The Background of Saul Bellow's Thought and Ideas Expressed in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*

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Saul Bellow's works are characterized by the serious and humorous fusion of different traditions: the religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity; the inheritance of Western thoughts and ideas together with the recent development of psychoanalysis and existentialism. In addition, all those elements are permeated by a keen insight based on Jewish viewponts tempered by the long history of suffering.

As the materialism of modern civilization and the systematization of society advance, an individual person is less and less valued as a whole human being, reduced to a mere part of the huge machinery of society. Those circumstances of the present situation threaten to destroy the integrity of a human being and leave him in a perilous situation in which his identity is lost, while materialistic thoughts and ideas provide the social justification for the direction of "Progress".

The Twentieth Century has experienced a fearful devastation, the most dreadful being the Nazi Holocaust. Mr. Sammler in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) has emerged, not only as a witness verifying the misery, but also as a pilot to show the way, overcoming difficulties, to lead the authentic road designed for humanity, based on the traditional inheritance of thoughts and ideas.

I The Shadow of H. G. Wells

Remarkably, the shadow of a real personality, Herbert George Wells, looms over this novel. Sammler is supposed to have been aquainted with Wells and greatly influenced by him when staying in London as a newspaper reporter.

Sammler respects Wells, appreciates being aquainted with him and is inspired by his thoughts and ideas. Sammler talks about Wells at the seminar in college. His daughter Shula wants her father to write a book on his memoir about Wells. It is this strong desire of hers that forces her to steal Dr. Lal's manuscript on the colonization of the moon, because she believes this treatise is very useful and beneficial, and would inspire her father to write about Wells.

Herbert George Wells (1866-1946) was a great personality who represented an age. He was really a giant living during the turbulent years from the end of the 19th century through the middle of the 20th century, producing remarkable achievements in the wide fields of literature, science and politics. He is a genre novelist, journalist, historian, socialist, popular educator, scientist, utopian, feminist, prophet and so on. It is really difficult to find proper words to define him precisely.

It seems clear that Bellow is very much interested in Wells and impressed by his ideas, from the fact that the name of H. G. Wells, scattered here and there throughout the novel, is closely connected to important incidents and provides the momentum for the story.

Wells' most famous piece of science fiction is *The Time Machine* (1895). In this novel the protagonist produces a new idea that the world might consist of four dimensions, with time in addition to the three dimentions of space, and that he could travel through time just as he can travel through space. After many years of research and experiment in his laboratory, the hero finally succeeds in building a time machine which can enable a man to travel through time.

Using this new scientific device, the time traveler first explores far into the past, enjoying the wonderful history of our advances, and then he sets out to travel to the far future. He flies through time farther and farther into the future, until at last he goes to AD 802701. Unfortunately, however, what he sees there is not the brilliant results and achievements of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, but just the ruin of the planet Earth. There the sun remains motionless on the horizon. Not only human beings but also all the animals and plants are disappearing from the earth, apocalyptic silence and darkness covering the planet as follows:

> The darkness grew apace; a cold wind began to blow in freshening gusts from the east, and the showering white flakes in the air increased in number. From the edge of the sea came a ripple and whisper. Beyond these lifeless sounds the world was silent. Silent? It would be hard to convey the stillness of it. All the sounds of man, the bleating of sheep, the cries of birds, the hum of insects, the stir that makes the background of our lives — all that was over. As the darkness thickened, the eddying flakes grew more abundant, dancing before my eyes; and the cold of the air more intense. At last, one by one, swiftly, one after the other, the white peaks of the distant hills vanished into blackness. (Wells 93)

This is an uncanny and ominous picture of the earth becoming inorganic. Seeing this, the time traveler's first thought is of the futility of man's dreams of intelligence.

Wells' idea expressed in *The Time Machine* is the flat denial of Charles Darwin's and the complete reversal of the theory of evolution. His idea may well be called 'cosmic pessimism'. But what relieves the time traveler from despair is beautiful flowers which a pretty girl on the ruining earth picks up and puts in the machine to show her love for him.

Cosmic pessimism in *The Time Machine* is rather similar in a way to a kind of 'intellectual pessimism' permeating *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, which ends with Mr. Sammler's desperate prayer to God in his love and mercy to redeem dead Dr. Gruner, who represents mankind making mistakes. Such divine love seems to share something

with the love the girl is extending to the present human beings, who live on the disappearing planet, Earth.

II Sammler as Jesus Christ

Mr. Sammler's Planet has a pervasive religious atmosphere, like the preceding novel, *Henderson the Rain King* (1959). Sammler went to Israel ten years ago to save his daughter Shula from her crazy and violent husband Eisen. He succeeded in making them get divorced and bringing her to New York. While in Israel at that time, he visited Galilee and was impressed to see the relics of Jesus Christ:

> Mr. Sammler's hired car took him to Capernaum, where Jesus had preached in the synagogue. From afar, he saw the Mount of the Beatitudes. Two eyes would have been inadequate to the heaviness and smoothness of the color, parted with difficulty by fishing boats — the blue water, unusually dense, heavy, seemed sunk under the naked Syrian heights. Mr. Sammler's heart was very much torn by feelings as he stood under the short, leaf-streaming banana trees.
>
> And did those feet in ancient time
> Walk upon ... (25-26)

It seems, however, that Sammler is compared to Jesus Christ, or rather depicted as a contemporary Christ. Immediately prior to World War II, he was arrested by the Nazis with his wife and many other Jews, and forced to dig a mass grave for them and for himself. All of them were shot to death and buried there. But Sammler alone survived the holocaust by a miracle, struggling through a heap of bodies to climb out of the grave. This incident seems to symbolize the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It seems clear that in a way the writer intends Sammler to play the role of Jesus Christ. This is suggested to the reader in the third chapter, where Feffer insists that Sammler is trying to condense his life experience into a Testament:

> "I know that you are trying to condense what you know, your life experience. Into a Testament."
> "How do you know this?"
> "You told me." (114)

In fact, recurrent allusions are made to the Bible and Jesus Christ throughout the work, suggesting that Sammler's experiences should be compared to Jesus'. Sammler's lecture at Columbia University seems to be symbolizing Jesus' activities of preaching. As Jesus' teachings were rejected and criticized by the Pharisees and Sadducees in those days, so is Sammler's by radical students today. As Jesus saw with mercy poor and miserable people around him and promised them the country of God, so does Sammler

think people and their situation to be very deplorable, mentally and physically, in a world where even the moon is supposed to be a world of salvation.

Dr. Gruner's son, Wallace, and Feffer have come up with a new enterprise. It is taking and selling aerial photographs of country houses. They will identify the trees and shrubs in the pictures and band them in Latin and English. Naming trees is referred to as a means to recover nature, though Wallace and Feffer do not notice it. Taking advantage of people's detachment from nature and ignorance about the plants on their property, Wallace and Feffer intend to earn a great sum of money. Wallace earnestly invites Sammler to join their enterprise and asks him to persuade Gruner, who is on his deathbed, into giving them money to buy an airplane for taking photographs.

This invitation of Wallace to Sammler is very similar in a way to the devil's temptation to Jesus Christ after his fasting for forty days and forty nights as seen in the fourth chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew:

> 3 The tempter approached Him and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command these stones to turn into loaves of bread."
> 4 But He replied, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone but on every command that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" ....
> 8 Next the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour,
> 9 saying to Him, "All these I will give You if You will kneel and worship me."
> 10 Then Jesus said to him, "Begone, Satan; for it is written, 'You worship the Lord your God and serve Him alone.'"

This part of the New Testament may imply in part that spirituality or devotion to God should be preferred to bread and the splendour of the kingdoms or material interests and earthly success. Like Jesus, Sammler declines Wallace's request. This attitude of Sammler's suggests many things with reference to Bible: Wallace's being an inhuman prodigal son, the collapse of human bondage in a family, the lack of natural human feelings, the slight to death; these characteristics of modern civilization are pointed out and severely criticized.

As for Feffer, who seems to be Jewish from his name, he is depicted as Sammler's close follower rather than his friend. Feffer promotes a seminar for Sammler at Columbia University, but he deserts Sammler at the very critical stage. Sammler suspects that Feffer has taken advantage of him for money, for Sammler says to Wallace, "Ah, Feffer. He abandoned me at Columbia, and I havn't seen him since. I wondered even whether he was trying to make money on me."(99) Thus Feffer plays the same role as Judas Iscariot, who betrayed his Lord for thirty pieces of silver. Feffer is to Sammler what Judas was to Jesus Christ.

Though depicted as a figure representing the sexual madness permeating Mr. Sammler's planet, Angela is felt generously treated by Sammler, in some ways as a victim of the

insane trend of the world, as Sammler says:

> It seems to me that things poor professionals once had to do for a living, performing for bachelor parties, or tourist sex-circuses on the Palace Pigalle, ordinary people, housewives, filing-clerks, students, now do just to be sociable. And I can't really say what it's all about. Is it maybe some united effort to conquer disgust? I don't know. Is it an effort to 'liberalize' human existence and show that nothing that happens between people is really loathsome? Affirming the Brotherhood of Man? (159)

Sammler's tolerance for Angela as considerate here as Jesus' was for a woman caught in the act of adultery in the eight chapter of the Gospel according to John:

> 3 The scribes and thee Pharisees brought a woman caught in the act of adultery and, placing her in the centre,
> 4 they said to Him (they were talking to test Him so they trump up a charge against Him), "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of adultery.
> 5 Now Moses ordered in the Law to stone such as she, so what do You say?"
> 6 But Jesus stooped down and wrote with His finger on the ground;
> 7 and when they kept on questioning Him He raised Himself and told them, "Let the sinless one among you throw the first stone at her."

After the war Sammler and Shula were brought from the camp in Poland to New York by his nephew, Dr. Elya Gruner, and have lived on Gruner's charity. Sammler respects and values Gruner most in the world. Unfortunately, Gruner suffers from a serious disease and dies at last. After his death, it turns out that Dr. Gruner has made a lot of money by illegal abortions for the Mafia, and the rumor has it that he has consealed the great sum of money somewhere in his house.

The most climactic incident in the latter part of the story is the scene where Gruner's prodigal son, Wallace, his hedonistic daughter, Angela, and other family members search the house for the money, and in their desperate efforts they foolishly destroy a water supply pipe, causing a flood. This flood seems to symbolize the Deluge, implying that it might be the revelation of God's anger about man's avarice and selfishness.

Allegorically, mankind has survived hardships, creating new civilization after the Deluge and cleansing itself by burning old corrupt cities such as Sodom and Gomorrah. The novel seems to suggest that the present phase of contemporary civilization may be so corrupt that it would be hard to survive without such measures, seen not from the intellectual but from the spiritual point of view. The overall tone of the story is pessimistic although each incident is depicted humorously and farcically, as Peter Hyland points out:

> Althogh *Mr. Sammler's Planet* contains much of the kind of c omedy that is characteristic of Bellow, its overall tone is undeniably somber, and the methods of its composition and the unusual circumstances of its publication show how much care Bellow took to achieve this tone. *Mr. Sammler's Planet* was published in two versions. It made its first appearance as a two-part serial in the November and December 1969 issues of the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine, and was put out in book form in the following year by the Viking Press. The fact that there are numerous differences between the two versions shows how rigorous and painstaking Bellow is in his writing: even in the later stages of production of the novel he was still making alternations, still trying to refine it. (Hyland 68)

The tone of the last scenes, including the flood and Sammler's last prayer for God's bless and mercy, sounds severely warning and poignantly pathetic, showing the author's pessimistic views about the future of mnkind. However, Elya Gruner is depicted as a figure synbolizing a typical human being in modern society who embodies the good and evil, materialistic desire and love for other people. Thus Sammler's praying to God for him implies his praying to Him for all human beings and suggests that only love can lead to the survival of mankind.

Ⅲ Sammler as a Murderer

As already pointed out, Sammler is depicted as a very symbolic figure exemplifying the experience of the formidable Holocaust by the Nazis during World War Ⅱ and the similar persecution of the Jews by the Poles after the collapse of the Nazis, reflecting the Jewish history of suffering over thousands of years.

It is suggested here that what has caused discrimination, persecution and massacre does not depend solely on an extreme group as the Nazis but on an impulse inherent in humanity. If these actions are insane, is humanity itself not insane?

It is true that Sammler is a victim of the Nazis, a sufferer from anti-Semitism, but it cannot be ignored that he himself has a characteristic of a persecutor. It is very important that he commits murder, even though forced to do by the circumstances. The scene is vividly described:

> But Sammler was driven through the parlor and back to Zamosht Forest. There at very close range he shot a man he had disarmd. He made him fling away his carbine. To the side. A good five feet into snow. It landed flat and sank. Sammler ordered the man to take off his coat. Then the tunic. The sweater, the boots. After this, he said to Sammler in a low voice, "*Nicht schiessen.*" He asked for his life. Red-headed, a big chin bronze-stubbled, he was scarcely breathing. He was white. Violet under the eyes. Sammler saw the soil already sprinkled on his face. He saw the grave on his skin. The grime of the lip, the

> large creases of skin descending from his nose already linked with dirt — that man to Sammler was already underground. He was no longer dressed for life. He was marked, lost. Had to go. Was gone. "Don't kill me. Take the things." Sammler did not answer, but stood out of reach. "I have children." Sammler pulled the triggr. The body then lay in the snow. A second shot went through the head and shattered it. Bone burst. Matter flew out. (138-39)

The murder was committed when Sammler was a partisan in Zamosht Forest in Poland, putting up resistance to the Nazis. He and other men were starving, chewing at roots and grass to stay alive. Then he encountered German stragglers and killed them. This man was one of them. After Sammler killed him, he plundered the German's gun, shells, food, boots, gloves — as much as he could. He 'ate the German's bread under winter-creaking trees.' Was this inevitable for Sammler to survive? Couldn't he help killing the man who asked for his life? His conduct may be tolerable if he is to survive in the war, since his life itself was in danger.

However, it cannot be denied that Sammler killed other men not only for his survival but also for his pleasure:

> Mr. Sammler himself was able to add, to basic wisdom, that to kill the man he ambushed in the snow had given him pleasure. Was it only pleasure? It was more. It was joy. You would call it a dark action? On the contrary, it was also a bright one. It was mainly bright. When he fired his gun, Sammler, himself nearly a corpse, burst into life. Freezing in Zamosht Forest, he had often dreamed of being near a fire. Well, this was more sumptuous than fire. His heart felt lined with brilliant, rapturous satin. To kill the man and to kill him without pity, for he was dispensed from pity. There was a flash, a blot of fiery white. When he shot again it was less to make sure of the man than to try again for that bliss. To drink more flames. He would have thanked God for this opportunity. If he had had any God. At that time, he did not. For many years, in his own mind, there was no judge but himself. (140-41)

The author says that to kill a man gives pleasure by making Sammler experience murder. A desire to kill may be an impulse inherent in humanity. It must really be what is called original sin. Human beings are destined to die. Life is given to them by God if there be God. Murder is an action to manipulate life, that is, to play God, to exercise the greatest power. Sammler may well feel pleased, even joyful, committing murder.

In the third and fourth chapter, Sammler's recollection is described when he went to Israel at the time of the Six-Day War. Sammler fears that the Holocaust would be repeated to Israel by the Arabs. This description is based on Bellow's real experience, as Peter Hyland points out:

> In 1967 Bellow went to Sinai to report for *Newsday* magazine on the Six-Day War, and much of what he saw there emerges as part of Mr. Sammler's experience. Unlike six million other Jews, Sammler himself had survived the Holocaust, literally rising from the grave. The threat of the Arab countries allied against Israel raised the possibility of a repetition of the Holocaust, as Sammler plainly sees: 'for the second time in twenty-five years the same people were threatened by extermination: so-called powers letting things drift toward disaster; men armed for a massacre' (Ch.3). (Hyland 70)

However, at the same time, the possibility is suggested that the Israelis could themselves practise genocide against the Arabs by using napalm. Violence and massacre are reciprocal, as suggested by Eisen's excessive violence against the black thief:

> Mr. Sammler is haunted by his memory of the moment when he killed the German prisoner in the Zamosht Forest. He acknowledges that this act was murder, but he believes that his own experience of extreme suffering at the hands of the Germans made his act inevitable. What disturbs him about the event, however, is that he felt an undeniable joy in his act of power, and this has taught him that the potential for violence and joy in violence is in all men. In the same way, the Israelis were compromised in the Sinai War when they used napalm while denying they were using it — a violence gone beyond the needs of the situation. This is what makes the act of violence committed by Eisen against the black thief so horrifying to Mr. Sammler: Eisen equates his own violence with Sammler's, with nothing of the sense of the moral impropriety of the act that Sammler has. It is the lack of this ability to make distinctions that Sammler sees everywhere about him. (Hyland 71-72)

Ⅳ The Exodus to the Moon

Dr. Govinda Lal believes that human beings should escape from this devastated earth and emigrate to the moon. As he indicates, the earth is now overcrowded. Indians are especially sensitive to the unusually multitudinous surplus of mankind. Calcutta, for example, is too overflowing with people for its inhabitants to live normally. They naturally expect that mankind, with its intellect and advanced technology, will find a way out from this situation. If this situation should continue, mankind would devour its environment and ensure its own destruction. Dr. Lal emphasizes this:

> The invitation to the voyage, the Baudelaire desire to get out — get out of human circumstances — or the longing to be a drunken boat, or a soul whose craving is to crack open a closed universe is still real, only the impulse does not have to be assigned to tiresomeness and vanity of life, and it does not necessarily have to be a death-voyage. (219)

Dr. Lal admits that we are destined to live according to the order of nature, believing 'atomic theories of cellular conductivity', that is, we are confined by the chain structures of the cell. At the same time, he thinks that it is natural that mankind should wish to free itself from the binding chains with its advanced technology, to 'live without order'. Further he argues:

> [The fundamental biological governing principle] is widely presumed to be there only to free us, a platform for impulse. Are we crazy, or what? From order, from governing principle, the human being can tear himself to express his immense privilege of sheer liberty or unaccountability of impulse. (216)

Thus, Dr. Lal's idea of the exodus to the moon is intended not only as a means to solve the problems of our environmental living condition but also to liberate mankind from its binding destiny, including the most dreadful, death itself.

Bellow uses H. G. Wells, the image of the real scientific, philosophical and literary giant as an important character in this novel, and now presents a modern scientist, Lal, and his idea of moon colonization as an extension of Wells' scientific ideas and scientific fictions. It seems very significant that Dr. Lalis an Indian, who is naturally very much concerned about his people's living situation of overpopulation, poverty, starvation, lack of resources and poor political leadership, which symbolically stands for the situation in which our planet as a whole finds itself. Dr. Lal thinks that another world of death covers all over mankind in this fatal situation and that many people want to put an end to their lives.

Dr. Lal's idea seems significant in that it reflects the scientific development in the 1960's and the projects all over the world to explore the universe, especially the spaceship Apollo, which actually landed on the moon.

Sammler admits this critical situation of mankind. He also thinks that human beings might choose their own destruction if they would continue to have their own way that they cannot help doing whatever they can possibly do. In his opinion, at present very mediocre representatives of human beings have the supreme power to extinct themselves in the United States, Russia, China, France and some other unknown places in the world. They can really put an end to all mankind, either on purpose or by mistake. In a sense, mankind is now playing out a magnificent and miraculous drama that the whole world disappear altogether at the same time at the catastrophe of the drama in the same manner as a single man dies. Sammler admits that such a drama is now going on, but does not believe, as Dr. Lal does, that mankind will follow its inner impulse to see the drama played through to the very end.

Sammler believes that most human beings want to survive this critical situation and argues against Dr. Lal:

> "When you know what pain is, you agree that not to have been born is better.

> But being born one obeys the will of God — with whatever inner reservations truth imposes. As for duty — you are wrong. The pain of duty makes the creature upright, and this uprightness is no negligible thing. No, I stand by what I first said. There is also an instinct against leaping into Kingdom Come." (220)

Thus Sammler objects to Dr. Lal's idea that creatures do not want any duty in themselves, but want to cut off every duty imposed on them and die, getting off the biological binding chains once they have completed their actions of reproduction. He also believes that in order to survive we must, of course, alter our outer situation, but more importantly we must change the direction of our thinking, true to the will of the creation.

Thus, the whole body of the novel is superbly constructed, the roles of the characters are closely connected with one another and the description is funny, comical, interesting and quite real, vividly depicting our actual situation and the problems which we are facing now.

Dr. Lal's emigration plan to the moon seems to be reasonable and understandable, because it is based on the fact that the earth is too crowded and too polluted for mankind to continue to survive much longer. Evidence and data have consolidated his idea, while advanced space technology seems to make it possible and plausible to realize it. The American space project is especially conspicuous, though Sammler and Dr. Lal agree that this kind of technological progress is derived from the wrong historical development in Europe and America as Dr. Lal admits:

> "I simply mean you would be acquainted with my argument, which I base in part on U.S. history. After 1776 there was a continent to expand into, and this space absorbed all the mistakes. Of course I am not a historian. But if one cannot make guesses, one will have to surrender all to the experts. Europe after 1789 did not have the space for its mistakes. Result: war and revolution, with the revolutions ending up in the hands of the madmen." (218)

Contrary to the appearance of plausibility, it is very clear that Dr. Lal's idea is actually impossible to carry out at the present stage, because the moon, as everyone knows, is a world where no living things can exist. The moon is really a world of death. Taking this reality into account, Dr. Lal's idea of the moon symbolizes the world of death, and the human beings' emigrating there implies the extinction of mankind: "There is no duty in biology. There is no sovereign obligation to one's breed. When biological destiny is fulfilled in reproduction the desire is often to die." (220) Thus, the moon is presented as the ultimate goal of the pessimism permeating this novel.

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