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His Barbed Behind: *Mr. Sammler's Planet* and Its Critics

*What my father's 1970 novel tells us
about today*

“I am not a revolutionary. I have little respect for American revolutionaries as I know them, and I have known them quite well.”

— *Saul Bellow: Letters*, p. 290



IN 1970 my father, Saul Bellow, published *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. His seventh novel, it came on the heels of major works that had long since established him as the preeminent American writer of his generation.

The book was immediately hailed as a triumph, reviewed and praised in every significant outlet. Here again, readers were told, were the signature marks of his method—gritty urban realism, a flawed and introspective intellectual protagonist, a gallery of eccentric characters based on real people in his life, a no-holds-barred exposure of Jew-

ish family comedy, and (for the first time) direct engagement with the Holocaust, a theme he had previously treated only glancingly.

But it was also controversial—intensely so, and clearly by design. A direct intervention in the social and political debates of the time, it was seen as taking up conservative themes, particularly the bad effects of the sexual revolution and “black power” protest on American society and culture. Consequently, it was called “the first neo-conservative novel” and lamented in liberal circles as a sign of the author’s deplorable “turn to the right.”

“Nowadays we tend to forget what a bombshell it was,” wrote the neoconservative art critic Hilton Kramer 25 years later. “In its refusal to conform to the left-wing pieties that had already swamped the academy, the media, and the whole cultural scene, it mocked what had swiftly become the conventional wisdom. Which, of course, was why the Left decried it.”

And decry it they did. Consider some of the adjectives applied to it: “harsh,” “aloof,” “judgmental,” “cold,” “contemptuous,” “didactic to a fault,” “rank and embittered,” “an austere, dismissive jeremiad,” “a howl of rage.” Saul’s ex-friend Alfred Kazin, once a major booster of his work, panned it as an expression of “punitive moral outrage.”

In short, the reaction was seismic, challenging readers on a deep level—especially members of the New York cultural elite who saw themselves reflected in its scathing critique of liberal hypocrisy. The critic Joseph Epstein was on to something when he remarked that the book seemed calculated “to offend whole categories of the reading public as well as most of the people who write about books.”

Why would the author’s son enter this literary minefield more than 50 years after the fact? Certainly it is daunting for one who is neither a writer or a critic, but a publisher, which is a very different animal. That said, I have a distinct advantage in being intimately acquainted with my father’s private thoughts. As much as anyone alive, I knew his

mind. I have also in my career as an editor published many polarizing books — books that liberals considered “bad” and “dangerous.”

You can tell a lot about the state of ideological flux in this country from how people react to such a book, and *Sammler*, while not a political treatise, does make a political argument. To reappraise it today is therefore necessarily to ask, in a way we do not ask of other novels, not just whether it holds up as a work of fiction (which it obviously does), but whether its argument was right.



Artur Sammler is an elderly Polish Jew and Holocaust survivor whose nephew, a wealthy physician, has rescued him and his daughter from a DP camp and generously pays for their upkeep. A highly cultured intellectual and journalist, Sammler spent the interwar years in London, where he became acquainted with the bohemian Bloomsbury set. Caught in Poland during the war, he was blinded in one eye by a Nazi rifle butt before being stripped bare, shot, and buried along with his wife in a mass grave, from which he alone escaped.

When Sammler crawled out of the pit, he was no longer a man but a consciousness stripped of illusions, including the illusion of personality, or of mattering as an individual. Now as he awakes in the gloom of his Upper West Side bedroom he feels himself to be scarcely alive. A spectral presence—tall and thin, with his hat and threadbare overcoat, smoked glasses that conceal his ruined eye, and a rolled-up umbrella—he spends his days riding buses to and from the public library or walking around the city minutely observing, cataloguing his impressions, and reducing his thoughts to hard, gemlike insights that he will never share with anyone. What he seeks is to penetrate to the essence of things, to see things as they are without emotional or value-based distractions.

Sammler is not an easy read. Page for page it is extremely dense, with an overabundance of images, thoughts, and impressions piling in from every side. This gives the book a claustrophobic feel. It also eschews straightforward narrative in favor of a stream of consciousness approach that may be called modernist in the vein of Woolf or Joyce. Events are not related sequentially or even in one place. Sammler's own story has to be teased out of the book and is told in brief flashes of memory, accompanied by gusts of emotion erupting like steam from a manhole. Falling into a mass grave under the weight of dead bodies. Shooting a German soldier whom he has forced to disarm and undress in the snow of a Polish forest. Hiding in an empty marble crypt under the care of a non-Jewish groundskeeper.

These experiences are not worn on Sammler's sleeve or even visible to anyone he meets. Nor does he sentimentalize them. Instead he views them as impersonal encounters with history and the innate human capacity for evil. The few dramatic scenes are hardly given room to breathe, and much of the inherent comedy of the book is underplayed. It also means that there is no authorial voice to indicate the line between the author and his character. This has left readers free to conclude that there isn't one.

One man went into the pit, another came out. This one has only one eye. The question critics wrestle with is whether he sees more or less with his one eye than others see with two. Is he a blind seer like the mythical Tiresias? The proverbial one-eyed man in a kingdom of the blind? Or a mutilated victim who can see only the ugly parts of life?

As much as anything, *Sammler* is a book about New York, and what he sees through his bushy single eye is filth, corruption, and decay, both physical and moral. The city is a wreck, and no one seems to care or even notice. Trash is everywhere. The payphones are smashed and looted, used as urinals. Crime is rampant, and the cops shrug and do nothing. Driving up the West Side highway in his

nephew's chauffeured silver Rolls with the Hudson on his left, he thinks: "There was the water—how beautiful, unclean, insidious! and there were the bushes and the trees, cover for sexual violence, knifepoint robberies, sluggings, and murders."

The degeneration and perversity extend even to his own family. His nephew and benefactor, Elya Gruner, a wealthy gynecologist and sometime Mafia abortionist, lies dying in the hospital, estranged from his two children. His daughter Angela, a sexpot past her freshness date, flesh straining against skimpy too-tight clothes, indulges her louche appetites while sending money to "defense funds for black murderers and rapists." Her brother Wallace, "a high-IQ moron," pursues a series of wacky money-losing business schemes and literally tears his father's house apart looking for hidden Mafia loot.

Sammler's niece Margotte, a middle-aged widow with whom he shares an apartment and who seeks to engage him in high-flown conversations about the banality of evil, is another well-meaning liberal, "boundlessly, achingly, hopelessly on the right side, the best side, of every big human question." Meanwhile Shula, Sammler's daughter, touchingly unbalanced and confused, drives the plot by stealing a scientific manuscript on the future of lunar exploration that she thinks her father needs for a planned memoir of H.G. Wells. Each of these characters in some way represents a disordered zeitgeist that has no moral center.

Sammler's status as a survivor gives him a numinous authority in the eyes of those who know him and for whom he plays the role of confessor and therapist. But it is an authority that is passive, weak—"respected but not obeyed," as the critic Ruth Wisse puts it—and that mainly serves to highlight the moral confusion of the others. Sammler's is an outsider's perspective, like Gulliver's in Lilliput, and he delivers a number of erudite rants on the theme of modern civilizational decline. The prognosis isn't good:

Like many people who had seen the world collapse once, Mr. Sammler entertained the possibility it might collapse twice. He did not agree with refugee friends that this doom was inevitable, but liberal beliefs did not seem capable of self-defense, and you could smell decay.

Sammler is tired and merely wishes to observe, but the world will not let him alone. Chapter 1 presents a series of affronts to Sammler's dignity, first in the form of his relatives, who try his patience with their personal oddities and unwanted confessions; then at Columbia University, where he gives a talk on Britain in the '30s that is rudely interrupted by an angry student radical—an episode based in real life; then on the bus home, where he observes a well-dressed black thief picking the pockets of elderly Jews.

Each of these plot elements has been used to make the case that Sammler—and by extension his creator—is a misanthrope, racist, sexist, and reactionary. Let's briefly review the content of these charges.



A common theme in critical assessments of the book has been that Sammler is contemptuously dismissive of his relatives, especially the women. Alfred Kazin's takedown in what Saul liked to call "The New York Review of One Another's Books" provides a useful text.

For Kazin, Sammler's thoughts are so severe and disapproving that they cannot even be expressed. And it is true that Sammler views his people with a clinical detachment that would seem unduly harsh if he said what he thought. But he does not. In fact, he is altogether nonjudgmental, listening impassively but not without compassion to their sordid, sad confessions. He sees them not as disappointing

human failures (though they are) but as overgrown children, wayward and confused. Wallace in his thirties is described as giving off a “fecal” odor, like an infant with soiled diapers. Angela always smells like she has just had sex. But Sammler is not misanthropic. He is just clear-eyed. He does not think himself any better than them. He has done worse things than they could ever dream of.

The charge of sexism is more fraught, and Kazin again provides the warrant, citing what he calls Saul’s “open contempt” for the women in the book as “crazy fantasists, improvident, gross, careless sexpots, ‘birds of prey.’” Here Kazin seems on firmer ground. It’s hard to believe this passage about hippie college girls was written without a deliberate intent to offend:

Some of the poor girls had a bad smell. Bohemian protest did them the most harm. Females were naturally more prone to grossness, had more smells, needed more washing, clipping, binding, pruning, grooming, perfuming, and training. These poor kids may have resolved to stink together in defiance of a corrupt tradition built on neurosis and falsehood, but Mr. Sammler thought that an unforeseen result of their way of life was loss of femininity, of self-esteem. In their revulsion from authority they would respect no persons. Not even their own persons.

This sounds like textbook misogyny. On the other hand, consider Sammler’s description a few pages on of Margotte as he watches her from the window, all dressed up to meet the Indian scientist Dr. Lal, author of the stolen manuscript, to whom she has taken a fancy:

Touching the frieze curtain, he watched her going toward West End Avenue, up the pale width of the sidewalk, alert for a taxi. She was small, she was strong, and had a sort of compact female pride. Some-

what shaking, as women do when they hurry. Gotten up strangely. And altogether odd. Females! The drafts must blow between their legs. Such observations originated mainly in kindly detachment, in farewell-detachment, in earth-departure-objectivity.

This is clearly an expression of deep fondness for Margotte and of sympathy for women in general. If this is a form of misogyny, it would take a Harvard academic to spot it. Moreover he is equally put off by unwashed young men with pimples “springing to their cheeks” from gushing unkempt beards. This sort of equal-opportunity revulsion bespeaks an attitude that has more to do with the loss of civilized manners than with female sexuality per se. We might add that a man who has lain next to his wife’s decomposing corpse for hours on end may have lost the capacity to view female bodies in a sexual way.

The charge of reactionary politics requires a bit more context. I like to say that neoconservatives (many of whom became my teachers, friends, and authors) were basically middle-aged Jewish men who took the ’60s very badly, and Saul was a fairly typical example. Like other young immigrant Jews, he started out as an enthusiastic Trotskyist deeply versed in Marxist texts. But subsequent events, including sectarian squabbles over the Spanish Civil War, Trotsky’s exile and murder, and Stalin’s crimes, especially the show trials and the purge of Jews from Soviet arts and culture, led Saul and some of his friends to rethink their youthful commitment to revolutionary ideals. Still, he remained a mainstream liberal, appalled by McCarthy, firmly committed to civil rights, and publicly opposed to the Vietnam War—even as he accepted an invitation from LBJ to attend a dinner at the White House for “leaders in the arts,” a choice for which he was severely criticized by literary friends such as Robert Lowell. At the same time he was uncomfortable with the

more extreme antinomian aspects of the student revolt against the so-called white power structure and bourgeois morality.

Critics who prefer not to address the substantive reasons for this movement away from the Left tend to fall back on psychoanalysis. The argument here is that Saul became more “patriarchal” as he aged, shifting from the archetype of the son to that of the father who seeks, as his virility declines, to assert his authority in the face of a noisy, disrespectful challenge from the young. In this connection, much is made of an episode that occurred in May 1968 at San Francisco State, where Saul’s speech on the place of writers in the university was disrupted by an angry young man who called him an “effete old shit” with “dried up balls.” This incident, incorporated practically verbatim into *Sammler*, is cited in various biographies and memoirs to suggest that *Sammler* is “an old man’s book” and that Saul and his hero are one and the same. The scene takes up less than a page:

“Hey!” ...A man in Levi’s, thick-bearded but possibly young, a figure of compact distortion, was standing shouting at him.

“Hey! Old Man!”

There is a brief exchange about something George Orwell had said:

“Orwell was a fink. He was a sick counterrevolutionary. It’s good that he died when he did. And what you are saying is shit.”

A commotion breaks out and Sammler is helped to withdraw by a sympathetic female student. Out on the street, the narration resumes:

[But] he was not so much personally offended by the event as struck by the will to offend. What a passion to be *real*. But *real* was also brutal. And the acceptance of excrement as a standard? How

extraordinary! Youth? Together with the idea of sexual potency? All this confused sex-excrement-militancy, explosiveness, abusiveness, tooth-showing, Barbary-ape howling.

Saul was undoubtedly upset by this experience. But he had already voiced his jaundiced view of the student movement in the *New York Times*, writing that he was “wholly opposed to civil disobedience” and disliked “unreasonable rebelliousness and pointless defiance of authority.” Jews of his generation remembered how German universities in the '30s had collapsed into fascism and plausibly feared it could happen again, here in the tolerant USA, amid the violent rejection of all civilized tradition and restraint. So there was clearly more involved for him than personal affront.

But the real hot-button issue here is race, and it is the scene where Sammler witnesses a well-dressed black man picking people's pockets on the bus that forms Exhibit A in the indictment of the book as (in the assessment of biographer James Atlas) “an outburst of racism, misogyny, and puritanical intolerance” signaling his transformation into “a full-blown reactionary.”

Sammler has seen the man plying his trade several times — “a powerful Negro in a camel's-hair coat, dressed with extraordinary elegance” — and become fascinated with his “princely” bearing and predatory grace. This time, however, Sammler is caught watching him operate, and this leads to a frightening confrontation after the man follows Sammler off the bus and into the vestibule of his building, where he presses him into a corner and silently exposes his penis. The description borders on the pornographic:

It was displayed to Sammler with great oval testicles, a large tan-and-purple uncircumcised thing — a tube, a snake; metallic hairs bristled at the thick base and the tip curled beyond the support-

ing, demonstrating hand, suggesting the fleshly mobility of an elephant's trunk.

There is no way a black reader or even a white liberal could fail to see this passage, with its animalistic metaphors, as expressing an ugly kind of racial prejudice rooted in fear of black sexual potency. Many reviewers were stunned, and the debate about this scene went on for decades. Years later, the journalist Brent Staples devoted a section of his memoir to describing his creepy obsession with Saul while a student at Chicago, stalking him through the crepuscular streets of Hyde Park, hoping to corner him in a vestibule. ("I wanted to trophy his fear.")

You can say what you like about the wisdom of putting this passage into the book or even writing it in the first place. But it was not some kind of accidental slip that betrayed the author's "actual" racist attitudes. Far from being inadvertent, the thing was done with great precision and an obvious authorial intention. Nor can one believe that an acclaimed Jewish author and public liberal who counted Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Richard Wright among his friends didn't know that he was evoking a highly charged stereotype. He knew what kind of reaction he would get, and he was willing to pay the price. The question is why he would do so.



These kinds of critical responses strike me as ironic, given that the book's famous opening paragraph explicitly warns against interpreting human phenomena in the light of abstract theories invented by the flawed and limited beings known as intellectuals. Looking around at the books and papers in his bedroom, Sammler expresses Ecclesiastes-level disenchantment and skepticism about their actual util-

ity. “Intellectual man had become an explaining creature,” Sammler thinks. “Fathers to children, wives to husbands, lecturers to listeners, experts to laymen, colleagues to colleagues, doctors to patients, man to his own soul, explained. The roots of this, the causes of the other, the source of events, the history, the structure, the reasons why. For the most part, in one ear and out the other.”

Sammler’s suspicion of these explanatory “superstructures” is ultimately rooted in their failure to account for his experience at Nazi hands—specifically, their inability to explain the existence of evil. This is the gravamen of Sammler’s attack on Hannah Arendt’s theory of the bureaucratic roots of the Nazi Holocaust. As he explains to Margotte: “The idea of making the century’s great crime look dull is not banal. Politically, psychologically, the Germans had an idea of genius. The banality was only camouflage...the adopted disguise of a very powerful will to abolish conscience.”

Given the author’s clear warning not to succumb to this temptation, it’s astonishing how many eminent critics have fallen prey to it, seeking to explain his literary motives in sociological, political, or psychological terms. One Bellow “expert” describes his turn against the Left as “a reaction against his guilt and shame over his revolutionism in the 1930s.” Guilt and shame? Well, maybe. But maybe the events of the 20th century also had something to do with it.

The kindest thing that can be said about such critics is that they are more in love with their own ideological fixations than with the difficult task of reading. For the book is not (at least in the opinion of this neoconservative editor) a neoconservative screed at all but a subtle critique of the neoconservative mind—detached, explaining, analytical.

This makes perfect sense if we recall that Artur Sammler is based to some extent on the sociologist Edward Shils, Saul’s colleague and close friend who is often said to be one of his “intellectual mentors.”

A rather caustic and acerbic individual known for his research on the public role of intellectuals, Shils read the book in manuscript and marked it up extensively in his signature green ink. In the view of David Mikics, one of our more astute contemporary critics, the book is an extended argument with Shils, with whom Saul agreed about the problems in modern society, but not the solution.

So yes, Sammler's outlook is classically neoconservative. But it is a one-eyed vision, deeply penetrating but lacking stereoscopic perspective. We have two eyes for a reason, one to show us human frailty and fallibility up close, the other to provide cosmic perspective on the broader human comedy, to see ourselves as God might see us. Sammler's one good eye appears to toggle back and forth, struggling to integrate these perspectives until at the end he finally succeeds.

My own reading is as follows. Sammler is not personally racist and neither was his creator, and if readers get past the first chapter, this eventually becomes clear — at least to those not blinded by ideological prejudice, personal grievance, or (in certain cases) both. Far from a neoconservative screed, it is a book about the recovery of Sammler's humanity and his sense of connection with others. When we meet him, he is on the verge of reawakening from his trauma-induced detachment and once again becoming fully human. The real arc of the story is therefore not political but spiritual.

It is important to recall that Sammler has been maimed, both physically and emotionally. He sees what is ugly in the world because of the ugly things that he himself has suffered, seen, and done. It is not easy to preserve hope while staring naked into the abyss. Yet throughout the book his thoughts return to Elya Gruner, a flawed human specimen who has nonetheless chosen to be good — to honor the terms of his contract — his agreement with God. This choice of goodness makes no sense. It is arbitrary and confers no material benefits. It therefore resists explanation. But Sammler knows that

he owes Elya a debt. It is also why he often thinks of the Polish groundskeeper who hid him in a marble crypt for no good reason other than the recognition of their shared humanity.

The basis for this kind of deep connection is what Sammler thinks of as “the old system” — a major theme in Saul’s work and the title of a short story written around the same time. “The old system” is his term for the complex substrate of intimate bonds that make us all a human family. Sammler owes his rescue to Elya’s “Old World family feelings,” but these are the very sentiments that are being extinguished in the brave new world of liberated appetite and excess. The result is the confusion and disorder that he now sees all around him.

The old system had to be destroyed because it has to do with deep attachments that people now think they have to be free of. Why? Because sophisticated modern explanations have told them that they are oppressed by racist, capitalist, and patriarchal systems that inhibit their authentic self-expression. But this revolt against inherited structures and forms — against civilization itself — in the name of a false liberation is destroying their ability to make sense of things, and to be good and happy people.

Sammler at the outset seems ready to give up on humanity altogether. But in his 30-page discussion with Dr. Lal, the Indian scientist who advocates leaving Earth behind and starting over on the moon, Sammler finds that he is not willing to abandon his planet or its benighted inhabitants after all. Instead he intuits that it is only in our deepest primordial feelings that the truth of our existence may be found. Thus at the end of the book, standing over Elya’s body, he silently recites a private kaddish for his benefactor, praising his goodness as the fulfillment of his contract with God, whose terms — deny them as we may — we all acknowledge in our hearts.

The black thief plays an important role in the arc of Sammler’s spiritual recovery. At the outset, he appears as a frightening

predatory figure, strong in his barbarous pride and sexual power. But at the end, when he lies prostrate on the ground, bleeding onto the sidewalk after being repeatedly bashed in the face by Sammler's violent son-in-law, the old man feels compassion and pity. The thief reminds him of himself standing at the edge of the pit, abused and humbled, stripped of his clothes, his wife, his identity, his dignity, his very humanity, on the way to becoming a corpse, and he cries out to his son-in-law for mercy.

Sammler also sees in him an important human quality. The princely thief in his splendid attire has invested tremendous imaginative and spiritual powers in the making of himself, powers not comprehended in Marx's theory of commodity fetishism or the Freudian psychoanalytic paradigm. And this is what ultimately brings Sammler back from the grave and returns him to humanity—with all the pain of grief and loss that it entails.

This is why, when people ask me to explain my father's politics, I say they were not partisan but literary. Saul had a way of seeing people not through one eye, as products of abstract impersonal systems or sociological forces, but through both—as self-created beings who use the power of their imagination to make themselves into whatever they wish to become, expressing their individuality in every way, through speech and action, habits, dress, and even physiognomy. As such, they are not the sum of their socially determined identities, but spiritual beings who are often as mysterious to themselves as to one another.

What I later understood from publishing books that challenged the reigning liberal consensus is that the critical attacks on *Sammler* were entirely political and had nothing to do with literature. Saul had become an iconic figure in American letters and a prominent subscriber to liberal causes, writing articles in the press and putting his name to all kinds of letters and petitions. For a long time during the '60s he tried to maintain an intermediate position between express-

ing disapproval of the war and discomfort with the radical excesses of the antiwar, feminist, and black-power movements. Grateful as a Jew for the safety and security provided by America, he was not prepared to cross over into anti-Americanism. Meanwhile he was pressured to conform by friends and colleagues whose business should have been writing books, not leading protests. Something had to give, and eventually it did.

Why did he do it, knowing the reaction it would get? All I can say, having known him as I did, is that he wouldn't surrender his independent judgment to any external authority. He wouldn't surrender it to Marx. He wouldn't surrender it to Freud. He wouldn't surrender it to the Communist Party. He wouldn't surrender it to any of the "mentors" who are supposed to have influenced his thought, like Ed Shils or Allan Bloom. And he certainly wouldn't surrender it to the New York Review of One Another's Books. He felt this pressure building up inside and had to let it out. Not the pressure of unexpressed bigotry and rage coming out in a literary tantrum, but of rebellion against the intellectual conformity that had become the price of membership in the liberal community. Because he felt that "lining up" over an issue was not his business as a writer.

For Saul to publicly turn to the right was unforgivable, a major blow to the prestige of the cultural Left and a breaking of ranks that could not be permitted. For more than anything else, *Sammler* was viewed as a betrayal by the author's liberal friends. And those who break ranks must be punished—marginalized, canceled, rendered unpersons. This is how the sectarian Left always deals with heretics. Being called a racist is just what happens when you put pressure on the ideological assumptions that bind the liberal community together. People you have known for years get mad and call you the worst names they can think of in an attempt to drive you off the pub-

lic stage and kill your reputation. To that extent, the debate about Sammler may be considered the opening skirmish in what came to be known as the Culture War.

But let us return to the original question: How does the book's argument hold up? What does *Sammler's Planet* have to say to modern readers?

Every generation knows a different New York City and attaches its nostalgia to a different stage in its endless cycle of renewal and decay. I myself have seen this cycle several times and have always been heartened by the city's remarkable ability to recover its vitality. So when I recently sat down to reread this great New York novel, with its hellscape vision of my Upper West Side neighborhood at the very time that I was growing up in it, I couldn't help but smile. What Saul, with his memories of a safer, cleaner, more civilized New York, saw as a horrifying descent into chaos I regarded as perfectly normal, even exciting and fun.

These days, however, Sammler's catalogue of urban disorder comes across as charmingly retro. New York today, like San Francisco and other large liberal cities, seems to be going down the drain after a series of manmade shocks, including a society-wide lockdown, a season of race-driven riots, an economic slump that hollowed out the city's business sector, a homeless crisis, an influx of undocumented immigrants, and a spike in violent crime and drug addiction. We see organized looting, public defecation, migrant encampments; we read in the *Post* about random stabbings, subway-track shovings, immigrant sex-trafficking gangs, all abetted by a hands-off approach to law enforcement. In short, it's fair to say that things are objectively worse than they were in the '60s.

Believe me, I know who I'm sounding like. Am I turning into

Sammler as I age? In truth, however, I am not so despairing. New York may yet revive and flourish with a change in political leadership. But it will never be the city I grew up in, because in the interval the position of Jewish New Yorkers has suddenly and drastically deteriorated to the point where we can no longer feel the unconscious safety that we used to take for granted. Today we are faced with violent antisemitism on a scale hitherto unknown in the United States: campus mobs chanting “Death to Israel,” Jews attacked and threatened in their neighborhoods, Jewish businesses painted with swastikas and their windows smashed, while again the cops do nothing. We all know where this kind of thing can lead.

If Artur Sammler could see all of this, he’d probably conclude that the neoconservative diagnosis of America’s ills in *Sammler’s Planet* has proven remarkably prescient. There certainly seems to be a direct line from the radical permissiveness of the ’60s to the even more radical liberationism of today. But there is also an important difference. The activism of the ’60s was sharply critical of America, but it was not without hope for reform and the fulfillment of its promise of greater inclusivity. It was also (with apologies to Artur Sammler) very sexy. Today’s activists have taken the antinomian aspects of the ’60s revolt to a point beyond discussion or debate. They cannot seem to articulate what it is they are protesting and can only howl in thwarted rage. They have no utopian vision of a better world, they just want to tear everything down.

What can explain their nihilistic rage and hatred of their own society? I think Saul would say something like this: Millions of people in Western countries, especially the young, seem to feel that they are failing at life and no longer know how to be human. Rightly or wrongly, they blame the surrounding society for its false promise of happiness through material abundance. Having abandoned traditional religion, they feel a spiritual void at their core that deprives them of meaning

and causes them pain and confusion, and their response to this is depression or anger. Directed inward, their alienation and self-loathing can lead to addiction or suicide. Directed outward, it leads to a cleansing orgy of mob violence.

A fair reading must therefore conclude that the book was nothing short of prophetic. Saul saw that underneath the veneer of liberatory licentiousness, the demand for total freedom from convention and constraint, there was real danger, the kind societies don't recover from. He also foresaw that Jews' eager embrace of emancipation from "the old system" in their transition from the old world to the new would not necessarily end well for them.

The silver lining may be the awakening of Jews from their long slumber of complacency and reflexive progressivism with a renewed sense of unity and purpose. The more perceptive of them can see they have been rejected by their former friends on the Left and are beginning to search for new allies. From where I sit as a publisher, I perceive an increasing convergence of interests among conservatives, Christians, Jews, and traditional liberals who have a common interest in the defense of the Western civilizational legacy in the face of a renewed challenge from barbarism within and without.

All of this is rather dark, so let me leave you with something lighter: a little verse my father composed that I do not think has been published anywhere else. I'm not even sure he wrote it down. But I do know he was very pleased with it. Think of it as *Sammler's Planet* rendered in four lines:

*I wish I were a porcupine
so you might kiss my barbed behind
and know, that without Veneration,
there is no Civilization.*

The note of belligerency is hardly accidental and that is what I like about it. You can almost hear his sonorous voice pronouncing “kiss my barbed behind” in an admonitory tone. To my mind it sums up in inimitable fashion the very problem we have been discussing — and points the way to the only real solution, which is to tell our critics exactly what they can do if they don’t like what we have to say.

This is the stance Saul Bellow assumed in the world, and it has turned out to be mine as well. To that extent, I seem to have a lot of my cantankerous old man in me. *