CHAPTER 3

MR. SAMMLER’S PLANET: THE HERO ACCUSED

All this world is heavy with the promise of greater things, and a day will come, one day in the unending succession of days, when beings, beings who are now latent in our thoughts and hidden in our loins, shall stand upon this earth as one stands upon a footstool, and shall laugh and reach out their hands amid the stars.

H.G. Wells, The Discovery of the Future 36

Enlightenment? Marvelous! But out of hand, wasn’t it?

Saul Bellow, Mr. Sammler’s Planet 34

The Novel and its Hero

With the increase in Bellow’s reputation in the 1960s came the increasing need to categorize him as the great hope of American letters. As Charles Berryman writes: “Critics were ready [after Herzog] for Bellow to take a ‘stand against the cultural nihilism of the twentieth century’ ” (5). Berryman clarifies this expectation by stating that although “[t]he novelist cannot be held responsible for the confusion of literature and philosophy inherent in such hopes…[Bellow’s] fiction has often been praised by those looking for a qualified affirmation of life in the pages of literature” (5). In response to this expectation, Mr. Sammler’s Planet (1970) was a surprise and a disappointment. Bellow himself did not seem to foresee the disturbance the book would create. In an interview in 1970 he remarked that he “had a high degree of excitement writing it . . . and finished it in record time.” He goes on to mislead his readers with a hint at the affirmative message the novel might offer: “It’s my first thoroughly nonapologetic venture into ideas. In Herzog and Henderson the Rain King I was kidding my way to Jesus, but here I’m baring myself nakedly” (“Mr. Bellow” 80).

S. S. Halldorson, The Hero in Contemporary American Fiction
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The easy misinterpretation of this remark serves as a model for how the novel itself would be misread. If one reads only “ideas” and “Jesus,” it is easy to conclude that yoking together these nouns would result in Bellow’s strongest affirmation yet. However, there has never been a yoking together, let alone a neatly packaged philosophy to Bellow’s writing. John Aldridge writes that Bellow’s creative imagination is: “dialectical and is always engaged in a debate between the secular and the transcendental, a debate he can carry on because he is almost alone among contemporary American novelists in having the power to tolerate, without collapsing under the stress of, philosophical ambiguity” (108). Bellow’s ability to withstand this philosophical ambiguity is central to his imagination, and he has never been able to offer in his work conclusions or patterns for living, regardless of the many lyrical endings he has written. At best, Bellow moves through the chaos of the post-enlightenment world to land (briefly) on an inarticulate feeling, his “something, something, happiness” (Herzog, Bellow’s emphasis, 340) that supports a qualified affirmation of human life. In effect, although Bellow’s heroes do journey and offer something like a return from their journey, theirs is not a once-in-a-lifetime adventure drawn to completion; the ending is a beginning of yet more necessary journeys to come because the hero never stops being the hero in temperament or inclination. Bellow’s novels conclude at a crossroads between the despair inherent in the chaos and diversions of American society, and the happiness inherent in the “something something” of the naked soul. If Bellow’s heroes pause at the end of his novels, it is clear that the heroic journey is a lifetime of tramping and not a single “eureka.”

In the years before Mr. Sammler’s Planet, Bellow had attempted to draw his readers and his critics away from their desire to read his novels for a “fixer philosophy” better suited to the self-help shelves across the nation. Although Sammler was only the latest of Bellow’s characters to discover that “[o]nce take a stand, once draw a baseline, and contraries will assail you” (118), he was the most successful in refusing to choose a path at that fork in the road, or, rather, the most successful in disallowing his readers to choose for him. Against Bellow’s desires, Henderson the Rain King and Herzog became novels of hidden patterns. In Mr. Sammler’s Planet, Bellow so successfully immerses himself in contraries that the reader cannot find stable ground. In the end, critics who searched for the yoking of Jesus and ideas would find neither iconic symbols nor Christian fellowship within the pages of the new novel. The result was a tribe of bitter and often personally affronted critics who—had Bellow chosen to engage them—would