Chapter VI

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Saul Bellow’s *Mr Sammler’s Planet* was published in the year 1970 by Viking Press. And for this novel he was awarded National Book Award for the third time in 1971. This novel is his most Jewish novel because it deals directly with most important events of Jewish history in this century — the Holocaust, the state of Israel, and American Jewry’s relation to the tenets of Jewish life. He believes in human survival under any circumstances, an emphasis on reason and human intellect, preference for good deeds and actions over contemplation and his concept of values — which constitute a rejection of despair, irrationalism, or madness as illuminating and consciousness for its own sake. These are also the components of Saul Bellow’s humanistic vision.1

As a European immigrant Bellow has led a truly varied life that has taught him the virtue of silence. Yet he is not so completely detached and aloof as he would like to be but is torn between detachment and the seemingly inescapable attraction of life. Sammler criticizes his own lack of immunity rather severely. As a man who has been counted as dead he believes he should be perfectly free from all interests. Sammler has led a cosmopolitan life. His early life began before World War I began in Cracow. In the 1920’s and 1930’s he

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worked as the London correspondent of some eastern-European newspapers. During that time he was acquainted with members of the Bloomsbury group, especially H.G. Wells. He was in Poland when it was invaded by Nazi Germany. His wife was killed in the mass execution but he was not happy to have survived. This is reflected in Sammler’s attitude of indifference to living on this earth. After his escape from death he was reduced to a less-than-human state, as he was driven to near insanity by the hardships he had to face in order to survive. Once he killed a German soldier and, in his depravity experienced a sudden pleasure in it. Half-starved and clad in rags, he and his daughter Shula finally reached the camp of displaced persons at Salzburg. From there, his wife’s nephew Dr. Elya Gruner, rescued them in 1947 and brought them to New York.

In this novel Saul Bellow presents once again some of the important events/themes from a humanistic point of view which will be discussed in detail in Section III.

II

His eyesight is a metaphor or his state of mind. One eye has been blinded through a blow with a gun butt; this damaged eye turns in different directions with different matters. The irony of the present action — which is again, as in Herzog, compressed into a few days — lies in the fact that Sammler once again finds death chasing and haunting for him. This time, it is Elya Gruner who is dying. By a series of seemingly ‘deliberate’ incidents — for instance, the disruption of his

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3 ibid. p.118
lecture at Columbia University by radicals, a most disturbing encounter with a Negro pickpocket, who notices that Sammler has observed him at work, the tracking down of an irreplaceable manuscript of Professor Lal by his own daughter Shula. Sammler is prevented from doing the one thing he really wants to do — that is to see his benefactor Elya once more before he dies. The clutter of circumstances that is a vivid illustration of what 'distraction' can do intercepts him effectively. When he reaches the hospital, Elya is dead. Thus, the span of the novel's action comprises the time it takes for a man to die. The recognition of the futility of explanations is one of Sammler's basic insights. He once considered himself something of a historian of civilization. His thought of his work as journalist as the work of an instructor of the masses. With his haughty, snobbish, not altogether charitable character, he might formerly have embodied one of Bellow's reality instructors. His social, economic and for a time even human descent, however, demonstrated to him the imprecision of the historical outlook and the impossibility of the synthesis of all facts. The question of whether the imagination has been able to produce is answered negatively in the book. Several critics feel the same about Mr. Sammler as a character and have attacked his personality for betraying a feeling of superiority toward all figures except Elya Gruner. This impression is partly the result of technique. It is however interesting to note that Bellow should choose such a remote and other worldly character as his personal. Perhaps it was Sammler's perspective on contemporary America that Bellow wanted to make use of. He is a man who has seen the worst and yet managed to retain dignity. He is a sharp observer and yet upholds kindness. He is a knowledgeable man but he does not make judgements. He is a sensitive man who defines love as order. Sammler embodies a pleasant mixture of
paradoxical qualities. Sammler's remoteness, moreover, structurally balances the fact that he is the one main character of the book. His presence is felt yet it is not undesirable.

Sammler has a trained, elegant mind. He has a unique characters in style and form which make him Bellow's novels. The language of Mr Sammler's Planet is more refined than that of Herzog. It has brevity and wit and admirably controls the emotions. It is noticeable that there is development throughout his work not only in respect of language and characterization but also in respect of its humanistic approach.4 Remembering, evaluating, imagining, and reinterpreting become the protagonists main business in life, a development that clearly indicates Bellowj's changing attitude toward the novel. Artistic self-expression has a secondary place compared to the importance given to the chain of thought processes both in Herzog and Mr Sammler's Planet

Sammler is not a typical Bellovian figure. He is definitely more sober and more composed than characters such characters as Augie, Herzog. He does not commit great follies but even if he does commit he does not reproach himself to or redress his mistakes.

The novel has some of the element/event/themes which point consistently to the Bellow's humanistic approach to life's problems. A further development of his humanism will be undertaken in the next section of this study.

4 ibid. p.126
As stated earlier in section I and II, Mr Sammler's Planet is a novel by Saul Bellow which presents more emphatically the humanistic elements in its theme, characterisation and some important critical observations on the Jewish situation in a larger measure than done in the earlier novels. It seems that the novelist himself is deeply involved in portraying the situation of an American Jew living in the modern world.

Artur Sammler, the protagonist of the novel, is the most private among the protagonists of Bellow's novels. Most of the time he talks to himself. He has a divided consciousness because his mind is drawn in two directions – by the polite society outside of himself and by his internal belief within his mind. He thinks that the inner voice of the individual is suppressed by the polite modern society outside of "received opinions". It is a conflict between the rationalistic talk" and the "secrets" of the spirit. The noise of the "rationalist talk" has drowned out the utterance of the individuals spirit, and therefore threatened the very existence of the "human" in the individual. As Ellen Pifer has summed up, Bellow uses here a "distinction Pascal made centuries ago in his Pensees . . . two modes or processes of reflection, the analytic and the intuitive, draw Sammler's mind in opposing directions, towards meanings that contradict and conflict."5

Bellow is thus trying to give Sammler a language to explore what is deep in his heart, what he feels intuitively but what cannot be perceived by others. Sammler tries to understand, analyse and explain

the nature of existence, but as the existentialist philosopher Kierkegaard had said that existence cannot be understood unless one is reconciled to it. The reconciliation to existence calls for affirming the source of mystery in human life. The conflict in Sammler’s mind thus arises from the fact that his rational and critical mind is strong enough to create a doubt in his mind about the ‘felt’ experience or the intuitive knowledge or internal beliefs.

Sammler’s mind is the arena of the constant intercourse between two types of reality – the reality as received from outside and the reality as ‘felt’ from experience.

Sammler’s knowledge of reality is received from the present experiences he went through during the World War II. He escaped from the Nazi Germans and than from the anti-Jewish Poles, and hid himself in a mausoleum for several months. During the period of hiding he was cut off from the world and society.\(^6\) Not knowing anything about the events outside such as the persecution of Jews etc. became more familiar with the symbols and metaphysical messages.\(^7\) He experienced the thin dividing line between security and exposure between life and death.\(^8\) Thus Sammler became more concerned with knowing the fate of the humankind in general and tries to probe the mystery of the human fate. Sammler has an “intuitive”\(^9\) feeling that mankind is headed toward some disaster which he too cannot precisely visualise or define because he is a

\(^7\) MSP.(89-90)
\(^8\) Porter, M. Gilbert. *op.cit.* p.175.
part of the human race. But he surely has some kind of a premonition that it would happen and he would also be involved in it. Being a modern intellectual man he tries to use his analytic mind to probe this mystery. He collects vast data and facts to arrive at general theories and laws that may help explain reality what he calls “superstructures of explanation.” As the novel beings he is seen in his west side bedroom conducting an inner dialogue with himself while he is waking:

“Intellectual man had become an explaining creature. Fathers to children, wives to husbands, lecturers to listeners, experts to laymen . . . man to his own soul explained. The roots of this, the cause of the other . . . the history, the structure, the reasons why for the most part, in one ear out the other. The soul wanted what it wanted. It had its own natural knowledge. It sat unhappily on superstructures of explanation, poor bird, not knowing which way to fly”

Understandably, the soul is not comfortable with the kind of intellectual knowledge brought to it by the analytic effort of man. That is why perplexed by these unsatisfactory explanations it wants, like an imprisoned bird, to fly away. The immeasurable and voluminous data of information about events and their explanations may be satisfactory to the intellect but not to the soul which has its own “natural knowledge” – its inner world of truth and value – which is suppressed. The source of an individual’s humanity and “natural knowledge” is thus in the individual’s faculties of “intuitive knowledge”. Bellow suggests that in those faculties there is a vacuum now. As Ellen Pifer reasons out, “Because human beings cannot arrive at moral values by determining

10 MSP. (21).
11 MSP.
and analysing a set of facts, knowledge of these values has come to be
doubted, devalued or debunked.\(^1\)

Clearly, Bellow’s novel suggests that the source of an individual’s
humanity lies in moral truths or values which can be intuitively
understood but which cannot be analysed or explained rationally. As a
critic Etienne Gilson observes the reality felt by the intuitive power of
the soul cannot be proved or disproved by the educated intellectual
faculty which may not sense what is “evident . . . to a soul, not to a
mind”\(^1\)

The Cartesian view caused the separation of body from the soul as
Bellow tries philosophically to restore their unity by suggesting that the
soul cannot function without the body and that as Sarah Cohen rightly
maintains that “only through it [the body] can the soul exercise its
powers.\(^4\) Sarah Cohen rightly argues that Bellow and through him,
Sammler has inherited “this divided consciousness, this sense of
separation of mind and matter from Descarte’s mathematical account of
reality. On this basis Bellow seems to have presented Sammler with
impair ed eyesight – blindness in one eye – as a metaphoric equivalent
for the rift in his vision. Due to his blindness in one eye, the old
Sammler cannot see fully or clearly because of the damage done to his
eye in the War by the rifle butt of a Nazi Guard”\(^1\) Sammler has lost
contact with human reality following the loss of his one eye and also of

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\(^1\) Pifer, Ellen. \textit{op. cit.} p.15.
\(^2\) Etienne, Gilson. \textit{The Unity of Philosophical Experience}, New York, Scribner’s,
\(^3\) Sarah, Blacher Cohen. \textit{Soul Bellow’s Enigmatic Laughter}, Urbana, Univ. of
\(^4\) MSP (184)
his wife in the Holocaust. He feels less intensely as a general human being. He thinks in himself as being human in a special way; he is "human, in some altered way. The human being at the point where he attempted to obtain his release from being human". Sammler has "two different — looking eyes" which shows his divided consciousness, and his different way of reading reality. His right eye sees what is outside of himself, the phenomenon passing on information to the brain. His left eye, somewhat impaired looks in another direction to be preoccupied separately with different matters.

Sammler’s right eye sees the unhappy human condition in the world. Dismayed, his left eye turns in another direction to seek some guidance from his medieval mystic, philosopher and guide Meister Eckhart. Eckhart advocates detachment from worldly — earthly and human — matters as a way to finding God. Sammler is deeply impressed by Eckhart’s philosophy. But this philosophy is not in accord with life and other people. It is both anti-life and anti-human. It is a philosophy that can take Sammler away from the world into himself, into the solitude inside himself. He therefore rejects this philosophy of divestment and instead acknowledges the bond between soul and body. He also admits that life is more than what one sees, and finally accepts to initiate into the mystery of the living.

Bellow’s humanism is thus permeated by a sense of the mystery of the living. To be truly human is to be more than existing and to be closer to the human race, not to be detached from it. He reads his

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16 MSP.(251)
17 MSP.(72)
18 MSP.(31)
philosopher Meister Eckhart who preaches detachment from human beings and earthly matters but he does not believe in what Eckhart preaches. Yet he does not totally reject Eckhart. That is why Sammler tries to stay aloof and secure from the outside world. But he gets more and more involved in the worldly affairs. As Ellen Pifer has noted, “earthly divestment is both impossible for him and, in any case, a humanly insufficient alternative. As the novel develops, Sammler gradually acknowledges the bonds . . . that unite soul and body and bind him to quotidian existence”19

Consistent with Bellow’s humanistic view, Sammler affirms that “life is sacred” and also that the worst evil is murder. “The best and purest human beings, from the beginning of time, hour understood that life is sacred”.20 Sammler, therefore, has life affirming belief but he also knows that the nature of man is destructive. The very belief that life is sacred is rooted in mystery which exists before any attempt is made to explain it. Human beings understand it instinctively; it cannot be explained to them unless there is a proper technique or method that can unfold it. A human being can understand it only by participating in the mystery and not by excluding oneself from it. “Sammler tries to detach himself from the conditions of mortal existence”,21 but finds that his attempt is meaningless. On the contrary, he gets more deeply involved in human and earthly affairs because of his minute power of observation, particularly with the right eye. He watches the Negro pickpocket in a New York City-bus stealing the pocketbook of a passenger with such delicacy and lightness that the watcher himself

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20 MSP.(18)
21 Pifer, Ellen. *op. cit.* p.18
becomes so much educated about the act of thieving. It is an evil action but Sammler finds he learns from it something about 'the essence of being'. His vision of life widens. What exactly he learns from this experience he cannot explain. But he goes through the experience several times till the pickpocket gets alerted and he quietly follows him to his apartment. There without telling him anything he exposes his mail organ to him and asserts him superiority. His drama dazzles Sammler into silence but the very act provokes him to witness something mysterious about it. He is overawed by the incident. He sees his own weakened personality and hence no longer an active participant member of the community dangling between being and non-being. He is helped by his son-in-law Eisen who attacks the black man. Sammler had done the same thing with a German soldier by murdering him with his gunshot. The killing of a human being had given him a refreshing sense of joy in life. He repeated the experience to feel the same joy again witnessing or doing crime or violence can also be illuminating. Bellow seems to understand, the mystery of evil. The black man becomes a catalyst for his illumination.

Sammler believes that the knowledge that comes to an individual through participation in life is certainly more human than that which comes from objective analysis of things. Subjective knowledge is in his view, superior to objective knowledge that comes through scientific or intellectual observation. Going a little further in this view he argues that being too objective or scientific makes one too abstract or even like a ghost. His too minute observation of the pickpocket's work gets him

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22 MSB(11-12)
23 MSB(49-50)
involved in a chain of events and so he becomes more involved in human affairs. His nephew Elia Gruner helped him financially but Sammler ultimately finds that Gruner’s money indirectly came from a mafia who were seeking some medical “favors”. Again, he can no longer remain detached from the imperfect community around him. Thus Sammler is bound to other human being through love.

Sammler who desired to remain away from his earthly planet ultimately reconciles with and re-enters into this planet. He believes that the true humanist or a human being must realise the eternal within his earthly existence. This would be the ideal before a modern champion among human beings. By doing so he would be comparable to the knight of Faith of the existentialist philosopher Kierkegaard. Thus Bellow creates in Sammler a protagonist who is aware of the cruelty, pain violence, etc. pervading common life and yet he finds reconciliation with existence is ultimately an essential attribute of a human being. He celebrates the ordinary, common life, or existence, of humanity. As he remarks, “what if some genius were to do with “common life” what Einstein did with ‘matter’? Finding its energetic, uncovering its radiance”,25 what Ellen Pifer calls “the soul’s illumination of truth.”26 Accordingly, the disorder, madness or chaos in the world is also indication of a human need for order. The human beings have both the power to create disorder and the extraordinary powers to rise above that condition and restore order. Bellow does however stress the Jewish ratiocination but it is a ratiocination which is finally transcended and the radiance of humanity that is acknowledged.

25 MSP (147)  