Saul Bellow: A Jewish Farewell
To the Enlightenment

From the beginning of his career as a novelist, Saul Bellow has been impelled by a powerful sense of the inadequacy of Enlightenment principles and categories to encompass and interpret modern experience, particularly the experience of the Holocaust. His first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944), was set in 1942-43. Its hero, a young man named Joseph who is awaiting his induction into the U.S. Army, has been working on a series of biographical essays about the philosophers of the Enlightenment. He was “in the midst of one on Diderot” when he received his draft notice and “began to dangle.” That his belief in the dispensation according to the gospel of the Rights of Man had already begun to wane is evident in his depiction of a Communist friend named Jimmy Burns who had dreamt of “becoming an American Robespierre” and in his account of his own disillusionment with the Communist party, the modern expositor of the universal rights of mankind. The Communists, he had believed, were devoted to “the Race, *le genre humain.*” But by the time he left the party, he “realized that any hospital nurse did more with one bedpan for *le genre humain* than they did with their entire organization.” Joseph’s study of the Enlightenment has not prepared him for the carnage that is taking place on the continent of Europe, to which he will soon be transported. “We do not flinch at seeing all these lives struck out; nor would those who were killed have suffered any more for us, if we, not they, had been the victims. I do not like to think what we are governed by. I do not like to think about it. It is not easy work, and it is not safe. Its kindest revelation is that our senses and our imaginations are somehow incompetent.”

The hero of *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970) knows con-
clusively what young Joseph could only guess at—that the Holocaust had exploded forever the Enlightenment conception of man as naturally good, in rational control of his mental and physical universe, and potentially able to use that control to create a heavenly city on earth. Like Joseph, Artur Sammler had once been a child of the Enlightenment and had devoted himself to a scholarly work on one of the great expositors of Enlightenment principles, H. G. Wells, whom he had known very well during his years in Bloomsbury. Indeed, before the Holocaust, Wells had been the object of his life’s work. Wells had based his utopian ideas for a renovated world on the application of scientific principles to the enlargement of human life: “the building of a planned, orderly, and beautiful world society.” But Wells himself, basing all his hopes on the naturalism of Enlightenment epistemology, was not prepared to reckon with those subterranean forces that erupted in modern Europe. Thus Sammler, in his post-Holocaust incarnation, spends all his time in the Forty-second Street Library reading the mystical Meister Eckhardt when everybody supposes him to be working on his memoir of Wells. For he knows that “poor Wells, the natural teacher, the sex emancipator, the explainer, the humane blesser of mankind, could in the end only blast and curse everyone.” Sammler does say, by way of extenuation, that Wells “wrote such things in his final sickness, horribly depressed by World War II.”

Unless one recognizes the extent to which, in Bellow’s mind, the Holocaust functions as a metaphysical refutation of Enlightenment assumptions, he will not easily find the center of this novel. Even so acute an observer of Bellow’s work as Irving Howe has written of this book: “Lively-odd figures, brilliantly managed incidents—but what does it all come to? That, until the very last paragraph, is the question one keeps asking about Mr. Sammler’s Planet.”1 Much of the book does seem intent on merely conveying to us the touch and tone of life in upper Manhattan, the way people and things look and sound, the kinds of ideas (or what the poverty of the English language
compels us to call such) favored by the semi-educated New York intelligentsia, whose conversation is “often nothing but the repetition of liberal principles” couched in the terminology of the *New York Times*.

Bellow has, of course, throughout his career studied the desperate and highly cerebral forms that personal existence takes in large American cities like Chicago and New York. But his characters generally have a sense of the relation between their own life and that of the old world. Some of them suppose this world and its inhabitants to have been greater, more heroic, than the shrunken version of mankind that inhabits American cities. Others, however, like Einhorn in *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), have a more accurate sense of the relation between Europe and America:

> There is some kind of advantage in the roughness of a place like Chicago, of not having any illusions either. Whereas in all the great capitals of the world there’s some reason to think humanity is very different. All that ancient culture and those beautiful works of art right out in public, by Michelangelo and Christopher Wren, and those ceremonies, like trooping the color at the Horse Guards’ parade or burying a great man in the Pantheon over in Paris. You see those marvelous things and you think that everything savage belongs to the past. So you think. And then you have another think, and you see that after they rescued women from the coal mines, or pulled down the Bastille and got rid of Star Chambers and *lettres de cachet*, ran out the Jesuits, increased education, and built hospitals and spread courtesy and politeness, they have five or six years of war and revolutions and kill off twenty million people.

This knowledge of death is one of the few certain benefits that an experience of Europe gives to those Jews who survive it. What separates Artur Sammler from the American Jews who surround him in New York (and later unites him with the Israeli Jews who are otherwise so foreign to him) is a knowledge of what death is. By a kind of miracle, he had been saved from the Holocaust that engulfed everyone around him, saved not because he had any special merit or special knowledge of how to survive—“had the war lasted a few months more, he would have died like the rest”—but because he has been given a duty, an
assignment: namely, to condense for others some essence of experience available only to those who have returned from the dead. *Mr. Sammler's Planet* is precisely an attempt to imagine and capture this essence.

The novel begins with an account and discussion of two crimes, two criminals, two forms of “explanation” (a pejorative word throughout the book) for their acts. Since the two crimes, one the massive one of Adolf Eichmann in transporting Jews to the gas chambers, the other that of a black pickpocket in Manhattan who also assaults Sammler, are recalled again and again throughout the book, it seems reasonable to suppose that in the relation between them lies at least a hint of the novel’s significance.

The subject of the Holocaust is explicitly introduced into the novel by means of a fierce attack by the novel’s protagonist on Hannah Arendt’s thesis (set forth in her book of 1963) that Eichmann was the most ordinary of men, a sort of cliché endowed with arms, legs, and a mouth, and that the perpetrators of the unspeakable evil of the death camps were in general not great criminals but merely the petty bureaucrats everywhere produced in modern times by the principle of division of labor. Up until this point in the novel, we have learned that Mr. Sammler, who is over seventy, was in Poland during the war, that in 1940 he had lost his wife and lost an eye, and that in 1947 he and his daughter Shula had been located by relatives in a D.P. camp in Salzburg and brought to the United States by his nephew Elya Gruner, an abiding presence in the novel. Hannah Arendt’s thesis about the “banality of evil” that prevailed in Nazi Germany is proposed to Sammler by his niece, Margotte.

Although Sammler has long since recognized the futility of arguing with his niece, his reply is passionate rather than perfunctory. Hannah Arendt, he says, has been duped, for the banality that she purports to discover in these murderers and their evil deeds was merely camouflage. “ ‘What better way to get the curse out of murder than to make it look ordinary, boring, or trite?’ ” Intellectuals with literary training expect every wicked hero to be like Richard
III, who steps to the front of the stage announcing "I am determined to be a villain." The Nazis, Sammler contends, never forgot their old, normal knowledge of what is meant by murder. "That is very old human knowledge. The best and purest human beings, from the beginning of time, have understood that life is sacred. To defy that old understanding is not banality. There was a conspiracy against the sacredness of life.'" No one, he maintains, can believe that the abolition of conscience is a trivial or banal matter unless she believes that human life itself is trivial. Hannah Arendt stands accused of "'making use of a tragic history to promote the foolish ideas of Weimar intellectuals.'"

To what uses, then, Bellow is asking, should that "tragic history" be put? The novel has already raised, in connection with a much smaller crime, the question of whether the notion that we learn things from suffering is anything more than cant. The problem of crime is much in Sammler's mind when we first meet him because he has been observing a black pickpocket regularly at work on the Riverside Drive bus and has made a futile effort to interest police in the matter. But in liberal and enlightened New York, interest in such criminals, he recognizes, comes mainly from people like his young relative, Angela Grüner, who is attracted by "the romance of the outlaw" and sends her rich father's money to defense funds for black murderers and rapists. Angela, like Margotte and Shula and several others in the novel, holds the liberal view that everyone is guilty of a crime except the person who has actually committed it. Their typical concern is not with that abstraction called justice or with upholding the honor of the victim, but with such "explanatory" questions as: "Who was this black? What were his origins, his class or racial attitudes, his psychological views, his true emotions, his aesthetic, his political ideas?"

Sammler himself is repelled by the notion that style, art, and meaning attach to criminals and inhere in their crimes. He recognizes that modern artists, like liberal intellectuals, respond to a sense of affinity between themselves and the criminal classes. Thus it is no accident that the most
memorable moment in *Crime and Punishment* is the instant when Raskolnikov crushes the old woman’s head with an ax. “Horror, crime, murder, did vivify all the phenomena, the most ordinary details of experience. In evil as in art there was illumination.” His daughter stoutly declares, “ ‘For the creative there are no crimes.’ ” But was there, wonders Sammler, any crime or (significant alteration) sin that was not committed for the highest motives? “Was there any sinner who did not sin *pro bono publico*? So great was the evil of helplessness, and so immense the liberal spirit of explanation.” Since the Enlightenment, there had been a tremendous attention paid to the “significance” of prisons, yet (perhaps paradoxically, perhaps as the working out of inner logic) “where liberty had been promised most, they had the biggest, worst prisons.”

The liberalism whose inanities are mocked throughout *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* has been for over a century the most widely embraced ideology of Western intellectuals. As long ago as 1864, John Henry Newman had written that “the Liberalism which gives a colour to society now, is very different from that character of thought which bore the name thirty or forty years ago. Now it is scarcely a party: it is the educated lay world.” But liberalism shares with other offspring of the Enlightenment—egalitarianism, socialism, communism—certain assumptions about the world, the mind, and society that are Bellow’s ultimate targets: naturalism, monism, relativism, worship of Mankind (rather than God), social utopianism, and revolutionism. The fact that liberals, socialists, and communists are so often at each others’ throats does not blind Bellow to the fact that they have a common ancestor, for he is keenly aware of the implications of the remark of Robespierre’s henchman St. Just, who, when asked to define the Revolution, said that it was the destruction of whatever the Revolution was not. Thus a recent critic of the Enlightenment shrewdly observes that “enlighteners have spent the past two centuries seeking out what they oppose, and, in quiet times, studying ways to turn the instruments of attack into philosophies in order to discover what it is they favor.”
Mr. Sammler's Manhattan is one of the great modern temples of Enlightenment worship. There he is daily witness to "the increasing triumph of Enlightenment—Liberty, Fraternity, Equality, Adultery! Enlightenment, universal education, universal suffrage, the rights of the majority acknowledged . . . , the rights of women, the rights of children, the rights of criminals. . . ." If the Enlightenment is indeed an exploded dream, news of the fact has not yet reached to New York, has not reached either to the "mental masses" or to "the worst enemies of civilization . . . its petted intellectuals who attacked it at its weakest moments—attacked it in the name of proletarian revolution, in the name of reason, and in the name of irrationality." Having set out to abolish the ancient privileges of aristocracy, the Enlightenment succeeded only in democratizing and universalizing them, so that now virtually nobody was willing to leave the earth unsatiated. Carlyle, one of the earliest critics of the Enlightenment world-view, had predicted that "the whole Finance Ministers and Upholsterers and Confectioners of modern Europe" could not contrive to make one shoeblack happy, and declared that "the Fraction of Life can be increased in value not so much by increasing your Numerator as by lessening your Denominator." The crises of the modern world were proving him right. Everywhere he looks Sammler sees "limitless demand—insatiability . . . Non-negotiable. Recognizing no scarcity of supply in any human department. Enlightenment? Marvelous! But out of hand, wasn't it?"

There follows upon these reflections, and by way of illustration of their validity, one of the most spectacular incidents of the novel, and one in which the athletic energy of Bellow's prose and imagination is most intense. Sammler has been persuaded by a young friend named Lionel Feffer to lecture at Columbia University on his recollections of English intellectual life in the thirties, which he had experienced firsthand during his residence in Bloomsbury. All the students in the audience are humorless, most are bored, and some are in an ugly mood to start with because Feffer has misled them into thinking they are going to hear
a lecture on “Sorel and Modern Violence.” (Feffer later justifies his chicanery by saying that the occasion was, after all, a benefit for black children.) Sammler quickly offends the revolutionary pieties of the students by quoting George Orwell’s remark that British radicals were comfortably protected by the Royal Navy. One member of the audience, particularly sensitive to anything that calls into question the perfections of Communism, regales Sammler with the sexual-excremental rhetoric of left-wing militancy. “That’s a lot of shit. . . . Orwell was a fink. He was a sick counterrevolutionary. It’s a good thing he died when he did. And what you are saying is shit.’ Turning to the audience, extending violent arms and raising his palms like a Greek dancer, he said, ‘Why do you listen to this effete old shit? What has he got to tell you? His balls are dry. He’s dead. He can’t come.’ ” This, Sammler reflects as he is bundled out of the auditorium, is just the way it was in the Weimar Republic. The official bastions of sweetness and light yielded most eagerly to their seeming opposites, irrationality and barbarism. Instead of routing the demons from their entrenched strongholds, Enlightenment and rationalism invite them into the sanctuary. It is only later that Sammler learns that his assailant was “a poor man’s Jean Genet” who believed in the achievement of sainthood through murder and homosexuality. This, too, is a legacy from Voltaire and Rousseau, for “the Marquis de Sade in his crazy way was an Enlightenment philosophe.”

No sooner has Sammler escaped from what Matthew Arnold, surveying another university, once called “our young barbarians all at play,”7 than he is subjected to another version of the argumentum ab genitalibus. The pickpocket, noticing that Sammler has observed him, follows the old man into the lobby of his building and forces him to contemplate his exposed and brandished penis. No warning or threat, or indeed speech of any kind, is deemed necessary by the black man. He, like the Columbia students, has invoked the irrefutable modern argument. “Then it was returned to the trousers. Quod erat demonstrandum.” When he recovers sufficiently from the shock of this experience,
Sammler views it as the existential realization of the philosophy of naturalism, the philosophical doctrine that reached full flowering in the Enlightenment, whose luminaries proclaimed that there is only one order of being, that nothing in reality has a supernatural significance, and that miracles are impossible. To speak, as Spinoza and later Voltaire had done, of a God who was indistinguishable from nature was to involve oneself in a contradiction and to lead others astray in the direction of idolatry. “Make Nature your God, elevate creatureliness, and you can count on gross results.”

Sammler had not always known this. But since the Holocaust, since his return from the grave, he cared only for the spirit, for God. He wished to be “a soul released from Nature.” Naturalism not only gave a false account of the world, it was incompatible with Judaism, a religion in which the prohibition against idolatry is primary. Sammler senses this during his trying conversations with his oversexed young relative Angela Grüner, the daughter of Elya. Angela is another of the novel’s many characters caught up by the sexual madness overwhelming the Western world. She tirelessly regales poor Sammler with tales of her sexual exploits, and succeeds only in reminding him that the propensity of numerous Jews for pagan idol-worship, for playing the harlot, as Jeremiah (3:1) says, with many lovers, cannot alter the fact that the Torah forbids worship of stocks and stones. “Somewhere he doubted the fitness of these Jews for this erotic Roman voodoo primitivism. He questioned whether release from long Jewish mental discipline, hereditary training in lawful control, was obtainable upon individual application.” Typical of Angela’s shallowness is her merely naturalistic conception of what it means to be human. She cannot understand why Sammler should praise her dying father for being a man. “‘I thought everybody was born human,’ ” she says. But Sammler replies, “‘It’s not a natural gift at all. Only the capacity is natural.’” Sammler recognizes clearly that, as his unloved Hannah Arendt liked to point out, “man’s ‘nature’ is only ‘human’ insofar as it opens up to
man the possibility of becoming something highly unnatural, that is, a man.”

Having barely survived the day’s encounters with the revolution in its various guises, Sammler returns home to find what looks like a providential message in the form of a manuscript, filched by his daughter from an Indian professor at Columbia, entitled *The Future of the Moon*. Its first sentence leaps out at Sammler: “How long will this earth remain the only home of Man?” To what looks very like a hint from a realm beyond human experience, Sammler responds with alacrity. “How long? Oh, Lord, you bet! Wasn’t it the time—the very hour to go? For every purpose under heaven. A time to gather stones together, a time to cast away stones. Considering the earth itself not as a stone cast but as something to cast oneself from—to be divested of. To blow this great blue, white, green planet, or to be blown from it.”

Before Sammler can think very deeply about the implications of Dr. Lal’s plans for colonizing the moon, his visit to his dying nephew Elya carries his mind back to a world that had indeed been a different planet: wartime Poland. At first he thinks of his period of hiding in the mausoleum of a family called Mezvinski. During a whole summer and part of autumn, he had sought metaphysical meanings—the very meanings that according to naturalism and monism do not exist—in a piece of straw, a spider thread, a beetle, or a sparrow. But there was either no meaning or else a meaning impossible to live with. Viewed in retrospect, his residence in the mausoleum foreshadowed a kind of living death that was to be his only future. The yellow light of Polish summer that filtered through the mausoleum door is no different from the light penetrating his Manhattan apartment now; it is a light that does not measure growth or change but, rather, accompanies “endless literal hours in which one is internally eaten up. Eaten because coherence is lacking. Perhaps as a punishment for having failed to find coherence.”

We are nearly a third of the way into the novel before Bellow reveals to us the experiences that have made Artur
Sammler repudiate both the premises and hopes of the Enlightenment. The reason why coherence and sacredness have been eluding Sammler since he entered the mausoleum, as well as the reason why he continues to pursue nothing but them, is revealed in his recollection of the open-air killing center to which he and his wife had been taken:

Yes, go and find it [sacredness] when everyone is murdering everyone. When Antonina was murdered. When he himself underwent murder beside her. When he and sixty or seventy others, all stripped naked and having dug their own grave, were fired upon and fell in. Bodies upon his own body. Crushing. His dead wife nearby somewhere. Struggling out much later from the weight of corpses, crawling out of the loose soil. Scraping on his belly. Hiding in a shed. Finding a rag to wear. Lying in the woods many days.

This is the bedrock of Sammler's experience, the anchor of his imagination and intellect. The immediacy of his recollection of the death camps restrains him from those "fantasies of vaulting into higher states" that are the characteristic delusion of utopians and revolutionaries.

Having already returned from a different planet, Sammler approaches with caution and skepticism schemes to transport man to still another one, whether through science or revolution. In modern intellectual circles, "if your theme was social justice and your ideas were radical you were rewarded by wealth, fame, and influence." But Sammler cannot forget that Hitler was the century's most daring and successful revolutionary, and one whose incorporation of the word socialism in his public program was no accident. Neither can it be merely coincidental that every revolution that followed upon the French model ended up in the hands of murderers. This, in fact, was what the second term of the Enlightenment triad—equality—meant. You redistributed the aristocratic privilege of murder among the people and persuaded them (with the help of such modern French enlighteners as Jean-Paul Sartre) that they could recover or establish their identity by killing and thus becoming equal to the greatest. "What did equality mean? Did it mean all men were friends and brothers? No, it
meant that all belonged to the elite. Killing was an ancient privilege. This was why revolutions plunged into blood. Guillotines? Terror? Only a beginning—nothing.” Under the guise of “rights,” the privileges of barbarism were doled out to the populace.

It was true that the planet did seem more and more intolerable, madness and poison more and more ubiquitous. But would escape to other worlds help much? Was it really plausible to believe with Dr. Lal that “‘access to central data mechanisms may foster a new Adam’”? Sammler has learned the folly of supposing that every social shortcoming is a sickness capable of remedy. “Nonsense. Change Sin to Sickness, a change of words . . . , and then enlightened doctors would stamp the sickness out.” When this failed, the intellectuals who had preempted the privileges once reserved for God despaired of man altogether and “their man-disappointed minds” sought refuge in madness or in utopias of various kinds. Utopianism, that search for the heavenly city on earth that characterized the *philosophes*, is for Sammler and his creator invariably a sign not of love but of hatred for humanity. “Always a certain despair underlining pleasure, death seated inside the health-capsule, steering it, and darkness winking at you from the golden utopian sun.” Dr. Lal “must have been sick of earth to begin with if he had such expectations of the moon.” Wells, we recall, who envisioned the heavenly city on earth, “could in the end only blast and curse everyone.” Sammler, by no means satisfied with present social arrangements, and very much inclined to think that New York is a modern re-creation of Sodom and Gomorrah, nevertheless accepts the fact that anomalies and inequities are necessary accompaniments of the human condition, evils only to be removed by a much greater evil. “When he tried to imagine a just social order, he could not do it. A noncorrupt society? He could not do that either. There were no revolutions that he could remember which had not been made for justice, freedom, and pure goodness. Their last state was always more nihilistic than the first.”

Sammler, unlike the utopian improvers and friends of the species who surround him, recognizes that the human
mind, if it is ever to rise into the skies and conquer new worlds, must begin with the resolve to stoop to the horrors that already have existed, and see the worst of them in their stubborn, maniacal permanence. " 'My travels,' he says, 'are over. . . . I seem to be a depth man rather than a height man.' " This is why, no matter how deeply buried within his subconscious life, the experience of the Holocaust keeps asserting itself as the chief determinant of what life is left to Sammler after twice escaping his doom. Half-way through the novel, we learn the details of his journey to the underworld of the killing centers and even of his own temporary marriage with the god of darkness who ruled there. We learn that after he escaped from under the mountain of corpses in the mass grave, Sammler had become something other than the victim, had shed that role to which Jewish history in Europe traditionally assigned him. He became a partisan in the Zamosht forest, where he and other starving men chewed at roots and grasses to stay alive, and also exploded bridges, unseated rails, and killed German stragglers in the dark of night. In the forest, he had discovered a German soldier and twice shot the man through the head as he pleaded for mercy and told Sammler he had children. Sammler had then stood at the place of last resort in the human soul, a place to which the appeal from another human being cannot reach. More important, he had shut his ears to the tempting voice of Jewish ethical "idealism" that congratulated the Jew for two thousand years of not picking up the gun (the gun that, of course, he had no chance to decline because it was never available to him). He admits to himself that he even derived pleasure and joy from killing the German. Indeed, his own survival—spiritual, not merely physical—was contingent on this act of violence. "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."

All this must be kept in mind as the necessary
background for understanding Sammler’s reaction, in May 1967, to the news that Nasser had closed the Straits of Tiran and Arab armies were encircling Israel while announcing their intention to reduce the country to sandy wastes. For Sammler, this is a historical repetition that confirms the permanence of evil and therefore, by logical necessity, the precariousness of Jewish life. Sammler has not only seen but experienced it all before: “For the second time in twenty-five years the same people were threatened by extermination: the so-called powers letting things drift toward disaster; men armed for a massacre.” In such circumstances, Sammler could not merely sit in New York reading the world press and listening to his young relatives—like the pro-Arab Wallace Grüner—of the leftist persuasion “explaining” the psychological necessity which drove the Arabs to war. He gets himself an assignment as a journalist so that he may be there, in Israel, “to send reports, to do something, perhaps to die in the massacre.”

This reaction by Sammler, who is no Zionist and has not been much of a Jew either, can be explained only by what he has learned from the Holocaust. Sammler, twice excused from death, was “sent back again to the end of the line” so that he might distill for others, “in a Testament,” the essence of experience. Up until the age of forty, he had been “simply an Anglophile intellectual Polish Jew and person of culture—relatively useless.” But that was before he was arrested, struck in the eye by a gun butt, and thrown into a mass grave. Forever after, he was a one-eyed man: “‘Of course, since Poland, nineteen thirty-nine, my judgments are different. Altered. Like my eyesight.’” John Stuart Mill once said, figuratively, that he had “a large tolerance for one-eyed men, provided their one eye is a penetrating one: if they saw more, they probably would not see so keenly. . . .”9 Sammler’s experience may have blinded him to certain possibilities of human life, to visions of new worlds and fresh beginnings, but it has enabled him to penetrate to a level of reality that will remain forever hidden from a new generation of “Bohemian adolescents, narcotized, beflowered, and ‘whole.’” Sammler recognizes that
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cant may lurk in the idea of learning through suffering, and is capable of much irony toward the notion that the Holocaust was a rich and rewarding educational experience—"I did not want to fall into the Grand Canyon. Nice not to have died? Nicer not to have fallen in. Too many inside things were ruptured. To some people, true enough, experience seemed wealth. Misery worth a lot. Horror a fortune." Nevertheless, Sammler does believe that he has been preserved for the completion of some unfinished business, which is connected with what he has experienced and learned during the Holocaust.

It is no accident that at the one point in the book where Sammler seems in danger of forgetting this experience and its lessons, he is reminded of them by his half-mad Israeli son-in-law, Eisen. Late in the novel, Sammler, racing to the hospital to see the dying Gruner, sees his old persecutor, the black pickpocket, thrashing Lionel Feffer, whose boundless liberal curiosity about criminals had led him to the imprudent act of photographing the pickpocket at work. A large crowd watches the action, but—after the accepted fashion of New Yorkers—does nothing to interfere to save Feffer. The seventy-two-year-old Sammler, frustrated by his feebleness, spots Eisen in the crowd and pleads with this powerful man (a foundry worker) to intervene. Finally, after some minutes, he stirs Eisen into action, violent and potent action. Eisen pounds the black man with blow after blow, until Sammler begs him to desist from what a moment before he had begged him to do. "‘You’ll murder him. Do you want to beat out his brains? . . . I didn’t say to hit him at all. You’re crazy, Eisen, crazy enough to murder him.’" But the retort of this Israeli is devastating to Sammler because it wrenches him back to the painful truth he had learned in the Holocaust and remembered at the time of the Six-Day War. "‘You can’t hit a man like this just once. When you hit him you must really hit him. Otherwise he’ll kill you. You know. We both fought in the war. You were a Partisan. You had a gun. So don’t you know?’" Josephine Knopp, in a very intelligent essay on Bellow, argues that Sammler’s wish to save the pickpocket from Eisen’s blows
shows his moral evolution since he killed the German soldier. I think that, on the contrary, Eisen’s retort recalls Sammler to awareness of the hard choices of survival and explains why Sammler’s identification with Israel extends beyond May 1967 when she was the potential victim of a massacre to June 1967 when she had won a decisive victory over those would have killed her if she had not.

Ten years after the Six-Day War, Saul Bellow, writing from Israel, reminded his readers that “the Jews, because they are Jews, have never been able to take the right to live as a natural right.” The reason why Sammler should identify himself with Israel at all is that the Holocaust had proved to him that the Enlightenment’s conception of natural, human rights would, in time of crisis, do nothing to save those Jews who did not have national rights as well. This becomes clear during Sammler’s great aria of the novel, his confession of faith delivered (after some coaxing) to Shula, Margotte, and Dr. Lal, who have insisted on hearing his “views” on life in general. Skeptical, as always, of “explanations,” he prefers to convey his idea of modern history through the story—a true one—of Chaim Rumkowski, the mad Jewish king of the Lodz ghetto. This failed businessman, “a noisy individual, corrupt, director of an orphanage, . . . a bad actor, a distasteful fun-figure in the Jewish community,” was installed by the Nazis as Judenältester (senior Jew) of the ghetto. While the Nazis carried on their customary depredations, Rumkowski was enabled to flourish as a king. He had his court, printed money and stamps carrying his picture, royal robes, pageants and plays in his honor; and he enforced a reign of terror over his own people.

Sammler returns obsessively in his thoughts and conversation to the subject of the theatrical forms that the striving for personal definition has taken ever since the Enlightenment and the French Revolution “liberated” men from their inherited identities into individuality. The theatricality of the French Revolution itself, the subject of a number of books, was the earliest indication of the desperate, individual forms that spiritual striving would take in the
new era. No sooner were men freed and enjoined to define
themselves instead of accepting a preimposed identity than
they lost themselves and took, in consequence, to play­acting. The reason why this should have been so was given
by one of the earliest critics of the Enlightenment and the
French Revolution, Edmund Burke: “We are afraid,” he
wrote, “to put men to live and trade each on his own private
stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each
man is small, and that the individuals would do better to
avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations,
and of ages.”

The Nazis understood that the well-known desire of
certain Jews to become distinguished “individuals” in non-
Jewish society could be put to German advantage. Sammler’s choice of Rumkowski, a Jew, as the extreme
version of the hopeless search for noble individuality
affords a striking insight into the link between an­
tisemitism and the psychic development of post-
Enlightenment Europe. Sammler, liberated—though at a
terrible price—from liberalism and relativism, declares
that “‘individualism is of no interest whatever if it does not
extend truth.’” But to many of the Jews of the nineteenth
century, who no longer believed in truth, individualism
offered the greater temptation of “emancipation” through
the granting of equality and human rights. Both proved to
be illusory and to involve Jews in yet greater dangers than
those from which their seeming liberators promised to free
them.

In her study of antisemitism, Hannah Arendt pointed out
that once equality is declared individuals and groups
actually become more unequal than they had ever been
before because it is more difficult to understand and explain
why, with equal conditions, differences should exist
between people. This was especially the case with the Jews,
who first gained equality with the triumph of the French
Revolution, and yet continued to be “different” from the rest
of society. In consequence, those Jews who entered gentile
society—whether as pariahs or as parvenus—were looked
upon as actors, admitted and admired, yet denied and
feared. ¹⁴ Enlightened Europe had opened society’s doors to certain Jews, but by the Nazi era, “‘the door had been shut against these Jews: they belonged to the category written off.’”

Why were those “rights,” which, as Sammler observes frequently, are the most lavishly dispensed gift of the enlightened world, of so little use to the Jews of Europe when the Germans decided to destroy them? Here again Burke offers an explanation. Burke had argued, in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), that the human rights “granted” by the French Revolution’s Declaration of the Rights of Man were a mere abstraction of far less value than “the rights of an Englishman” (or, by implication, those of a Frenchman or a German.) “It has been the uniform policy of our constitution,” he wrote, “to claim and assert our liberties, as an *entailed inheritance* derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity.”¹⁵ According to Hannah Arendt (who may be Sammler’s aversion but was Bellow’s colleague at the University of Chicago), the Holocaust confirmed the soundness of Burke’s critique. “Not only did loss of national rights in all instances entail the loss of human rights; the restoration of human rights, as the . . . recent example of the State of Israel proves, has been achieved so far only through the restoration or the establishment of national rights. The conception of human rights, based upon the assumed existence of a human being as such, broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships—except that they were still human. The world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human.”¹⁶ It was, moreover, in just those countries where the Jews had been most determined to ingratiate themselves with their neighbors as “men” rather than as “Jews”—“Be a man in the street and a Jew at home” was the assimilationist slogan—that the population responded most readily to the allegation that the Jews were not human beings at all.

Sammler instinctively identifies his own fate and that of
the Jewish people with Israel because he recognizes the preferability of national to natural rights. He does so partly because of his experience, partly because he has given up his naturalism for supernaturalism, which makes him mindful, if only in the most nebulous way, of the "entailed inheritance" which the Jews derive from their forefathers, and transmit to their posterity: namely, their religion built on the idea of a covenant between God and man.

The search for sacredness that began for Sammler only after he had been rescued from Europe has certainly not led him in a straight line to the Torah. He is more confident of what "the main thing" is not than of what it is. It is certainly not "the expulsion of . . . demons and spirits from the air, where they had always been, by enlightenment and rationalism." His reading, in his seventies, has narrowed to Meister Eckhardt and the Bible, because he is convinced that a man who has been killed and buried should have no other interest but God and the spirit. He is "given to praying . . . often addressed God." This God is not recognizable as the Jewish one, yet Sammler's "religion" has at least two distinctly Jewish characteristics. It is prophetic rather than apocalyptic, and it is predicated on the assumption that the very condition of virtuous states is that they are not pleasant, for morality is essentially made up of "thou shalt nots," is a bridle rather than a spur.

Now that most forms of individualism have been discredited, says Sammler, people begin to wonder why they were born and even long for nonbeing. "'Why should they be human?'" In such a mood, they contemplate apocalyptic answers, and yearn toward that leap into chaos which they believe the prerequisite to construction of a new cosmos. But Sammler "'always hated people who declared that it was the end. What did they know about the end? From personal experience, from the grave if I may say so, I knew something about it.'" What he knew about it was precisely that it was not the end, for he had received, from a realm beyond human experience, the message that there is in man "something . . . which he feels it important to
Something that deserves to go on.” If modern sensibility indulges in the cheap luxury of apocalyptic emotion, thought, and utterance, that is because “Humankind had lost its old patience.” Although Sammler has actually experienced death and rebirth, his “entailed inheritance” is a Jewish wisdom that stresses not death and rebirth but survival and recovery. He is a descendant of the beggar who is described at a party in Bellow’s early novel The Victim (1947):

“They tell a story about a little town in the old country. It was out of the way, in a valley, so the Jews were afraid the Messiah would come and miss them, and they built a high tower and hired one of the town beggars to sit in it all day long. A friend of his meets this beggar and he says, ‘How do you like your job, Baruch?’ So he says, ‘It doesn’t pay much, but I think it’s steady work.’ ”

The idea of the ethical life set forth in Mr. Sammler’s Planet is not based on reason and is not directed toward amelioration of the social order. Since a just social order is unattainable, perhaps, muses Sammler, “‘the best is to have some order within oneself.’” This is old advice, and distinctly unappealing in apocalyptic times. “‘A few may comprehend that it is the strength to do one’s duty daily and promptly that makes saints and heroes. Not many. Most have fantasies of vaulting into higher states. . . .’” If justice does not reign on this planet, neither movement to another nor bloody revolution here will remedy the situation, for the failure is one of will and not of ignorance. Every man, from Cain to Eichmann, has known the difference between a just and an unjust act. If duty is the stupidest virtue—Dr. Lai calls it hateful and oppressive—it is also the most indispensable. “‘The pain of duty,’ replies Sammler, ‘makes the creature upright, and this uprightness is no negligible thing.’”

The concluding passage of the book is Sammler’s prayer for the soul of Elya Gruner. Although Elya has participated in much of the corruption that characterizes life in the modern American city, he has also met the terms of his contract, has accepted and fulfilled his “assignment” even
though he disliked it. Gruner, the character in the novel whose being is most thoroughly entangled in the Jewish world of his fathers and their fathers before them, had rescued Sammler and Shula after the war, and provided them money with which to live. For Sammler, he represents the unspectacular but essential virtues of the ordinary life lived according to custom, tradition, duty. "He did what he disliked. . . . Elya, by sentimental repetition and by formulas . . . has accomplished something good." From the "entailed inheritance" of his ancestors—"He knew there had been good men before him, and that there were good men to come, and he wanted to be one of them."—Gruner had received a knowledge of what it means to be human that could never be provided by Enlightenment epistemology and ontology. With a defiant final flourish, Sammler (and Bellow) celebrate in this eulogy over Gruner the ancient idea that virtue has a covenantal basis, that between man and God there exists a reciprocal agreement whose terms have a clarity and irresistibility unimaginable in a Social Contract: "He was aware that he must meet, and he did meet—through all the confusion and degraded clowning of this life through which we are speeding—he did meet the terms of his contract. The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows. As I know mine. As all know. For that is the truth of it—that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know.

Given the extraordinary attachment of Jews to the Enlightenment and its various offspring, the still more extraordinary phenomenon of Jewish attempts to prove that Judaism is itself the epitome of Enlightenment secularism and universalism, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* gains its importance precisely as a Jewish repudiation of the Enlightenment. By the end of the novel, we understand so fully how the Revolution that promised to the Jews as Jews nothing but to the Jews as men everything deprived Jews of their humanity and their birthright that we wonder how anybody ever missed so obvious a truth. It may at first seem odd that, in a novel so overwhelmingly dedicated to
showing how untenable, how false, how mischievous are the philosophical premises of the Enlightenment after the destruction of European Jewry, we should hear relatively little of an explicit nature about the special harmfulness of Enlightenment premises to Jews and Judaism, and nothing at all about the fact that, as Bellow readily remarks in another book, "The intellectual leaders of the Enlighten­ment were decidedly anti-Semitic." Marxism, for example, is treated as the most destructive modern offspring of the Enlightenment, but no mention is made of Marxism’s uninterrupted tradition of Jew-hatred or of the fact that Sammler and all his ancestors, that is to say, the impoverished Polish Jews, were vilified by Marx himself as “this filthiest of all races.” Bellow may have wished to protect himself from allegations of ad hominem condemna­tion and contemptible parochialism. More likely, he wished to rest his case on the reader’s ability to recognize that if monism and naturalism are baneful to mankind as a whole, they must be particularly so to that people whose religion makes the sharpest distinction between human and divine, and most resolutely prohibits worship of the former because it knows that an idol cannot respect a covenant with God.

3. Mr. Sammler’s severity with Arendt causes him partially to misrepresent her views. What she says, in Eichmann in Jerusalem, is not that the Nazi system kept people like Eichmann ignorant of what they were doing but that it kept them from equating what they were doing with their old, “normal” knowledge of murder.
7. Preface to Essays in Criticism (1865).


17. This point has been very effectively made, with respect to Bellow’s earlier novels, by J. C. Levenson, “Bellow’s Dangling Men,” *Critique* 3 (Summer 1960): 5.

18. See the conclusion of the articles by Marx and Engels on the Polish question, in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, 29 April 1849.
If thou wilt not observe to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that thou mayest fear this glorious and awful Name, the LORD thy God; then the LORD will make thy plagues wonderful, and the plagues of thy seed. . . . And ye shall be left few in number, whereas ye were as the stars of heaven for multitude; because thou didst not hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God. And it shall come to pass, that as the LORD rejoiced over you to do you good, and to multiply you; so the LORD will rejoice over you to cause you to perish, and to destroy you; and ye shall be plucked from off the land whither thou goest in to possess it. And the LORD shall scatter thee among all peoples, from the one end of the earth even unto the other end of the earth; and there thou shalt serve other gods, which thou hast not known, thou nor thy fathers, even wood and stone. And among these nations shalt thou have no repose, and there shall be no rest for the sole of thy foot; but the LORD shall give thee there a trembling heart, and failing of eyes, and languishing of soul. . . . These are the words of the covenant which the LORD commanded Moses to make with the children of Israel in the land of Moab.—Deuteronomy 28:58-69

A remnant shall return, even the remnant of Jacob, unto God the Mighty. For though thy people, O Israel, be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them shall return; an extermination is determined, overflowing with righteousness. For an extermination wholly determined shall the LORD, the GOD of hosts, make in the midst of all the earth.—Isaiah 10:21-23

You only have I known among all the families of the earth; therefore, I will visit upon you all your iniquities.—Amos 3:2