

# Man of Letters

A novelist finds his classic voice

REVIEW BY JEREMY BERLIN

SAUL BELLOW: *Letters*

Edited by Benjamin Taylor  
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Throughout his mental and physical journeying, he has been composing letters—to friends and enemies, professional rivals and colleagues. . . . The letters are cranky, brilliant, poignant. . . . Some . . . are playful, some are pixilated; but all of them are, in the last analysis, responsible. Taken together they compose a credo for the times.

THAT'S A FAIR PRÉCIS of this cracking new volume, 700-plus pieces of Bellovian correspondence penned over eight decades. Only it comes from a 1964 *New York Times* review of *Herzog*, describing a habit of the titular character—a Canadian-born Jewish intellectual raised in Chicago by Russian parents, mired in middle-aged cuckoldry and divorce, struggling to make sense of the cosmos's eternal churn. For these inveterate letter writers, however, art and life part ways at the post office: Saul Bellow's alter ego Moses Herzog never mailed his missives; Bellow did. Now, a lionized lifetime of books and awards later, we have this telling posthumous clutch.

"A novel, like a letter, should be loose, cover much ground, run swiftly, take risk of mortality and decay," Bellow once said. That he took his own advice on the first count is beyond refute: His rangy, hectic novels were singularly paradoxical—ebullient and solipsistic, personal and political, postmodern and old-fashioned. His correspondence has a slightly different cant. Reading these letters, one is struck by the number of chances taken, yes, but also by the wisdom proffered, the generosity displayed, the fellow feelings sustained. The Bellow

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that emerges here is less churlish and contrarian (names he was often called, and sometimes deserved) than inclusive and compassionate, especially toward other writers, whom he seemed to view as brethren in a tough guild.

In 1953, he encouraged the younger Bernard Malamud with a kindly note: "You're a writer yourself, a real one." Four years later, he urged a struggling Philip Roth to contact his own well-placed agent. In 1976, he gushed to John Cheever: "Will I read your book? Would I accept a free trip to Xanadu with Helen of Troy as my valet?" Five years after that, his ardor for that author flowered:

When I read your collected stories, I was moved to see the transformation taking place on the printed page. There's nothing that counts really except this transforming action of the soul. I loved you for this. I loved you anyway, but for this especially.

Even righteous indignation, which Bellow clearly felt in 1956 after William Faulkner and other writers sought the anti-Semitic Ezra Pound's release from an insane asylum, is relatively succinct and restrained:

What staggers me is that you and Mr. Steinbeck who have dealt for so many years in words should fail to understand the import of [his] plain and brutal statements about the "kikes" leading the "goy" to slaughter. Is this . . . the stuff of poetry? It is a call to murder.

Of course, no book of Bellow's words can be all sweetness and light. Here we also find professional turnabout (the critic, he huffed to Alfred Kazin back in 1944, "finds his drama ready for him; the novelist has to assemble it from the materials he bumps blindly, fish-like, with his nose"); callousness (writing to a grand-niece, the serial husband refers to his own "numerous and preposterous marriages"); and intolerance ("I'm afraid there's nothing we can do about the journalists," he wrote ruefully to Roth in 1984. "We can only hope that they will die off as the deerflies do towards the end of August"). The punch

is sometimes spiked with vitriol and misogyny (a publisher is “a devious rat,” an interviewer a “crooked little slut”), yet by party’s end, it’s the tipples of *humaneness*—expressed through discursion and bon mot—that intoxicate.

A principal pleasure in this chronological collection is the chronology itself—in the joy of watching a big man of American letters grow into himself, reflexively and reflectively, in the course of composing letters. The earliest ones here, from the 1930s and ’40s, are junior-varsity Bellow: clamoring for attention and respect (“The writing is sound, the idea . . . is a genuine one,” he wrote defensively to Kazin in 1944), overripe with a callow poesy (“the lonely wind is making the trees softly whisper and rustle . . . somewhere in the night a bird cries out”). By the early ’50s, he’d found his literary feet (“When I began to write *Augie March*,” he told *The Paris Review* in a lengthy 1966 interview, “I took off many of [my self-imposed] restraints”). Henceforth, even the most banal notes, rife with sympathy, allusion, and self-knowledge, boast a striking power-to-weight ratio. Writing to Robert Penn Warren in 1954:

That’s awful about the leg! I hope it was only a Tennysonian and poetic fracture that will give you an opportunity to dream, and not one of those rough Hemingway-type broken legs. You sound cheerful about it, but then you have an enviable way of referring to your troubles. I wish I had it. As the youngest child I learned to make the most of mine.



Soon that classic voice—the nervily mordant, high-low kibitzing of the Talmudic wise guy, which, said Roth, closed “the gap between Thomas Mann and Damon Runyon”—is everywhere. Love and death, rooted together in

dirty little patches of mundanity, bloom as one. As Bellow wrote to his then wife, in Chicago circa 1962:

I am seated in my office growling at Life the Tiger. Winter has now turned into a cold fluid—gray. All the old ice looks like Death’s protégé. Even the sparrows are sick of this. And the elms. Phooey! [ . . . ]

And I miss you. Your loving *Husband*.

The excerpt above, however, proves a rule: Bellow’s famous correspondents overshadow the wives and friends, sons and lovers, agents and editors. That’s hardly a cavil; letters to costars, not stagehands, tend to make for more compelling theater. Still, a stargazing reader may become blinded to the greater sky, seeking literary gossip to the exclusion of all else, or plunging headlong into the brush after tidy correlatives: Which letters underscore Bellow’s formative early novels (*Dangling Man*, *The Victim*)? Which were written during his stylistic (and commercial) blaze of glory (*The Adventures of Augie March*, *Seize the Day*, *Henderson the Rain King*, *Humboldt’s Gift*)? Which run concurrent with the lesser works (*The Bellarosa Connection*, *The Dean’s December*, *Ravelstein*)? But these are snipe hunts, at

Saul Bellow in 1958

least if the first purpose was to find a man in full. Besides, don't we really want something *newly* edifying from our great writers, something we can't glean from their novels or novellas or stories or essays?

We do, though we don't always receive it. "The great authors are not all so good at letters," notes Benjamin Taylor in his lyrically astute introduction. "Indeed, you could make a considerable list of figures of the first rank who were perfunctory correspondents. It would seem to be a separate gift, as mysterious as the artistic one." Which is one reason for this volume's vitality. Another is its already endangered status: This collection—mailed letters published in book form—may be among the last of its kind. Today's literary lions prowl vast new veldts of technology and transmission. No one knows what their credo will be, or what sort of correspondence they will send or save—or not.