

“BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY, CLUJ-NAPOCA  
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*Abstract of the Ph.D. Thesis*

**SAUL BELLOW – BEYOND THE COMMUNITY**

(SAUL BELLOW. DINCOLO DE COMUNITATE)

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## A. Contents:

<i>Contents</i> .....	1
<i>Introduction</i> .....	2
<i>Chapter I: <b>The Writer and the American Context</b></i> .....	7
I.1. Saul Bellow's Heritage: the Writer's Words and Those of His Critics.....	7
I.2. The American Scene: from the Melting Pot to the Postethnic Society.....	21
I.3. Assimilation, Acculturation and Pluralism in Jewish American Fiction.....	33
<i>Chapter II: <b>Literature and Ethnicity</b></i> .....	41
II.1. The Jewish Americans: History, Religious Identity, Integration in the American Society.....	41
II.2. The Jewish American Writers.....	51
II.3. Jewish American Fiction and the Problem of Ethnic Identity.....	60
<i>Chapter III. <b>The Sacred – Profane Life Relationship in Saul Bellow's Novels</b></i> .....	75
III.1. The Sacredness of Life in a Profane Existence.....	75
III.2. Individual Moral Responsibility as the Corner-Stone of Society.....	111
<i>Chapter IV. <b>The Perception of History and of the Community in Saul Bellow's Novels</b></i> .....	130
IV.1. History's Dark Pages: Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust.....	130
IV.2. Towards a Possible Escape Gate: Human Brotherhood.....	182
<i>Conclusions</i> .....	211
<i>Bibliography</i> .....	215

**B. Key-words:** cultural heritage, American multiculturalism, American identity, canon, ethnicity, Jewishness, Judaism.

## C. Abstract of the Ph. D. Thesis:

*Introduction.*

My Ph. D. thesis called *Saul Bellow – Beyond the Community* has set out to analyze the fictional work of the American author paying particular attention to Jewish cultural elements that can be encountered within his novels and also to the way the author related himself to this heritage.

My aims have been to analyze this author's work searching for elements pertaining to a Jewish literary and ethical legacy and see how exactly this specific legacy was used by the writer in a supposedly WASP American cultural and literary scene; and also to analyze how the work of a writer belonging to an ethnic minority managed to

enter the mainstream, canonical literature, perhaps mirroring the evolution of that community in the USA.

From a methodological point of view I have taken a hermeneutical approach to the text within the multicultural theoretical framework using as instruments the issues / concepts of : ethnicity, American identity (from the melting pot to its post – ethnic variant) in order to emphasize how the Jewish American community and its writers related to the assimilation process. I have also discussed the way the insider – outsider condition of Jewish American writers has influenced their position within the mainstream literature – ethnic literature diagram.

My thesis is based on a double interpretation of Bellow's novels – one from the point of view of his Jewishness meaning elements of a sociological, ethnical, historical, literary nature rendered in his work: e.g. the condition of the Jew in America, the perspective on anti-Semitism and on the Holocaust that the American Jews have, the presence in his novels of a traditional Yiddish/ Jewish character – the schlemiel. At the same time I have looked at Saul Bellow's fiction from the perspective of the Judaic religious elements present within his otherwise secularly-inspired literary production: e.g. the concept of fellowman and the individual responsibility.

This separate analysis of Bellow's sense of Jewishness and Judaism was done not only to underline the modern, recent idea that being Jewish does not automatically imply a religious dimension in one's life but it also had a practical purpose in helping me better reveal the novels' ethnic and the religiously-inspired coordinates that do not always overlap in Saul Bellow's fiction. The primary sources that I have used are his best known novels: *Dangling Man*, *The Victim*, *The Adventures of Augie March*, *Seize the Day*, *Henderson*, *the Rain King*, *Herzog*, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, *Humboldt's Gift*, *The Dean's December*, *The Bellarosa Connection*, *Ravelstein*. The third and the fourth chapter include substantial close readings of the above mentioned novels which emphasize the fact that Saul Bellow's fiction has some of the characteristics of ethnical literature, yet it reaches beyond the limitations imposed by a type of fiction written for a specific audience (like the members of an ethnic community) or written about such individuals

sharing a common past and a specific religious and cultural background. Because the ideas presented in Bellow's novels have resonated with the larger American audience, because of the enhanced aesthetic quality of his work and the Western canonical sources that have influenced them, helped by the general ideological and social context of the late 40s – 60s which was pushing for assimilation, his novels have been included among the works of the mainstream American writers.

*Chapter I: The Writer and the American Context*

In the first chapter, within the first part I have presented the writer's own opinions and public statements about the way he perceived this Jewish heritage and the craft of fiction that he so well handled and I have generally stated the theoretical approach I had adopted for the paper. A close reading of the text may reveal Bellow's liberal humanist way of thinking reflected in his novels and his interviews; for him literature was a high-minded enterprise for sensitive and fine-tuned intellectuals who believe that human nature and the human condition are the same all over the world and that the individual creates its own destiny through his/her choices. Yet in his novels we find at work a series of intellectual trends that make Saul Bellow difficult to approach from just one theoretical perspective. The writer's formal training as an anthropologist is visible in some of his novels through his interest in other cultures and in the binary oppositions he privileges: nature vs. culture, the profane vs. the sacred, the individual vs. the community, the center vs. the margin (reminiscent of Claude Levi Strauss' anthropological structuralism and of Derrida's deconstruction). We see these illustrated in *Henderson*, *the Rain King*, *The Dean's December*, *The Adventures of Augie March*, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. But unlike the case of some of his contemporaries, in all his novels is noticeable his opposition to everything that may be said to be characteristic of a postmodern literature since he admires the principles of value, meaning, control, identity of the writing. It is true that in Bellow's characters one can see transposed into literature the author's desire to become an American accepted with equal rights by the mainstream WASP society and literary scene, even if this meant neglecting certain aspects of his Jewish heritage. His characters' debates are sometimes political, place and time bound reflecting their

historical context, but most are first and foremost intellectual; they are not ideologically driven constructions that are a vehicle for power and participate in the making of history. Therefore a new historical approach would do justice only partly to the author's intention of presenting America with a faithful and sensitive picture of its intellectual and cultural life during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

For the purpose of underlining the Jewish legacy in the novels of this author and the way this work became an established value of the mainstream literature which supposedly was the creation of a WASP society, one of the most appropriate research methods could be centered around the usage of the "ethnicity" and "post-ethnicity" concepts when doing a close reading and interpretation of the texts of an author belonging to an American "minority". Two sources are essential for this approach that I favor- one is Werner Sollors' *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* for its discussion of the role of ethnicity in literature and that of the descent and consent relations in making up the American identity; and the other is David Hollinger's *Postethnic America, Beyond Multiculturalism* for its perspective that favors voluntary over prescribed affiliation, appreciating both the descent and the consent communities.

In the second subchapter I have analyzed the American cultural policies: from the assimilation and the acculturation doctrine of the 30s-50s to multiculturalism's demand of ethnic pride in the 70s-90s in order to see how Saul Bellow related to his ethnic heritage throughout these years i.e. if he tacitly accepted these cultural paradigms in turn one by one (and the answer is that he did) and also in order to categorize his attitude as relevant for a specific type of ethnicity, the symbolic ethnicity. When asked to identify himself as being either Jewish or American or Jewish-American, Bellow answered that he was simply a "writer", or at best "an American writer of Jewish origin". But later on he also added that his Jewish history gave him an entirely different orientation and that a "writer had no choice but to be faithful to his history". Such an apparent variation may be indicative of a kaleidoscopic American ethnicity and also of the writer's reluctance to embrace labels in a troubled 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Obviously the various avatars of the American identity brought forth by the melting pot concept, H. Kallen's cultural pluralism, W. Herberg's triple melting pot, the 1970s and 1990s multicultural approaches, D. Hollinger's postethnic perspective can function as background for the presentation of the way writers can be connected to their ethnic heritage. In this respect I believe that Hollinger's approach to ethnicity, to be more accurate to post-ethnicity is the one that allows me the best to explain Bellow's attitude and writing, considering that post-ethnicity prefers voluntary to prescribed affiliations, appreciates multiple identities and recognizes the constructed character of ethno-racial groups. It recognizes the fact that the individual makes choices in specific, limiting circumstances, most of which have to do with one's ancestral roots. Yet it rejects the claim that history or biology provides a clear set of orders for the affiliations an individual can make.

Keeping in mind that one can and has the right to choose his/her ethnic affiliations, one can understand why Saul Bellow's relation to his Jewishness changed through time: from the young man's desire to become Americanized and accepted as any other mainstream writer, to a more nostalgic attitude of the old man who revalued his ethnic roots. The general idea would be that his ethnicity is a symbolic one, i.e. he enjoyed a subjective feeling of ethnic identity but shied away from a more substantive identification which would have meant involvement in a concrete community. He also refused to be labeled "a Jewish American writer", avoiding the role of spokesman for his community that such a "pigeonholing" might have entailed.

The third subchapter is concerned with a discussion of the way social and cultural phenomena like assimilation, acculturation and pluralism have been rendered in Jewish American fiction. They represent different angles of vision regarding the Jewish-American experience, changes and stages which were accurately mirrored in some literary works. Other pieces of fiction will ignore these issues and turn toward more universally-valid subjects, ideas to be tackled by the authors, any authors, irrespective of their ethnic background. Needless to say that from such a perspective the relationship of the writer, viewed as a member of a certain ethnic group, with more or less accentuated

allegiances to his or her background or/and to the American culture, will have to take a central place in this analysis. This will consequently lead towards a search for the ways the issue of ethnic identity and the presentation of the life of Jewish-Americans are dealt with within the novels and stories of representative authors for this community.

*Chapter II: **Literature and Ethnicity***

The second chapter is further subdivided into three parts. The first is focused on the history of the Jews in the U.S.A. (the several waves of immigration, their relationship with the Old World and their new cultural, social and economic environment) and the new pact that they have signed with America which became to them the new Promised Land. A new community was created with a different culture which meant that it gave rise to a new type of literature. In this context, American Jews can be seen as a special liminal case of immigrants who from outsiders quickly become insiders.

The other two parts have dealt with the literature that was produced by writers belonging to this ethnic group and the way they managed to identify themselves through their work. Since the writer is also a member of a community, he/she will therefore mirror in his/her work the processes that the whole group undergoes. Thus I have also tackled the American context which helped create this new type of literature. Using this kaleidoscopic ethnic identity that emerged in time, I have mentioned that within Jewish American literature the treatment of ethnic subject also varies. It should also be defined what is to be understood by the notion of “Jewish-American” writer. Several critics designate authors as belonging to this category using different criteria: the ethnic background of these authors, the subject matter of their works, the themes and character portrayal to be found within, intertextual perspectives leading back to the Jewish literary tradition and culture or even larger outlooks like ideological trends and the relationship with the mainstream American literature. From such a perspective the relationship of the writer viewed as a member of a certain ethnic group, with more or less accentuated allegiances to his background and to the American culture, will take a central place in my analysis.

The third part has attempted to make a pertinent analysis of some novels, novellas and stories belonging to the above-mentioned literature, from the point of view of their

presentation of this community's life between various types of ethnic identity: the old Jewish identity as defined in Europe, the new hyphenated Jewish-American identity, and the values of WASP America. The diachronic perspective on this fiction was helpful in tracking the evolution of this literature from the sometimes awkward and unskilled productions of the early writers, recent immigrants struggling with a new culture and a new language, to the elaborate and accomplished works of contemporary authors belonging to the second or third generation of Jewish-Americans. Such a survey contributes to stressing the parallel development of this particular community and its specific literary production, and the effects of their mutual influence.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the writer mediates between his/her community and the larger American society. Since this literature was written mostly by 1<sup>st</sup> generation immigrants it has a strong autobiographical element (the works of M. Antin, A. Cahan). Then starting with the second generation, the writers of the 50s and 60s we see the dominance of canonical, mainstream writers (S. Bellow, P. Roth, B. Malamud) who address the larger American public and do not feel like giving explanations to anybody, after all, they feel fully American. This attitude turned out to project an elusive confidence because the radical part of their ethnic community would always feel like these prominent members have somehow deserted them and even worked against the interests of the community. Beginning with the 70s we see the emergence of writers of "renewed ethnic spokespersonship" who are more concerned with coming back to the authentically Jewish sources, in most cases the religious ones (like C. Ozick).

### *Chapter III. The Sacred – Profane Life Relationship in Saul Bellow's Novels*

The third chapter tackles the relationship between the sacred and the profane world in Bellow's novels. Among the important ideas to notice here, one has to mention the fact that Bellow's fiction does not overtly tackle religious ideas, the daily life of his characters is constructed on a profane basis. Yet one of the main statements of his fiction has its roots in Judaism's religious precepts. Life is sacred and must be protected from nihilism, alienation and all the "wastelands of the modern condition". Herzog, one of his main characters asks the pivotal question around which all Bellow's fiction revolves



-“How shall a good man live?” The answer brought forth by his novels pertains both to morality and religion and it concerns the communion with one’s fellowman.

The close reading of the texts made in the first subchapter reveals that his characters do not attend the synagogue or the church, they do not perform the mitzvot required of every pious Jew (with a few exceptions they are all Jews), they do not pray very often or think about God, but all of them, sooner or later, experience a sense of awe and of personal insignificance in front of a nameless greater, larger-than-human-life entity, existence, as well as in front of the implacable mechanism of historical, social and cultural evolution. Their sense of the “sacred” differs very much from that of the theologians, but nevertheless, they have inherited from their ancestors all the Biblical knowledge they have to know and which they often use to illustrate and support their otherwise worldly arguments. At the same time they yearn for something which might fulfill their lives, be it a connection with a higher, transcendental level or communion with their fellow beings built upon an ethical, read religious, Jewish basis. Invariably, at the end of his novels, the heroes discover that the way out of their tormented intellectual and spiritual (waste)lands is through the acceptance of human suffering and responsibility for their own deeds as well as through the fulfillment of duties towards their fellow beings. Yet there is an ambiguous, volatile ending in Bellow’s novels. The author doesn’t suggest that once they have found salvation, his protagonists will also necessarily embrace it or at least adopt it for a longer term. Realistically enough, these characters cannot completely get out of their state of “becoming” and enter that of “being”; each and every day they must take the same affirmative choice all over again, each day the individual must decide to live a worthy life and love his/her fellowman.

The hint that Bellow gives at the end of his novels – the necessity for a continuous renewal, for a permanent fight which the individual is supposed to carry day in and day out against his/her overgrown ego, against despair and isolation – may lead the reader to make a distinction between religion, the goal of which is the preservation of a given doctrine, and religiosity, the aim of which is a perpetual spiritual rebirth. The details and sometimes even the principles of dogma seem irrelevant to the Bellovian characters, yet

in their intellectual life (this is where they are at their best) they struggle to find a way to lead a meaningful existence in a society and culture that has lost all meaning and content.

In the second subchapter one sees that to the writer, the new modern religion of the contemporary society is the “doom of the West”, which means a desacralisation of life. It also means that people do not value life anymore, and to civilization they prefer raw, untamed human nature. In front of this kind of life characterized by physical and psychological violence, discrimination, poverty, spiritual emptiness, lack of education, Bellow prefers the old Jewish strategy for survival – that of saying “yes” in front of the grimmest facts, believing that reason will prevail over brute force and that human beings, through action can still make a difference.

It is obvious that in the U.S.A. a particular kind of narrative was developed from a very early age of the nation: the myths of democracy, progress, territorial and economic expansion brought by the Founding Fathers of the nation quickly replaced the old Puritan religious tales of sin, virtuous life, redemption.

But even this secular meta-narrative was in its turn replaced by a growing disenchantment with the American political system and the notion of modern progress. As a consequence, in order to prevent a possible disintegration or atomization of the society to the point of lack of cohesion or coherence, the writer suggests that each individual is responsible for his/her deeds, that every deed is charged with both a sacred and profane value and every individual must love and protect his/her fellowman, i.e. enter an ethical relationship with the Other.

Yet the balance of the sacred-profane life relationship in the novels of Saul Bellow is in a fragile equilibrium. The characters’ thoughts and deeds belong to the profane side but the author’s voice through his fiction and official declarations, though void of an explicit religious tone, seems to have been highly influenced by the precepts of Judaism that the author undoubtedly knew as a child growing up in a traditional Jewish family, a boy who attended the heder and who was viewed by his mother as a future Jewish scholar. That every man is responsible for his/her deeds, that every deed is important and charged with both profane and sacred value, that the individual must learn

to love, help and live a worthy life next to his/her fellow being and not a life of intellectual ascetism at the confines of the society, these are all ancient Jewish beliefs of a sacred life that Saul Bellow transposed in the profane environment of the 20<sup>th</sup> century American culture and civilization.

*Chapter IV. The Perception of History and of the Community in Saul Bellow's Novels*

In the first part of the fourth chapter I have dealt with the perception of history and the community as it can be noticed in Bellow's novels. Obviously the characters of a writer belonging to a hyphenated community would not feel a contradiction or incompatibility in their double identity, so they tackle the history of the United States, that of the Jewish people and that of the state of Israel. Generally, they are American intellectuals and as such they are especially preoccupied with the deadlock that contemporary society finds itself in and how exactly ( the history of ) philosophy, literature, sociology can provide a solution or, on the contrary, how such scholastic, academic enterprises can do further harm. Yet these characters are also Jews who ponder on the causes of anti-Semitism; sometimes they think about the fate of the state of Israel and how European Jewish history influenced its American counterpart. Mostly they speak with melancholy about the tough life they had as children of (immigrant) poor Jewish parents, growing up in the slums of Chicago and New York. As grown-ups, their intellectual life seeks the pleasures and the temptations of the American culture and civilization, but their emotional life always goes back to the protective confinements of a (past) Jewish community. Consequently, Saul Bellow's Jewish characters would rather speak about something they are more acquainted with: the existence or the non-existence of an American anti-Semitism, the way they had felt or the manner they had reacted as children to the sometimes hostile Gentile environment and about life in the Upper West Side where many Eastern European immigrant Jews lived. They were owners of a strong sense of distinct identity and language but not such devote followers of Judaic traditions and customs. At such a stage in their lives, public history meant the history of their community, not of the country at large. However, the history of their parents takes back seat to their concerns with the contemporary political, economic, social and intellectual American scene.

Bellow's characters discuss the causes of anti-Semitism and the fate of Israel, but ultimately they see America and its (WASP) culture as their true home which has protected them from the fate of their ancestors. The childhood spent in the ghetto was not a basically unhappy one because it was spent in the protective confinements of the Jewish community (here one can see a sharp contrast with the way a European Jew might have seen this in the past). Yet when growing up, the young man always feels the need to sign the new covenant with American life and society.

Here I have brought forward a keen issue for the Jewish American community – the way the Shoah is rendered in the Jewish American fiction and the role of memory in constructing an (ethnic) identity. There are two types of books: Holocaust inflicted (that is the case of Bellow) and books about the Holocaust per se, which try to recreate, fictionally or autobiographically, life in the camps. With two major exceptions, Bellow dealt only marginally with the Holocaust in his books, and this mirrored a general tendency in the Jewish American literature of the 50s – 70s. First of all it took some time for the general public to comprehend what was happening in Europe in the camps and this lasted until the end of the 50s. Then the Jewish Americans felt a sense of guilt for not having done more to help their brethren escape to America. Then there was also a certain delicacy in approaching a subject pertaining to European history for which the Americans have only second hand knowledge - as opposed to literature written by survivors or their descendants. In the U.S.A. this reckoning with the past also degenerated in a sort of marketing process used to reinforce collective identity which is highly debatable.

In the second part of this chapter I noticed that when writing about Jewish history and the perspective that people who assume this identity have on history and the life of their community, most of the time it is impossible to draw a perfect dividing line within Judaism between the narration and the commentaries upon a chronological line of political, social events and the teaching pertaining to the sacred realm of divine revelations and religious precepts. Especially since both of these areas, religion and history, in this case, meet and are intermingled in the domain of ethics. In the words of a Jewish American writer both religious metaphor and historical memory have one

supreme function, that of enabling the individual to understand what it is like to be the Other; an emphatic process necessary for a peaceful, happy co-existence within the confines of the same land and civilization.

An important message to be found in Saul Bellow's fiction seems to be the idea that human brotherhood may offer not only escape from the moral and cultural predicament of modern society, but it can also serve as a hindrance to the reiteration of history's nightmares. Human brotherhood implying love for the others, for mankind, giving a real value to the life of an individual, may serve as a fundament for the basis of our society; it is also a feeling that writers should cherish as it may help them cross the gap that "the Great Noise" of modern daily life had created between the artist and the ordinary individual as a potential receiver of the work of art.

What Bellow said in his novels was that in order to prevent such horrible things like the Holocaust, the two world wars, etc., from happening again, people must have a strong sense of communion with the Other. This emphatic process that creates human brotherhood can be interpreted as the transposition into the field of sociology of the implications of the religious concept of 'fellowman' and the divine commandment of "Love thy neighbor as yourself". What Bellow's intellectuals put at the center of their life is the need for responsibility and the involvement in the life of the society.

#### *Conclusions*

The aim of the present Ph.D. thesis was to trace Jewish cultural elements in the novels of Saul Bellow and see how well and to what extent they intermix with the values that WASP America imprinted on the author's fiction. All of this was discussed in the context of changing cultural paradigms that Bellow reflected very well in both his work and official declarations. The concepts of ethnicity and American identity have been overlapped for some time now, but the way they are reflected in literature has also evolved with the changing of social, economic and political realities. Without denying the fact that art, fiction should be autonomous, one cannot help seeing that they do not function in a void, but within a society, within the larger or smaller community that they mirror. It is only the gift and the craft of the writer that makes fiction reach beyond. In my thesis, I hope I have proved that Saul Bellow was a writer of Jewish origin who made

literature and America his true home, irrespectively of the fact that he was a man who somewhat , at least at a superficial level, obeyed the intellectual and cultural trends of his time. In between a rather dark past and a hopefully better future, Bellow's characters and fiction remain ambiguous, many-sided, not completely pessimistic, but not exploiting a facile optimism either. The author and his books give full credit to potentiality, to becoming. It is after all one of the main attributes that makes us human. To paraphrase one of his characters: no more than human and no less than human.

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