, must make himself aware of nothing less than "the total human situation." Sometimes this magisterial sensitivity brings amusement. In a rueful letter about aging, he cites his "blue-cheese ankles." Reporting merrily, in 1997, on a dinner for Vaclav Havel that turned into an admiring mob, he writes that "Havel and I chatted for about three minutes and were separated as if we were tomato seeds in the digestive tract." This is the sort of drollery that gives evidence of an uncommonly large internal space. "The 19th century drove writers into attics," he tells Alice Adams. "The 20th shuts them in nutshells. The only remedy is to declare yourself king, or queen, of infinite space."

In the mid-1970s, there came a crisis. The dazzling representation of the appearances no longer satisfied Bellow. "For some time now," he writes to Owen Barfield in 1975, "I have been asking what kind of knowledge a writer has." The "interest of much of life as represented in the books I read (and perhaps some that I wrote) had been exhausted. But how could existence itself become uninteresting." He concludes that "images or representations *this* side of the mirror have indeed tired us out." Even more startlingly, he informs Barfield that "lately I have become aware, not of illumination itself, but of a kind of illuminated fringe — a peripheral glimpse of a different state of things." Barfield was an extraordinary figure, a disciple of Rudolf Steiner's eccentric "anthroposophy" and its belief in a spiritual world with which we may have direct acquaintance, but also a profound thinker in his own right about language and imagination and the spoliation of human inwardness by a scientific and technological civilization. Bellow's letters to Barfield are perhaps the most fascinating in the book, not least because they are the only ones in which Bellow is humble.

At Barfield's suggestion, he undertook a study of Steiner — in defiance, to put it mildly, of his own skeptical and secular

temperament. Perhaps his old schooling in the Russian writers — “We were so *Russian*, as adolescents,” he recalls to Stanley Elkin in 1992 — inclined him to such explorations. His impish delight in outraging the advanced cultural consensus of his time might also have encouraged him in this flamboyantly anti-materialist heterodoxy. But not surprisingly, the doctrine did not win him. No doctrine ever did. In 1977 he confides to a friend that “I can’t manage this new kind of consciousness. I don’t know what to do about it.” And in 1979, in a dramatic letter to Barfield, he revolts. “I am troubled by your judgment of the books I’ve written. I don’t ask you to like what you obviously can’t help disliking, but I can’t easily accept your dismissal of so much investment of soul.”

It is a stirring moment, and more than an outburst of pride. It is a vindication of the old calling on the new ground: he has found spirituality in the enterprise of fiction. The rumor of dessication is dispelled. He will have no more of the other side’s condescension to this side. Never mind that the form of the novel was built on the ruins of metaphysical certainty: novels, too, may be soulful. Three years later Bellow castigates his erstwhile teacher for an uncomprehending review of “The Dean’s December,” and in a parting shot he taunts the mystagogue that “the leap beyond” . . . would have to be a leap into a world of which one has had some experience.” Without such a continuity, the consummation would be meaningless. The transfiguration of the sandals must be preceded by the recognition of the sandals.

In recent years, Bellow has been venerated primarily for his laughter and his language. His British admirers in particular, orphaned by the dreariness of their own postwar fiction and in abject (and rather boring) envy of American energy, have remade Bellow according to their need: a comic writer, a high mocker and essentially a stylist. There is some truth, obviously, to this worship of his ebullience, of the libertine vigor of his voice. Of all modern writers, Bellow somehow managed to combine intellectuality and vitality without compromising either of the indispensable terms. The life-force never deserted him, even as it was always attended by interpretation. The unruliness of existence was Bellow’s lasting theme; but while he studied it, he never quite ordered it. In his fiction and in his life, he seemed to believe in the fecundity of disorder.

Yet something is missing from the chortling celebration of Bellowian jollity, and that is its foundation in gloom. “Bitter melancholy” is “one of my specialties,” he tells Edward Shils in 1962. About “the power to despair,” he writes to a friend in 1961 that “having myself felt it, known it, bathed in it, my native and temperamental impulse is to return to sanity in the form of laughter.” The letters show a



*The letters show a man constantly wrestling high spirits from low, and forbidding himself ‘the newest wrinkle in anguish.’*

man constantly wrestling high spirits from low, and forbidding himself “the newest wrinkle in anguish.” The charming and gregarious writer feels “almost astrally alone, but still “I’m out for *sursum corda*. Lift up the heart.” In 1968, in a letter to Meyer Schapiro about Delmore Schwartz (who had died two years earlier) and John Berryman (who would kill himself four years later), he remarks that “I see why these self-destructive lives are led. But I can’t convince myself that it is a good tradition.” There is an almost erotic charge to Bellow’s endless affirmations; they are so affecting because they are so willed. Since they are deeply reflective, they do not seem merely manic. “Really,” he writes to Lionel Trilling in 1952, “things are now what they always were, and to be disappointed in them is extremely shallow. We may not be strong enough to live in the present. But to be *disappointed* in it!”

Bellow was clear about the role of comedy in his work. “The real thing is unfathomable,” he declares in 1974. “You can’t get it down to distinct or clear opinion. Sensing this, I have always had intelligence enough (or the intuition) to put humor between myself and final claims.” To Richard Chase, in 1959, he remarks on his lack of “the will or the capacity to continue to a definite conclusion” — this was a charge frequently brought against his teeming novels — and explains that

“I sometimes think the comedy in my books is a satire on this inconclusiveness.” The satire could sometimes be savage, of course; and he was usually not the object of his own cruelty. But the laughter in Bellow is mainly philosophical laughter. He had Camus’s lucidity, but not his solemnity. (“‘The Plague’ was an *IDEA*. Good or bad? Not so hot, in my opinion.”) His only equal in this attainment was Beckett, except for the abstraction and the allegory, which Bellow could do without. (In an archive Taylor found Beckett’s calling card, arranging for a meeting with Bellow in Paris — as Taylor nicely puts it, “the living embodiment of modernism was eager to meet the great quarreler with modernism.” The encounter was brief and uneventful.) There was nothing hip or cynical or self-satisfied about Bellow’s hilarity. It was a boisterous stoicism, a technique of perseverance.

**B**ELLOW liked to scoff at serious people, but he never left their company. He, too, always had something urgent to say. The Yiddish writer I.L. Peretz once castigated a critic (a Bellowian activity!) that it is not enough to speak Yiddish, you have to have something to say. The view of Bellow as primarily a stylist, the pleasure-seeking reading of Bellow, the cult of his sentences, is inadequate. His manner was rougher and

more controversial, stubbornly animated by ultimate questions, motivated by mind, an intervention in society as well as in literature. Even greater than how he said what he said was what he had to say. His writings, these letters included, are efforts in explanation, or in the hunger for explanation. He did not compose manifestoes or programs, and he despised ideologies — Norman Mailer is “such an ideologist,” whereas “I do everything the hard way”; but his ridicule of intellectuals never led Bellow, as it did some of his contemporaries, to the barbarities of anti-intellectualism.

Denouncing “culture-gravity,” he jokes to Bernard Malamud that “they say ‘picaresque’ and don’t laugh,” but Bellow laughed and said “picaresque.” The author of these letters was, from beginning to end, a genius reader, always returning to the old thinkers and writers, always tussling with them. He was, in his nature, one of their number. “Ideology is of no use to us in refurbishing the empty house,” he observes to Leslie Fiedler. What is of use, by contrast, is humanism. Humanism is “the most subversive of all — and I am a humanist.” The absence of irony from that avowal is like a cool breeze. Trotsky, Reich, Steiner: Bellow was forever chasing the answer, but his disappointments in belief never dissuaded him from the chase. “The best of me has formed in the jumps.” Finally he was — may this, too, be said without irony? — a seeker after truth.

One marvels for many reasons at the man who wrote these letters, but for no reason more than that he was a free man. I do not refer merely to his rebelliousness and his restlessness, to his “jail-breaking spirit.” He is beset by cares and obligations; his friends die and die and die; he makes a slop (until, in 1989, he marries Janis Freedman) of his private life; but nothing ever robs him of the free and unfettered use of his powers. “A language is a spiritual mansion from which no one can evict us,” and in that palace Bellow was sovereign. “The only sure cure is to write a book,” he advises Alice Adams. Only time, and the accidental ingestion of a poison fish in the tropics in 1994, dims him. Otherwise, for the duration of the long and unsinkable life chronicled in these pages, he is a large man growing larger, a spirit expanding, an unabating lightstorm, and “the name of the game is Give All.” He never loses his constancy of purpose. In the penultimate letter in this volume, in the winter of 2002, he sums himself up for a distant relative in a casual *Abschied*: “Actually, I’ve never stopped looking for the real thing; and often I find the real thing. To fall into despair is just a high-class way of turning into a dope. I choose to laugh, and laugh at myself no less than at others.” And then, on the next page, the final page, as if to verify his visionary relation to the real, the sandals. □