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## Mr. Sammler's Planet: The Terms of the Covenant

Michelle Loris

*Sacred Heart University*, [lorism@sacredheart.edu](mailto:lorism@sacredheart.edu)

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# Mr. Sammler's Planet: The Terms of the Covenant

by Michelle Carbone Loris

FOR Saul Bellow the essential quest is spiritual: it is a search for humanness in a world that daily assaults and denies such a search. This struggle to be human is the author's one story and the various versions of that same story simply indicate the individual progress each protagonist—Joseph, Asa, Wilhelm, Herzog, Sammler—makes on that journey. To find the genuinely human is the hero's task. Each hero, then, must grapple with Schlossberg's wisdom: "It's bad to be less than human and it's bad to be more than human."<sup>1</sup>

Before the hero can come in touch with his genuine human self and establish a relation not only with the self but also with the community of life outside him, he must acknowledge the despair of both his inner and outer existence; he must confront the false masks that keep the self hidden; he must encounter the fact of death.

For most of the heroes the ability to rid oneself of the self's histrionics and to acknowledge death as integral to life becomes a journey toward grace: spiritual preparation is anchored in the here and now and satisfactorily enough stops there—each hero comes to terms with his humanness. Joseph moves from the *despair of dangling*: he manages his way out of the paralysis of the less than human to join the community of life as a soldier. As compared to the others, Joseph's experience with death is farthest removed from him. Joseph sees a man fall dead on the street and this becomes a "prevision"<sup>2</sup> of his own mortality and later enables him to recognize "that spring's breath of warm air was simultaneously a breath of relief at his decision to surrender" (121). The revelation spring brings him concerns "the ephemeral agreements by which we live and pace ourselves" (126).

Asa moves a few steps further: he travels from the despair of victimship—the less than human—to join the human community with responsibility and without egotism. Asa's spiritual preparation is to have his assumptions rinsed in the experience of the real suffering of a family death. The crater of Asa's spirit is the void of his victimship. As victim, Asa is isolated, self-pitying, and without loving responsibility to anyone else. But when he recognizes his sister-in-law's genuine grief, his nephew's tragic death, and most of all, when his heart rises to its fullest human capacity: when he acknowledges his responsibility to Allbee, Asa moves

from victimship to humanness. Asa has moved further than Joseph: Asa joins society not under the guise of name or category (Joseph joins the Army) but simply as himself—the leavened Asa.

Tommy Wilhelm's spiritual movement takes him from the insecurity of having to be more than human to the heart's need to be compassionately human. Tommy's meretricious denials of death are perceived as a stance of pride. He keeps his real self hidden: "Also he was smoking a cigar, wearing a hat, he has an advantage; it is harder to find out how he feels."<sup>3</sup> Tommy knows "what acting should be" (3) and it is only when he removes the disguises that he is able to move to those deep emotional places that lay bare the essential self. The death of a stranger effects this cleansing for Tommy. Standing beside the casket of one whom he does not know and does not resemble, and who he sees is disguised in the death cosmetics used to assuage the fear of the living, Tommy surrenders the glitter palace of his mind for the honest pain and compassion of his heart. "Through torn sobs and cries Tommy moves toward the consummation of his heart's ultimate need" (118). He seizes this day.

Herzog, duke of the heart, moves from those romantic notions about the individual to the stillness of occupancy. Though cuckolded by Madeline and best friend Gersbach, Herzog must rise from the more than human self-pitying mire he wallows in. "Moses, suffering, suffered in style"<sup>4</sup> but he must "shake off . . . the victim bit" (104) and learn that "we must be what we are" (86).

**H**ERZOG's wanderings through the spaces of evil and death reconcile him with his humanness. Similar to Wilhelm's experience at the wake, the child abuse case prepares Herzog's way: "Herzog experienced nothing but his own *human feelings*" (294). Later he again witnesses the "monstrousness of life," (294) but this time in his own crazed attempt to shoot Gersbach and Madeline. Herzog has moved further than Joseph, Asa, or Wilhelm. For the latter, death is outside them; observing the death of others becomes a "prevision" of their own mortality and a way to their humanness. With Herzog, death and evil move closer; they are within the capacity of his own heart.

With this awareness Herzog's compulsion "to explain . . . and justify" (8) life's chaos is finally silenced; by the end of his journey "he had no messages for no one. Nothing. Not a single word" (416). Herzog at the end is like Sammler—neither wish to explain anymore. But Herzog's silence indicates only that he is reconciled "with universal moral law, with socio-temporal activity and with a desire for fulfilling a future life consisting of intelligible ethical action."<sup>5</sup> Sammler's reticence points to something else; his journey takes him further than the other heroes'. For Sammler, the brevity of distinguishing rather than the verbosity of explaining penetrates the essence of the question: "What is the true

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stature of a human being?"<sup>6</sup> For Sammler, the answer is to be found in the "God adumbrations in daily forms" (237) that he sees and sees.

Whereas the other Bellow heroes ground their being in the finite genuine human self, Sammler—a wandering salvage-man (his name) and a one-eyed Teresias—grounds his being in God. Like the other protagonists, Sammler must shed his ego-distorting masks to reach the moment of his individual humanness. Sammler's "way out of the captivity in the forms" (57) of "making an 'Englishman' of himself" (61) is, like the other heroes', through the inexorable fact of death. But the other protagonists acknowledge their mortality through the death of another. For Sammler, the experience is different. Sammler moves through his own death to live again—not to escape death, because death pervades his planet, his consciousness, his novel, but to have his "judgments . . . altered . . . like his eyesight" (211). Death is not all that brings this new perception to Sammler; evil, too, is a profound learning experience. Herzog clumsily attempts murder; Sammler coldly and gladly executes a man. Sammler *knows* evil is not banal, and he knows the primacy of its endemic quality well enough to recognize it again in his compulsion with the Magisterial Pick Pocket. The other protagonists leave their dangling and isolated condition to join the community of life outside them. Humanness is not realized until the self surrenders to others. Sammler too is an alien on his planet; he is a "visiting consciousness" (73); he knows "that the place of honor is outside" (73). Sammler joins but he does not submit. In an apocalyptic world ready for last judgment, Sammler has "an eschatological point of view" (215). His despair brings him to the Kierkegaardian leap; he knows that ". . . inability to explain is no ground for disbelief. Not as long as the sense of God persists" (236). Despite the suffering, the chaos, the theatrics, ". . . very often and almost daily Artur Sammler has strong impressions of eternity" (237). While the other heroes move to the finite human, Sammler sees and sees the "splash of God's own spirit . . . in the heart of every human being" (89).

Shaping Sammler's vision within the novel is a three day chronology or loose apocalyptic movement from judgment through the purification of flood and beatitude to the condition of promise. Framing and pervading this entire structure is the presence of death. Death is repeatedly reflected in the Holocaust, the Six Day War, modern civilization as represented in Sammler's New York City, and more particularly Elya's death which frames the three days, and at the same time, parallels Sammler's own entombment that "let him live" (230). Death, then, integrates this three day movement that strains toward life, and is itself the generative life principle of the novel. For, the reader's position to Bellow's novel is Sammler's position to his world, and more ironically, Sammler's position to the Pick Pocket's. We see Sammler seeing; we see what Sammler sees. Some of his

seeing requires the reader's corrective. But mainly, the reader, using Sammler's camera eye, participates in the corrective that is Bellow's novel: *Mr. Sammler's Planet* "makes one think about the collapse of civilization, about Sodom and Gomorrah, the end of the world" (304). Thus the reader is witness to the novel's narrow but significant spiritual movement through death to life.

**E**VIL is a deciding presence in Sammler's world, and to his ailing planet, day one is a sentence of judgment which is itself paralleled in the judgment of Elya's illness. The premonition of end times is not normal and neither does this day dawn to a "normal sky" (3). On Sammler's planet, "The experiences of life seem no longer to occur each in its proper space, in sequence, each with its recognizable religious or aesthetic importance" (26). Foretelling the second movement of the novel, Sammler thinks: "In fact the whole experience of mankind was now covering each life in its flood" (26). Sammler can "smell the decay" (33) as he waits for the world to collapse a second time (33).

His "enlarged vision" (12) comes from a recognition of and involvement with evil. The Princely emblem of evil in the novel is embodied in the Pick Pocket. The Pick Pocket's crime is a shadow of Elya's, Shula's, Feffer's own small and large criminality, and is overshadowed by the old Sammler's ultimate crime of murder. The Pick Pocket's idealization of his genitalia and its power is made miniscule by Angela's, Feffer's, and Bruch's sexual activities which range from promiscuity to exploitation and perversion. Moreover, not only is Sammler's encounter with the Black's mystery and majesty of "genitalia demonstratum" the first of three sexual "putdowns" to Sammler (the radical student and Angela), but more, the scene is a symbolic and climactic disclosure of all the evil rampant on Sammler's planet.

The Black Prince's obvious satisfaction with himself—his Dior glasses and cashmere coat—reflects what Sammler calls the contemporary person's "theatre of the soul" (234). The masks are worn by all the characters in this book. Margotte clothes herself in a proliferation of words called intellectual; Shula is obsessed with her father's non-existent work on H. G. Wells; Feffer excels in the theatrics of sex and money; Bruch wants to be top deviant; Hoenikker's god, like the Pick Pocket's, is the body and its accouterments; Angela's debasement is sex; and Wallace's series of "nearlys" that run the gamut from physicist to homosexual (88) are a poignant indication of the fractured, unintegrated self he is. Sammler, too, the old Sammler that is, hides behind the mask of class superiority and privilege.

Prisoners of their own idolatries, Sammler's people try to escape the terms of the covenant (contract): they thwart the spirit's efforts to realize itself. Sammler,

however, knows that "the soul wanted what it wanted, that it had its own natural knowledge," (3) but his people debase themselves and trivialize their existence. Not realizing that now is the "time to be conscious," (4) they become "the conspiracy against the sacredness of life" (18); they "abolish conscience" (18); they define and disguise evil as banal (18). Never able to make sober terms with death, to set "relations with the infinite," they can never be "entirely at home in the finite" (62). Death is their "sole visible future" (75) and at the end of day one, judgment looms over Sammler's planet.

Judgment, however, is a call for purification. Because of the artifices imposed on the soul, "The spirit feels cheated, outraged, defiled, corrupted, fragmented, injured. Still it knows what it knows, and the knowledge cannot be gotten rid of" (236). This knowledge is the spirit's call for purification. The symbolic flood and the words of beatitude confirm the spirit's knowledge and answer its call. Sammler's entombment signals this meaning to us. "Hidden in a mausoleum . . . the dead life" (89) taught Sammler that the human person "summoned out of matter . . . to be" (90) is "obliged to wait, painfully, anxiously, heartachingly, in this yellow despair . . ." (90) until "the greatness of eternity . . . shall lift us from this present shallowness" (89). The yellow light of despair pursues Sammler; it is the light that flickers into his West Side apartment where he is again entombed. But Sammler knows; he tells Lal, "By opening the tomb to me, he Cieslakiewicz let me live" (230).

Sammler's involvement with evil, too, indicates the movement of purification. Sammler cold-bloodedly murders the German. He thrills in it. He knows what it is to take a life, to have his own taken. Though he once tried to set himself above humanity, his attraction to the Pick Pocket reminds him of his human complicity in evil. Still, Sammler's extraordinary experiences are symbolic; "he, personally is a symbol" (91) and his "symbolic task" (91) is his ability to see and to allow us to see.

Death and evil have purified Sammler's sight. He penetrates what he sees. He sees that the forms we have chosen to impose on the spirit are blasphemous and terrifying; yet he recognizes that the masks are the human being's confused, chaotic, and inept spiritual strivings: "The idea of the uniqueness of the soul. An excellent idea. A true idea. But in these forms? In these poor forms? Dear God! With hair, with clothes, with drugs and cosmetics, with genitalia, with round trips through evil, monstrosity, and orgy, with even God approached through obscenities? How terrified the soul must be in this vehemence, how little that is really dear to it can see in these Sadic exercises" (229). Still, he knows that our madness and despair are the base of the soul's truth, (93) and that that truth is the soul's desire to be grounded in God, its "longing for sacredness" (92).

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THE comic and ironic symbolic flood, then, caused by the least integrated but most searching soul, Wallace, and reflected in Elya's impending physical flood, cleanses and spills into the words of beatitude—the only words Sammler finds himself repeatedly reading after every devastation: "Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . He who is poor in spirit is receptive of all spirit . . . God is the Spirit of spirits," (253) and the spirit's only comfort and consolation is God. These are the terms of the covenant.

Sammler's compassion is the narrow condition of promise in the novel. Through his compassion, the terms of the covenant are re-established. Sammler is urgent to meet Elya before the doctor dies. He wants to bring Elya the words of compassion: "One should declare something like this: 'However actual I may seem to you and you to me, we are not as actual as all that. We will die. Nevertheless there is a bond. There is a bond'" (261).

On his way to Elya, Sammler attempts to save the Pick Pocket. He despairs momentarily when he realizes no one will help. Yet, he acknowledges that the lunatics surrounding him "were his people—he was their Sammler. They shared the same fundamentals" (266). Salvage-man Sammler, "assigned to figure out certain things, to condense, in short views, some essence of experience" (274), endures and sees and knows. He saves what he can.

Yet, though he may be *their Sammler*, he nevertheless stands apart from them as he must. "He was a man who had come back. He had rejoined life. He was near to others. But in some essential way he was also companionless" (289). Echoing the prayer in Meister Eckhardt Sammler knew he "was someone—and this struck him—poor in spirit" (290). He loves, he joins, but he may not submit to the chaos. His position, as it is the reader's, is the seeing corrective: the adumbrations of eternity.

Death's movement through purification to promise is assured symbolically in the season: "It would soon be full spring" (277). Sammler, too, affirms new beginnings: "Mr. Sammler saw that together with the end of things-as-known the feeling for new beginnings was nevertheless very strong" (278).

Elya has died but Sammler's feelings are strong. Sammler's prayer for his friend Elya—expressing a profound love—promises us that Elya "did meet the terms of his contract" (313). The "terms of the contract" (313) are also met by Sammler. With Elya's death, Sammler, made to live out the Meister Eckhardt prayer, "was deprived of one more thing, stripped of one more creature" (312). Sammler's final prayer reaffirms the covenant and repeats, for the third significant time in the novel, what the spirit has known and does know all along the way—that despite our monstrosity, despite our chaos, and even despite our death, our "inmost heart" (313) knows what our mind refuses to acknowledge—the soul's ultimate need to be grounded in God before we can become entirely human.

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### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Saul Bellow, *The Victim* (New York: Signet Book, 1947), p. 121. (All other references are to this text.)
- <sup>2</sup> ———, *Dangling Man* (New York: Signet Book, 1944), p. 77. (All other references are to this text.)
- <sup>3</sup> ———, *Seize the Day* (New York: The Viking Press, 1946), p. 3. (All other references are to this text.)
- <sup>4</sup> ———, *Herzog* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1961), p. 25. (All other references are to this text.)
- <sup>5</sup> James Neil Harris, "One Critical Approach to *Mr. Sammler's Planet*," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 18:4, October, 1972, p. 237.
- <sup>6</sup> Saul Bellow, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (New York: The Viking Press, 1969), p. 232. (All other references are to this text.)