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Old Saul and Young Saul

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Saul Bellow's Heart: A Son's Memoir

by Greg Bellow

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1.

In outline form, Greg Bellow's memoir of his father Saul tells a familiar twentieth-century story: a young Jewish left-wing idealist becomes an overbearing middle-aged reactionary, driven in part by sexual anxieties obvious to everyone but himself. In detail, the story is nuanced, moving, and idiosyncratic, with an unpredictable ending.

As Greg Bellow describes him, "young Saul," known only to his family and close friends, was the vulnerable, soft-hearted, independent-minded son of a brutal, observant-Jewish, immigrant father. *Saul Bellow's Heart* opens with Greg's memory of himself at eight, watching young Saul, at thirty-seven, burst into tears after "a terrible argument, in Yiddish, between my father and grandfather." Twenty years later, "old Saul," in violent contrast, was as rigid a patriarch as his own father had been, humiliating his children and grandchildren in private while denouncing in public the breakdown of traditional hierarchy and obedience.

In Greg Bellow's account, as in his father's recently published *Letters*, old Saul seems to have been, at least in part, a protective carapace that Bellow built around himself when he began to feel exposed by fame. Old Saul concealed his vulnerability and mixed feelings, not only from the public but also, to his cost, from his wives and children. Unlike the ambivalent and self-doubting young father who laughed at his own contradictions, old Saul was abrupt, arbitrary, and uncomplicated. He said what he meant, whether you liked it or not, and became silent when told he was contradicting himself.

At eight, alone in a hospital in Montreal (he was born there in 1915), Bellow listened to a volunteer read aloud from the New Testament, an episode recorded in two of his novels and summarized by Greg Bellow:

Saul secretly fell in love with Jesus as a man who loved mankind and suffered without complaint. Surrounded by other boys who taunted him for being Jewish, he quickly realized that loving Jesus was a complicated matter best kept to himself on the ward and from his parents.

As a young man, Bellow took sharp pleasure in Jewishness as an intellectual and moral style, a source of irony and independence, but pulled away from its offer of a collective, ritualized identity. "During those years," Greg reports, "he resisted the label of 'Jewish writer,' once pointedly declaring that he liked hockey, but no critic labeled him a Blackhawk fan." Bellow outraged his

father by leaving a ham in the icebox and driving on Yom Kippur to visit friends while his family, obedient to Jewish law, walked to synagogue. When Greg was twelve, Bellow asked him if he wanted a bar mitzvah, and was content when Greg, whose friends resented being sent to Hebrew lessons to prepare for the ceremony, said no.

Old Saul swept aside the younger one's respect for his son's feelings, demanding (unsuccessfully) that his grandson Andrew should have a bar mitzvah and learn the religious traditions that he had ignored when raising Greg. He renounced his youthful internationalism for racial stereotypes and right-wing tub-thumping. Young Saul, forced underground, remained as rebellious as ever, but was reduced to secret revolts against his older self. In public, Bellow gave a lecture titled "A Jewish Writer in America" (posthumously published in these pages¹); in private, in a letter a few months earlier, he put the phrase "Jewish Writers in America" between distancing quotation marks and exclaimed, "a repulsive category!"

Greg recalls incidents when the two Sauls seem to have contended for the right to speak. After Greg reminded his father that he had let him refuse a bar mitzvah, Bellow said nothing more about it, young Saul having silenced the old one. Soon afterward, however, old Saul, without speaking a word, renewed his demands by sending a messenger, a woman who, on first meeting Greg, "began to badger me about Andrew's bar mitzvah"—one of many occasions when Bellow used messengers and surrogates to impose old Saul's will on friends and family whose memory of his younger self shamed him into silence when face to face.

As he aged, Bellow grew exaggeratedly patriarchal. While a young father, he had been, in Greg's eyes, more maternal than Greg's mother. When he and the teenage Greg spoke privately, he always asked about the state of what he called Greg's "inner life." Greg once gave him a printed Father's Day card saying, "You've been like a mudder to me, fodder." Greg confirms his father's self-portrait in the *Letters* as a man puzzled by his vulnerability, his impulse to trust and revere, his recurring search for strong-minded "Reality-Instructors" (his name for them in *Herzog* [1964]; "I bring them out," Herzog says), and his defensive fury after he exposes these qualities to others. Greg says of the older Bellow's denunciations of ex-wives and once-dominant friends: "These complaints were largely for public consumption and to disguise how dependent Saul had felt."

Bellow's softer qualities are present in his books—most vividly in his finest and saddest novel, *Seize*



Greg Bellow

Greg Bellow with his father, Saul Bellow,
Ludingtonville, New York, 1946

the Day (1956)—but the old man’s genius at self-presentation ensured that the public would imagine him as a colossus like Rodin’s Balzac. In his late novella *The Actual* (1997), the narrator seems to share Bellow’s private sense of himself: “I myself was both larger and heavier than my parents, though internally more fragile, perhaps.”

Bellow seems to have regretted having revealed himself through the partial self-portraits in his first two novels: the passive narrator in *Dangling Man* (1944) who rushes to accept military discipline, and the bewildered, submissive Asa Leventhal in *The Victim* (1947), in thrall to the WASP Kirby Allbee. The crisis that finally releases Leventhal occurs when he returns home to find Allbee having sex with a prostitute. A betrayal by a man served the same function that a wife’s betrayal would serve in novels written by the older Bellow two decades later. “You don’t care about the woman,” Allbee tells Leventhal. “You’re just using her to make an issue and break your promise to me.”

Old Saul came into being after a crisis in the late 1950s that paralleled the crisis in *The Victim*. Bellow, having “kept his head in the sand for an astronomically long time,” admitted to himself that his second wife, Sondra (Greg calls her Sasha), was having an affair with his friend Jack Ludwig. Ludwig had played a fawning flunky to a seigneurial Bellow, and Bellow had taken a teaching job on condition that his vassal Ludwig be hired with him. As in many unequal-seeming relations, the ostensibly dominant figure may not have been the psychologically dominant one. Sondra “maintained that the true passion of the affair was between Saul and Jack.”

In Bellow’s fantasy in *The Victim*, Leventhal takes revenge against Allbee by pushing him through a door that hits him in the face. Bellow took revenge against Jack Ludwig by writing him into *Herzog* as the domineering hypocrite Valentine Gersbach, “Saul’s valentine,” Sondra said. Gersbach’s faults include displays of Jewish solidarity—he gives lectures to the Hadassah—of the kind that young Saul despised and old Saul practiced. Bellow defended himself against his oppressors by imitating them.

Greg Bellow was born to Bellow’s first wife, Anita, in 1944. He became a psychotherapist specializing in unhappy children. “Saul commented that I had turned the misery of my childhood into a career.” Greg felt as if he lost his father twice while he was still alive. The first loss occurred when Bellow left Anita in 1952. (Later he had four more wives, three more divorces, two more sons, and a daughter.) The second loss occurred in the 1960s when the newly conservative Bellow repudiated the left-wing ideals and “complete lack of religious observance” that he had taught Greg in childhood.

After the first loss, Greg still found comfort in his father’s visits and care, and when Anita, having remarried, spent Greg’s college fund furnishing a new house, Saul took over her share of the expenses. After the second loss, the relations of father and son took two conflicting forms. At times they shared intense emotional intimacies and wept together at deaths among family and friends. Bellow said after one death, “Come to Chicago. Your loving father will be waiting.” At other times, they withdrew into tense silences. One lasted eighteen months, after Saul, having said he was “moving heaven and earth” to attend Greg’s daughter’s wedding, curtly announced that he would not be there. Greg and his daughter “had a heart-wrenching conversation about how Saul could inflict so much pain by making commitments and failing to fulfill them.”

2.

Saul Bellow's Heart is persuasive but artless, making it an easy target for reviewers who didn't want to hear what it has to say. Greg Bellow writes as if he were speaking aloud, shifting unguardedly between nostalgia and rage. He forgets whether someone was selfish or generous, slips now and then into a fog of pop-psych clichés, but emerges with telling anecdotes that make their point without commentary. The reviews that pounced on the son's contradictions also promoted a simple, heroic image of the father.

The subtitle "A Son's Memoir" understates the book's wider interest. What prompted Greg Bellow to write it was his discovery, after his father's death, that Saul had accumulated a vast family of literary heirs in addition to his biological ones, and that his literary heirs remembered an ideal father entirely unlike Greg's real one. This discovery felt like yet another loss of his father.

In death, Saul had been taken over, it seemed, by an efficient and impersonal public relations machine. Bellow's lawyer reported his death to the media, not to his children. Greg first heard of it from his car radio. No one from Bellow's real families was asked to speak at his funeral. He was memorialized instead by a writer, "the literary 'son,'" and an academic, "the dutiful Jewish 'daughter.'" Afterward, Greg read published tributes—in which "I could barely recognize Saul"—by younger writers declaring their spiritual intimacy with his father:

In the following weeks I heard and read many anecdotes and accounts that claimed a similar special closeness with Saul Bellow the literary patriarch. I took them to be distinctly filial and soon came to feel that dozens of self-appointed sons and daughters were jostling in public for a position at the head of a parade that celebrated my father's life. By now irked by the shoving match at the front of the line, I asked myself, "What is it with all these filial narratives? After all, he was *my* father! Did they all have such lousy fathers that they needed to co-opt mine?"

Greg names three writers for whom Bellow was a literary father, all of whom wrote books prompted by their vexed relations with their real fathers.

The relation between a literary father and a literary heir is always one of mutual idealization. Similar cross-idealizations of *éminence terrible* and *enfant gris* occur in other fields and in both sexes. The most common variety seems to be prompted by a young person's wish to find a mentor, a word that points directly to the fantasy behind the wish. In the *Odyssey*, the Ithacan elder Mentor is not a mentor at all; the protective guide who takes Telemakhos in hand is Athena disguised as Mentor, a divinity filling a role that no ordinary mortal could manage.

Not all celebrated writers attract idealizing literary children. Those who do seem to have an unusually sharp divide between their public image and their private self, between their versions of old Saul and young Saul. Another writer who attracted many ideal sons (one was also an ideal son to Saul Bellow) was Lionel Trilling, whose amoral, nihilistic inner self despised his outer self's "character of public virtue" (as he called it in his journal) and kept resolving to repudiate it; instead, he repudiated, one after another, the ideal sons who were mirror images of it.

What the literary father seems to find in an ideal son is an image of his younger self as it might have been without its weakness and doubt, the younger self whom Saul Bellow unhappily confronted whenever Greg came to visit. What the literary son seems to find in an ideal father is an image of what he might become if he could overturn the barriers left inside him by his real father. Each hopes to find in the other a relief from anxiety that no idealizing fantasy can give; so the claims of sonship that so annoy Greg Bellow remain frequent and insistent.

Greg Bellow perhaps need not be as annoyed as he sounds. His often angry relation with his father was one of mutual love, while the seemingly harmonious relations between Bellow and his ideal sons were sometimes ones of mutual use. Christopher Isherwood, another hero for younger writers, noted in his diary that one's "warmest supporters are the ones who do the most...to make you look ridiculous." Bellow's literary heirs tend to celebrate him in absurdly heroicizing ways, and they invariably quote the verbal fireworks that make him dazzling—the long propulsive sentences, accumulating phrase upon gorgeous phrase like a streetwise Walter Pater—not the laconic evocations of loss, especially in his shorter books like *Seize the Day*, that make him moving.

Bellow's literary heirs like to imagine him as a nineteenth-century artist-hero, beyond good and evil, exempted from all other obligations by the service demanded by his art. One reviewer who savaged Greg Bellow's book argued that Saul had

struggled to create something out of nothing, and had to justify that scandalous magic in conventional, unmagical, mid-century America. This justification expressed itself all too often as self-justification, and the storm of assertion cleared a brutal path.... In two or three generations, that story will have faded from memory, outlived by what it enabled.²

It was of course Bellow's brutal actions that "cleared a brutal path," not his self-justifying "storm of assertion" about them, and these sentences argue for a fantasy of writing as a "scandalous magic," a godlike creation *ex nihilo* (a "nothing" that was in fact crowded with living wives and friends), and a fantasy of brutality as something that only the boring and bourgeois recoil from. Like all immoral arguments, it is also illogical, relying as it does on the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy that Bellow's brutality "enabled" his writing rather than coexisting with it or diminishing it. Had Bellow done less damage in life he might have written even better novels, without the preening and point-scoring that disfigure most of his later books.

In his last years, Bellow became increasingly aware of what he had lost through his fantasy of patriarchal strength, and increasingly convinced that young Saul had been right all along. In his mid-eighties he astonished Greg by announcing, "I should never have divorced your mother." Greg responded with the same *l'art pour l'art* defense later adopted by Bellow's literary heirs:

Flabbergasted, I expressed my doubt that he could have written his novels without divorcing Anita and pursuing the more independent life of a writer. He brushed my objections off....

Bellow was not speaking merely for Greg's benefit. He seems to have been in the same frame of mind a few years earlier when he wrote *The Actual*, the austere masterwork of his old age, published when he was eighty-two. The narrator, Harry Trellman, understands at last that the only woman who is real to him is Amy Wustrin, whom he had dated briefly in high school but never pursued further because, as she now reminds him, fifty years later, "your classification for me was 'a petty-bourgeois broad.'" Each married someone else; years passed without them seeing each other; Harry failed to recognize her once in the street. Now he writes, in the voice of young Saul undoing old Saul's errors:

We had gotten along for decades without each other. Separate arrangements were made. All the while, I had concluded that I was too odd for her. Or that for various other reasons she assumed I could never be domesticated. So my emotions went into storage, more or less permanently. But by and by I began to see what sort of hold she had on me. Other women were apparitions. She, and only she, was no apparition.

Amy is “the actual”: “Other women might remind me of you, but there was only one actual Amy.” The best way he can think of to describe his love, he says, is to call it “an actual affinity.” Trellman is well-read—he mentions Jowett’s Plato, Gibbon, Freud, Stanislavsky—and doesn’t need to explain that he is adapting an old scientific vocabulary to describe a love that connects one specific individual to another, as opposed to “elective affinities”—the title of Goethe’s bleakly deterministic novel about the erotic relations that one generic type of person tends to fall into when placed in proximity with another generic type.

In the closing sentence of *The Actual*, Harry proposes marriage. “This is the time to do what I’m now doing, and I hope you’ll have me.” Greg Bellow seems to assume that Amy refuses, but the book ends before she answers. In Bellow’s earlier novels, as in his final one, *Ravelstein* (2000), his fictional self wanted a woman’s uncritical, approving love, and knew for certain whether or not she had given it. He wanted the same thing in his marriages.

What he hopes for in the last words of *The Actual* is something very different, a love inseparable from forgiveness, and he does not pretend to know if it will be granted. But it may be relevant to his hope of reversing the past that Harry, a few moments earlier, watched gravediggers raising the coffin of someone whose “theatrical will” had been “to come back from the grave.” The young Saul, part of him still the eight-year-old boy in the Montreal hospital who had absorbed many words about forgiveness and hope, survived in the patriarch who lived to eighty-nine and died in 2005. “A well-worn copy of the New Testament,” Greg writes, “was on Saul’s bedside table during his final illness.”

1 *The New York Review*, [October 27](#) and [November 10, 2011](#). ↵

2 James Wood, “Sins of the Father,” *The New Yorker*, July 22, 2013. ↵