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BELLOW'S BLUES

One morning not long ago as I prepared for a long-awaited trip to Paris, my dear friend the editor sent this innocent remark together with a photocopied article:

“Enclosing an essay by [Saul] Bellow on Paris, in which he laments the loss of the intellectual capital, turned into just another fancy stage set, rather than a place that desperately matters.”

My internal reaction was belligerently defensive. “So?” I thought, snubbing in one swoop an entire tradition dating from the venerable Montaigne—the broadside, the tract, the *feuilleton*—works wrought expressly to bemoan a condition or event.

Then I read Bellow’s piece, called “My Paris,” part of the collection *It All Adds Up*, published in 1983. It is deft, thoughtful, self-ironic.

For the soul of a civilized, or even partly civilized, man, Paris was one of the permanent settings, a theater, if you like, where the greatest problems of existence might be represented. . . . Americans of my generation crossed the Atlantic to size up the challenge, to look upon this human, warm, noble, beautiful, and also proud, morbid, cynical, and treacherous setting.

Whereas now, according to Bellow, the place has lost its *force célèbre*.

No one is stirred to the bowels by Europe of the ancient parapets. A huge force has lost its power over the imagination. This force began to weaken in the fifties, and by the sixties it was entirely gone. . . . Foreigners no longer [come] to Paris to enrich their humanity with modern forms of the marvelous. . . . No international art center draws the young to Paris. Arriving instead are terrorists. . . .

He goes on to list, rather arbitrarily, various elements of the Paris he misses: “cheap conveniences” like family bistros, certain small shops; merchants like

the *emballeur* who kept a pet three-legged rabbit among the wooden crates he built.

Bellow regrets the accelerated influx of terrible traffic and *clochards*, winos drunk in doorways. More complicatedly, he traces his own cautious love affair with the place (though he is loath to call it that), beginning when he first looked there for what he suspected America lacked: “the capacity to enjoy intellectual pleasures as though they were sensual pleasures.” Bellow swears he held sentiment at bay as he sought the Paris of *Père Goriot*, but admits its extraordinary impact:

But why did Paris affect me so deeply? Why did this imperial, ceremonious, ornamental mass of structures weaken my American refusal to be impressed, my Jewish skepticism and reticence; why was I such a sucker for its tones of gray, the patchy bark of its sycamores, and its bitter-medicine river under the ancient bridges? The place was, naturally, indifferent to me, a peculiar alien from Chicago. Why did it take hold of my emotions?

His answer—then—was that the city served as the ultimate theater for confronting the problems of existence. His answer *now*, from a distance of thirty-odd intervening years, offered with deadpan serenity, is that the city’s mysterious power finally derives from its cheerful secularism. He cites an old expression from the Jews of Eastern Europe, *Wie Gott in Frankreich*, a simile for perfect happiness. Even God, Bellow surmises with droll satisfaction, can “relax toward evening . . . on a tranquil *terrace*” in Paris when He is “surrounded by unbelievers,” untroubled by “prayers, observances, blessings, and demands for the interpretation of difficult dietary questions.”

And though Bellow’s essential argument is of course perfectly defensible—Paris can never be again what it was during his tenure there—I found myself wondering:

After the witty, wistful *j’accuse*, what second shoe is supposed to fall?

We may envy Bellow’s firsthand history with the city’s superb heyday (“the Picassos, Diaghilevs, Modiglianis . . . and Pounds; the Giacomettis and the Stravinskys, the Brancusis”). We may sense the reality of his sly complaint, even if we have not personally lived it, as anyone younger uncomfortably senses the truth of an elder’s nostalgia. But—*je m’excuse*—then what?

It strikes me that any lament for a lost era precludes response by its very nature; that a certain received helplessness hovers shadowlike on both sides of such declarations of *temps perdu*. In most cases the exercise of complaint itself gives consolation. In the process it provokes thought, teases out buried assumptions (i.e., the life of the questing, soulful intellect once mattered much, much more), asks us to reflect. It also thrusts forward the nostalgist's apparent authority. To try to directly rebut his claim always sounds puny and fussy in the wake of his grand overture, spoils the ripple effect of the last notes of his elegy. In effect, the complaint does not really *ask* to be answered. It is instead a circuitous form of telling—about ideals, about desire. How much better things actually may have been becomes almost incidental, a soft-focus revisionism of the most subjective kind.

But regret for change—from the downhill slide to outright ruination—has a consistency, a reliable power and payoff. In writing, in public, at the breakfast table, the job, the subway—a good grouse-session supplies deep satisfaction. In frigid northern England, for instance, each harrowing report among hardy locals (garden froze, roof blew off, pub closed) is coyly punctuated every few lines—as if by some conscience-cleansing sherbet—with the demure disclaimer, “Mustn’t grumble!” (Sort of a Lancashire version of “Allah be praised.”)

In fact grumbling's long been the stuff of cultural ritual, of collegiality. As a formal exercise in the academy, it's mother's milk. Reciting a list of humbugs, like chanting or prayer, soothes us, connects us, widens the path for more conversation. Think of pundits. Talk show hosts. Ethnic elders! “Why, in *my* day . . .” And always, there is weather. (See: northern England.)

Bellow's reflection of course aspires to far more than neighborly *kvetching*. Yet the self-satisfaction of his gloom rings irritatingly familiar. (“Stationers who once carried notebooks with excellent paper now offer a flimsy product that lets the ink through. Very disappointing.”) Here we go again, I thought. Fill in the blank: *Blank* ain't what it used to be. A beloved condition is irretrievable. The writer mourns. The reader may mourn with him, but in any case is generally impotent to restore what is missed. And there the matter dangles, in an orgy of head-shaking or melancholy downstream-drift.

Similar requiems are printed for anything we can name: metropolitan cities or small towns, losing their ineffable essences. The death of art, manners, real music, good lyrics. Whither home cooking, letter-writing, quality service, ballroom dancing, a tomato that tastes like a tomato, the life of the mind,

leakproof notepaper? At this stage of our being, any wholeness is necessarily contaminated, all lofty states punctured. The essayist's grief (or rage or disgust) cannot incite us to redress wrongs because in the overview there's nowhere to begin. Something like the way we wince and wilt, pummeled by the world's agony on the nightly news. Besides ventilation, the only other solace afforded by exertions like Bellow's may be the mute agreement implied by their structure, a quiet *Hmm, yes. Right*; perhaps to do a few things more mindfully—or not.

This dynamic may skirt the objectives of art, which hopes to smack people awake, to cause at very least some mischief—to move us, to disturb, at its zenith to hurl the notorious ephiphanic moment; Rilke's stunned comprehension "Archaic Torso of Apollo," with what was surely a thrill of horror: "You must change your life."

But the purposes of the elegy are different. *This was*, it says. *It will never be again. Look well, and be sorry.*

Nevertheless, *à propos* of Mr. Bellow's blues, I must move to defend the imagination's resilience. Paris, in my experience, still exerts stupendous power over the collective imagination—if only because the city still exists, however compromised. (The only good word I may ever have for a Nazi would be for the general—curiously, unnamed in modern discussions—who on evacuating Paris after Germany's defeat, famously disobeyed Hitler's orders to blow up the city on his way out.) Contrary to Bellow's insistence, the young (at least, the bright young) *do* bring to their reading, and to their first Paris visits, a sense that they are meeting something very Large indeed. If they have not yet been able to articulate "desires born of a conviction that American life impulses are thin," they suspect the same. To be bright and young is perhaps to assume it.

Foreigners most certainly still *do* come to Paris to enrich their humanity with modern forms of the marvelous; never mind the unappetizing "Marxism of Sartre" or other isms to follow, that Bellow berates. We succeeding generations cannot dally with such luxurious distinctions, not at this phase. We desperately need to look upon a true *agora*; upon a life routinely buffeted by deliberate, man-made, splendid beauty—in public edifices, parks, museums, streets, statuary, fountains—the habitually magnificent; where it is taken as a matter of course that the external should aspire to inspire. Never mind if it strikes some as nearly rococo in its excess. The high-voltage vitality of the place still slams us back, thundering against the shameful thinness, the artlessness of quotidian American culture. *You must change your life.*

There may be something to Bellow's amused suggestion about secularism. Perhaps a gritty unbelief preserves the dignity of privacy that one feels so intensely in Paris, a cool, mannerly understanding of the individual's right to his own business, his own trajectory. There is a tart respect for personal autonomy in Paris like that of no other city I know, including New York. They may be making pitiless judgments behind the impassive facade, but no one is in your face with marketing surveys, insisting you have a nice day. People may be seen eating alone in stately, deliberate peace. You can't help feeling instantly grateful for the common-sense intelligence and yes, plain decency of it. (As one droll friend puts it, "They still do many things very well.")

When I say the city's very name, now, in 1998, people's eyes blaze up and their voices grow husky, whether or not they have yet made the pilgrimage. And it is not visions of shopping on the rue de Rivoli that ignites their dreams. The vision is rather of the full panoply—of all that anyone has ever claimed for Paris, and more: the mysterious Quest almost automatically conferred with sheer juxtaposition to all that beauty. It faces you from every direction like a stern god, every inch the "permanent setting, the great theater" in which you must—must!—confront the problem of existence, no matter your response—to stay drunk, scribble in cafés, ride the métro among the beggars and sad workday dreamers, wander streets (averting the dogshit) and museums until eyes glaze and legs cramp. "Everything," a shrewd friend once advised me, "is exactly what you hold it to be."

And so it was, when I went this time. Stepping from a cab into a tiny street near the place de la Contrescarpe on a typically *grisaille*-soaked day (Bellow perfectly describes the gray, cold, foggy northern climate that acts on spirit and matter as "a powerful astringent"), I took an elevator to the old sixth-floor apartment I was renting from a friend. From its terrace I looked out to the dome and spire of the Pantheon, the hodge-podge of mansard rooftops, mazed streets, vine-trailing walls. A churchtower bell chimed the hour as I stood there, bleary from jetlag—and the sharp pure cold, the white-noise of miles of motion, birdsong from the courtyards, the stunning, utterly indifferent beauty—roared their message from every surface, gilded or grimy. *You must change your life.*

Bellow notes in his essay that when de Gaulle died, "there was nothing left—nothing but old monuments, old graces." If French civilization is indeed past its prime, as Bellow vows, well, *ça doit aller comme ça*. So be it: grant its

endless political, economic and provincial struggles, its pettiness and pride, the fact that it's smitten (as Bellow bitterly notes) with little boutiques touting shiny kitchen appliances. But until (God forbid) the city is completely razed, old monuments and old graces won't be chopped liver. To view these firsthand, to see—to feel—how literally they *inform* life, to walk the old gray streets, the *ponts* on the Seine (now sewage, now a brilliant necklace), to glimpse the millions of human stories moving like dust from an exploded star in its throbbing orbit—all this remains a rare, stunning privilege; infiltrates at many levels, profoundly inspires. “We have a hole in our hearts,” maintains a wise friend, “for want of beauty.” She meant the Europe of ancient parapets, of a routine mingling of the divine with the daily; the art and architecture of centuries with the stench of traffic exhaust. Any sentient visitor is still almost certainly forced, on facing this staggering tableau, to square off with his own soul, and to be fundamentally changed forever after, however subtly. If it falls to us to have to imagine more vigorously the great theater the city was, whether the plays it mounted were the world's favorite features or its gifted, renegade avant-garde—fine. We who were born later will gladly take Bellow's “lost” Paris as we now find it.

It's the only one we've got.