

The romantic spirit in Saul Bellow's *The Dean's December*

El espíritu romántico en The Dean's December, de Saul Bellow

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ABSTRACT

The Jewish-American novelist Saul Bellow (Lachine, Canada 1915) has been writing for six decades. Within this time span, he has shown his concern in both his fiction and non-fiction works for the major issues that man has raised throughout the history of humankind such as the position of the individual in the world, history and death, among others.

In this paper, I have analysed one of Bellow's constants in his novels from a romantic perspective: the need his characters feel to escape from the alienating atmosphere of the city to nature so as to come to terms both with themselves and the world.

In order to carry out this task, I have focused on Bellow's allusions to the romantic poets William Blake, P. B. Shelley and W. B. Yeats because they all criticize the fragmentation the modern world is going through.

KEY WORDS

Saul Bellow.
Jewish-American.
Romantic poets.
Alienation.

RESUMEN

El novelista judeoamericano Saul Bellow (Lachine, Canada 1915) lleva escribiendo más de seis décadas. En este tiempo ha mostrado su interés, tanto en su obra de ficción como de no ficción, por las grandes cuestiones que el hombre ha planteado a través de la historia de la humanidad tales como la posición del individuo en el mundo, la historia y la muerte, entre otras.

En el presente artículo hemos analizado una de las constantes que aparecen en las novelas de Bellow desde una perspectiva romántica, a saber, la necesidad que sienten sus personajes de escapar del ambiente alienante de la ciudad para dirigirse a la naturaleza con el fin de ponerse en paz consigo mismos y con el mundo circundante.

Para llevar a cabo esta tarea, nos hemos centrado en las alusiones que Bellow hace a los poetas románticos William Blake, P. B. Shelley and W. B. Yeats porque todos ellos critican la fragmentación que sufre el mundo moderno.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Saul Bellow.
Judeoamericano.
Poetas románticos.
Alienación

SUMARIO 1. Introduction. 2. Personal unrest. 3. Coming to terms with life. 4. References.

1. Introduction

In an interview with Sanford Pinsker, the Jewish-American writer Saul Bellow (Lachine, Canada, 1915) was asked if Herzog, his most famous character, had tried to test out the implications of romantic thought in the contemporary world in his book entitled *Romanticism and Christianity*. He answered:

I think people in Western countries live Romanticism all the time. They don't even know it, but they do. They think of the proper mode of being as highly stimulated, ecstatic, a life of infinite possibilities, the individual utterly free, his main responsibility to fulfil himself and to realize his own desires as richly as he can'.

Bellow's reply summarises his attitude towards life. Essentially an affirmative writer, he believes in man's capacity to ameliorate the world to make it a more agreeable place where to live. This attitude has always led him to express his opposition with regard to modernism since he rejects its view of everyday life as something futile and man's existence – and his suffering – as «absurd». This conception of both man and life contrasts with his affirmation of man's life and his idea about suffering inherited from the Yiddish tradition (Aleichem, Peretz, Singer, etc.).

One of Bellow's major concerns throughout his writing has been the defence of man², which involves advocating the human being's freedom and individuality. In this article, I will then concentrate on Bellow's opposition to oppression and injustice from a romantic point of view. To carry out this task, I will analyse the references to some poems of William Blake (1757-1827), P. B. Shelley (1792-1822) and W. B. Yeats (1865-1939)³ that he makes in his novel *The Dean's December* (1982). Bellow's allusions to these poets are made on the basis that they all denounce the social inequalities tyranny brings about.

2. Social inequalities

As explained in the previous section, Bellow has shown great interest in criticising social inequalities in all his works and more specifically in his novel *The Dean's December*. Clearly influenced by romanticism, he firmly believes that injustice is greatly due to the tyranny exercised by political authorities, and as such, by making reference to some key romantic poems that precisely denounce injustice in the world, Bellow wants to reflect on the enormous differences existing in the America of his epoch.

Ineluctably, Bellow was to turn to the romantics, considering that they, who advocate the supremacy of the individual over others, emphasise the role of man's feelings and ideas. In

¹ An interview with Sanford Pinsker entitled «Bellow in the Classroom». *Conversations with Saul Bellow*, ed. Gloria L. Cronin & Ben Siegel (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1994), p.95.

² I recommend John Clayton's book entitled *Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man* (Bloomington, 1979) to any reader interested in an analysis of Bellow's works from a psychological point of view.

³ There are critics, Graham Hough (1950), Frank Kermode (1986) and Jahan Ramazani (1990), among others, who have analysed Yeats' poetry from a romantic perspective.

other words, the advocates of this movement foster the ideal of freedom because they believed that the age of tyranny was coming to an end. As stated by Harold Bloom (1971:39), «The burden of Romantic poetry is absolute freedom, including freedom from the tyranny of the bodily eye ...» —Since the Bellovian hero is a romantic, he subscribes to this argument.

If in romanticism the emphasis was on the heart, and not on reason, it is logical to think that the romantic poet was overrated on account of the intensity of his sensitivity and perception. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793), Blake points out that «Energy is the only life, and is from the Body; and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy»⁴.

Thus, romanticism conceives of man as an individual, a spectrum of infinite possibilities trying to reform society by undermining the oppressive established order as the only way to reach progress. The result of such task is the poet's unavoidable disappointment and desperation, as is Bellow's characters' initial feeling towards this issue.

In the extensive Bellovian work, there are countless references to English romantic poets, references that are made, generally speaking, on account of Bellow's attraction towards the romantic idea of society as an alienating agent on man. Like them, Bellow proposes a return to nature so that his heroes can come to terms with themselves and with the world in which they live. For space reasons, I will solely focus on Bellow's allusions to the romantic poets Blake and Shelley and the postromantic poet Yeats⁵ in *The Dean's December* (1982).

In this novel, the protagonist is a dean called Albert Corde who is married to a prestigious Romanian astronomer named Minna. Corde must travel to Bucharest because his wife's mother, an ex-partisan of the Communist Party, is dying. While in Bucharest, Corde looks back to Chicago, his hometown where he has left some pending matters. Probably, the most pressing one involves him directly in a foul case. His nephew Mason Zaechner, a young man who struggles to defend black people's rights, is accused of being partly responsible for a murder. Apparently, a black prostitute called Riggie Hines and Lukas Ebry, her pimp, have killed a young white student named Rick Lester by throwing him out of the window. Mason's name gets involved in the story.

This matter and other similar ones have led Corde to write a series of articles where he regrets the atmosphere of violence and degeneration that his beloved Chicago breathes. The dean blames this awful situation on the Chicago politicians, who have turned the city into a culture broth of horror and racism. Albert Corde, as a great reader of romantic poets, shows very acutely his vision of the cruelty and injustice of a society that is annihilating man at any cost.

In the first place, Corde has always been interested in the figure of the English poet and mystic William Blake on account of a key aspect of his thought: the world of innocence versus the world of experience. In Blake, both innocence and experience are two opposed states of the

⁴ William Blake, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Alicia Ostriker (London: Penguin, 1977, plate 4), p.181.

⁵ See note 3.

human soul: the former is typical of the child, whereas the latter belongs to the adult. According to the English mystic, both states are necessary in the human being, since without either of them, man would disappear. These are two irreconcilable states whose simultaneous existence proves that they need each other. As Thomas R. Frosch (1974: 30) puts it, «[Blake's] poetic argumentation is always organized according to his myth of contraries, a progression through a conflict of opposites that affirm each other and in which neither term ever surrenders its particularity.»

When referring to innocence, Blake presents a world that God has created so that man can make full use of it. In this world or state, man, who ignores that life on earth is hard, lives in a permanent state of happiness; conversely, in the state of experience, Blake depicts a cruel and unjust world where the human being can be so tyrannical that he may exploit other men and, what is worse, even children.

In *The Dean's December*, Bellow envisions this Blakean world of experience, as can be perceived in the following extract:

But there was plenty of emptiness, as much as you needed to define yourself against, as American souls seem to do. Cities (this had been impressed on Corde when he pored over Blake - Spangler had not stopped him by kidding him about it)—cities were moods, emotional states, for the most part collective distortions, where human beings thrived and suffered, where they invested their souls in pains and pleasures, taking these pleasures and pains as proofs of reality. Thus 'Cain's city built with murder,' and other cities built with Mystery, or Pride, all of them emotional conditions and great centers of delusion and bondage, death⁶.

The reason why Bellow makes such an explicit reference to Blake is, on the one hand, because life in Bucharest was oppressive and depressing due to the strict security measures imposed by the Romanian police, the *securitate*, and, on the other, because the disagreeable case of Corde's nephew's implication in a murder clearly reflects how violence pervades society.

As a consequence of this, I may claim that Bellow's reflection on the city is a clear meditation on the two key issues that, in my view, constitute the backbone of the novel: the spiritual disease which modern civilisation is going through and an exploration of the human soul which clearly shows man's fall. As is the case with Blake's works, Allan Chavkin (1995: 22) points out that in Bellow's *The Dean's December*, «cities function symbolically, and hence the journalistic approach which must abide by the restrictions of 'objectivity' was not suitable for Bellow's purpose.»

Bellow's reference to Blake is intentional. He considers both the cities of Bucharest and Chicago two clear epitomes of the modern western city: an oppressive and depressing agent. To

⁶ Saul Bellow, *The Dean's December* (New York: Penguin, 1982), p.281. Subsequent references to this edition are given parenthetically.

Corde. Bucharest and Chicago embody what Babylon meant to Blake, that is, scientific materialism and determinism, war, slavery, lust, and, definitely, anything that means decadence and degeneration in man. Quoting Allan Chavkin (1995: 23), «For Corde, Chicago has degenerated into a kind of Babylon where science, religion, and sex are distorted, though not always in ways identical to those found in Blake's poetry.»

Let us pass on to Percy Bysshe Shelley, the romantic poet who probably best demonstrated a rebellious spirit. He was the most committed poet in the issue of man's freedom and social (in)justice of the 19th century. Gerald McNiece (1989: 1) claims that Shelley «remained the ardent disciple of revolutionary idealism throughout his life.» Shelley's tireless efforts against tyranny make him one of the most important points of reference in Bellow's works, and, particularly, in *The Dean's December*.

As explained above, Corde is temporarily living in Bucharest. There, he reflects on the problems that he will have to solve when he goes back to Chicago. Corde is obsessed with the first verse of a poem by Shelley called «Sonnet: England in 1819» which talks about George III's loss of moral authority.

Corde is aware of the fact that his position as dean of a university where a murder has been committed is wearing him out and bringing him a lot of enemies such as Provost Alec Witt, who hates him and has been trying to expel him from university.

Corde had gone back to an earlier standard, to the days when he and Spangler were reading Shelley and Swinburne together in Lincoln Park. At the age of seventeen they would often quote to each other the line in which Shelley had described George III: 'An old mad blind despised and dying king.' The wonderful hard music of those words used to stir them. And this was this sort of music that Corde apparently wanted to work into his journalism. If indeed it *was* journalism. *If indeed it was Shelley. If it wasn't, Corde as George III himself, old, mad, blind, and sure to be despised in Chicago* (73). (My emphasis.)

The sonnet Corde alludes to presents a series of rulers who, led by the tyrannical king George III, oppress and starve their people. Shelley does not spare any negative term to describe their real nature (dregs, leechlike, sanguine, etc).

An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying King;
Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
Through public scorn,—mud from a muddy spring;
Rulers who neither see nor feel nor know,
But leechlike to their fainting country cling
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow
A people starved and stabbed in th'untilled field;
An army, whom libercide and prey
Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield;

Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay;
 Religion Christless, Godless — a book sealed;
 A senate, Time's worst statute, unrepealed—
 Are graves from which a glorious Phantom may
 Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.⁷ (My emphasis.)

This is a historic reference to an awful event in the English history of the 19th century. All occurred on August 16, 1819, a day when around 60.000 people had gathered at «St. Peter's Field», Manchester, to listen to a leading radical reformer of that time, Henry Hunt. Some minutes after the beginning of his speech, a troop of the King's personal guard entered to arrest him. In the midst of such confusion, people started to run away and, as a consequence of the intervention of the troop, eleven people died and several hundreds were wounded—the allusion to the dead appears in line 7, «A people starved and stabbed in th'untilled field.» During Shelley's epoch, when it became more and more conspicuous that reforms had to be carried out, the government used repression, and both moderate and radical reformers, together with fanatic anarchists, were persecuted by the English government, as the rulers believed these groups were potential revolutionaries.

Corde remembers how he used to read Shelley's poems with his childhood friend Dewey Spangler, a well-known columnist at present. This fact enables us to establish a parallelism between the young Shelley and the young Corde: at seventeen, both had had a close friend with whom they could share their passion for literature. In the case of Shelley, a young man called Thomas Jefferson, and, in the case of Corde, the already cited Spangler. Another connection that can be established in relation to the English romantic poet is that Shelley, Corde and Spangler had written revolutionary poems in their youth and they all were eventually disappointed by the spirit of the Revolution.

Obviously, the allusion to Shelley's famous poem is not unintentional: Bellow is making a clear reference to a society divided by rulers who «neither see, nor feel, nor know» and «a people starved and stabbed in th'untilled field.» Corde recalls an event that makes him reflect on this sad issue. He remembers how he had been at a posh party in which a group of rich people — embodying the ruling class of the Shelleyan poem—exchange presents and sing «happy birthday» to a Great Danish which, to Corde, becomes «the Great Beast of Apocalypse» (290), while the poor — «the people starved and stabbed»— are killed in the streets of Chicago.

It is also worth noting the reference Bellow makes to Shelley's long poem «Mont Blanc» (1817), in which, on the one hand, the English romantic connects the individual mind and a universal mind, and, on the other, he delimits human thought⁸. According to Shelley, the

⁷ Percy B. Shelley, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Alasdair D. F. Macrae (London: Routledge, 1991), p.95. Subsequent references to this edition are given parenthetically.

⁸ To Harold Bloom (1969: 25), «Unifying the two parts of the subject is the poem's postulate of the possibility of a Thou as a kind of universal mind in nature.»

genesis of all phenomena and power is above the Mont Blanc summit, which happens to be the highest mountain in Europe.

I think that the most interesting aspect of this poem is the ending because, in it, the poet praises the beauty that he perceives in nature, which he tries to come to terms with.

The wilderness has a mysterious tongue
Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,
So solemn, so serene, that man may be,
In such a faith, with nature reconciles;
Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal
Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood
By all, but which the wise, and great, and good
Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel (lines 76-83).

In this poem, the narrator has abandoned the city because he needs to leave behind the confusion and the sense of helplessness civilisation provokes in him. For this reason, he has fled from society and has returned to nature. The poet can only reach an interior peace and harmony once he has reconciled himself with the world.

Corde also goes back to the *wild*. At the end of the novel, the dean and his wife Minna fly back to the United States, although, before returning to Chicago, they stop at Mt. Palomar, California— it is significant that, like the Shelleyan hero, the Bellovian protagonist climbs up the mountain to come to terms with the world and with himself. On top of the mountain, Corde discovers the close connection between the individual and cosmos or, in Shelleyan terms, between the individual and the universal minds. This way, the dean explains the identification between the world and the self.

Rocks, trees, animals, men and women, these also drew you to penetrate further, under the distortions (comparable to the atmospheric ones, shadows within shadows), to find their real being with your own. This was the sense in which you were drawn (306).

In «Mont Blanc», Shelley wonders whether the human imagination can grasp the meaning, in its broadest dimension, of the work that has been revealed to him. It seems that, to the Bellovian hero, the answer is affirmative.

Finally, in this brief approach to the romantic influences in Bellow's works, I would not like to disregard W. B. Yeats⁹. Bellow's interest for Yeats has to do with the Irish poet's concern about the subject of the destruction and the death of man in Western civilisation.

⁹ In his poem entitled «Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931». Yeats himself claimed: «We shift about— all that great glory spent —/ Like some poor Arab tribesman and his tent. / *We were the last romantics*—chose for theme / Traditional sanctity and loveliness.» (My emphasis.) *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London, Melbourne & Toronto: MacMillan, 1967), p.276. Subsequent references to this edition are given parenthetically.

The first reference to the Yeatsian poetry is «Sailing to Byzantium», a poem that opens his book *The Tower* (1928). The subject matter of both the poem and the book is Yeats' disappointment with Western civilisation for being an inappropriate place for old people. Specifically, «Sailing to Byzantium» presents an already elderly poet who attempts to escape from this world through art and his mind. To M. L. Rosenthal (1978: 29), in the poems included in *The Tower*, «The speaker is at once caught up in the world he is observing and apart from it, staring transfixed at an apocalyptic moment in the cyclical rise and fall of civilizations.»

Yeats chose Byzantium because it had been a neuralgic centre of the European civilisation, as well as an important religious and cultural place. In this poem, together with another one called «Byzantium», Yeats meant to seek a spiritual travel to that city. In the following passage, the first stanza of the poem is reproduced.

That is no country for old men. The young
 In one another's arms, birds in the trees
 —*Those dying generations*— at their song
 The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
 Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
 Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
 Caught in that sensual music all neglect
 Monuments of unageing intellect (217). (My emphasis.)

In *The Dean's December*, Bellow makes an explicit reference to the expression that appears in italics. Corde rereads a series of articles he has written for *Harper's*. Basically, the dean tries to explain what he sees around him, that is, a decadent, violent, corrupted Chicago that can be embodied in what he calls the *underclass*. In other words, the protagonist refers to the black people who, living in slums, prisons and detoxification centres, have been hardened up by the violence, poverty and desperation of city life. Corde blames the Chicago politicians for the unbreatable atmosphere that surrounds Chicagoans. Corde thinks about such *underclass* and defines it as *dying generations*.

«... The communications revolution could bypass Chicago or Detroit. Cities could be written off—*dying generations*, the blacks and Puerto Ricans, the aged too poor to move ... Let them be ruined, decay, die and eliminate themselves. There are some who seem willing that this should happen. I'm not one of them. Not me» (226). (My emphasis.)

This passage occurs immediately after the funeral of Minna's mother. Corde has left his wife and goes for a walk with Vlada Voynich, a scientist who is very interested in studying the degradation that Chicago has undergone mainly due to the pollution produced by some lead poisoning. Corde believes that this poisoning symbolises a more serious disease: the end of

philosophy, of ideas. This theme has been a constant in Bellow's novels. For instance, in *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), the protagonist, Charlie Citrine, is a successful writer who edits a journal called *The Ark* together with an acquaintance of his, a swindler named Pierre Thaxter. The problem is that it is becoming more and more difficult to publish the journal because both Charlie and Thaxter are virtually broke. To them, the reason to publish *The Ark* has always been more than just to release a literary magazine into the market. Rather it has been a question of presenting new ideas, although, according to Charlie, man has been out of ideas for a long time. «When you start to talk about *the Ark* you lose me. For once tell me simply —what, why?» I was grateful for such a challenge really. As an aid to concentration I shut my eyes to answer. I said, «the ideas of the last few centuries are used up»¹⁰. Bellow makes one allusion to Yeats' poem «Long-legged Fly», included in his *The Last Poems* (1936-39). In the first stanza, the Irish poet describes Caesar as a solitary man, a characteristic that, according to Yeats, all great men in history have shared. In the poem, Caesar is staring at the void, and reflects on how the decaying civilisation can be saved.

That civilisation may not sink,
Its great battle lost,
Quiet the dog, tether the pony
To a distant post;
Our master Caesar is in the tent
Where the maps are spread,
His eye fixed upon nothing,
A hand under his head.
Like a *long-legged fly* upon the stream
His mind moves upon the silence (381). (My emphasis.)

This reference is not accidental. Corde, like the great Roman emperor, stares at the void. He muses about the murder case he has left pending in Chicago and realises that he is alone because, when he tries to be a fair judge in this clear example of assassination, he comes across the opposition of both Provost Alec Witt and his nephew, Mason Zaechner. In that moment, the dean sees the little handle of a clock that he identifies with the «*long-legged fly*» and despairs. He also feels hopeless while observing how the already mentioned *underclass* pervades society.

Corde let this pass. He waited while the second hand of the electric clock on the wall made one full cycle, like the *long-legged fly*. Mason's message was clear: Lucas Ebry was real, others (uncle Albert, for instance) were not. Uncle Albert had no business to be messing with people who were wrapped up in an existence, in a reality that was completely beyond him. For those people the

¹⁰ Saul Bellow, *Humboldt's Gift* (New York: Viking Press, 1975), p. 250..

stakes were life and death. What did Uncle Albert stake? Let him stick to his fancy higher education—seminars in Plato and the Good. Those people of the *underclass*, dopers or muggers or whores: what were they, mice? (40-41). (My emphasis.)

There is, however, one point worth making: whereas Yeats is an apocalyptic poet who thinks that man is doomed to disappear, Bellow is an affirmative writer who, in the line of the great Yiddish masters such as Sholom Aleichem and Isaac Bashevis Singer, is fully convinced of man's capacity to go on.

3. Coming to terms with life

In this article, I have approached Saul Bellow's *The Dean's December* from a romantic perspective. As shown in the previous section, the Bellowian hero, in general, and Albert Corde in particular, can be considered romantics due to their need to escape from the smothering atmosphere of the city to nature in order to come to terms with both himself and the world.

We believe that this was a necessary point of departure to pass onto the central core of the article: Bellow's critique of the modern world in his novel *The Dean's December*. In this light, Bellow's references to the Blakean world of experience that he perceives in both Bucharest and Chicago can be understood more easily: two cities that embody Blake's Babylon as a cruel, unjust, enslaving and materialist place.

When referring to Shelley, Bellow advocates the revolutionary spirit of the English romantic poet who presented the ruling class as oppressive, and the ordinary people as the oppressed. Taking Shelley's poem «Sonnet: England in 1819» as a starting point, Bellow makes his critique of the corrupted politicians annihilating Chicago.

Finally, as Bellow sees degeneration around him, he cannot help alluding to the crumbling modern world depicted by Yeats in poems like «Sailing to Byzantium» and «Long-legged Fly» in which the Irish poet envisions a world coming to an end. However it should be noted that, unlike Yeats, Bellow believes in the regenerating capacity that man has at hand. This is clearly perceived at the end of the novel because, after the painful experience Corde has lived through, he climbs up Mount Palomar in order to identify himself with the surrounding world and discover the connection between cosmos and himself.

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