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 ***Saul Bellow: Letters (review)***

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Philip Roth Studies

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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Gloria L. Cronin (bio)

Saul Bellow: Letters. Edited by Benjamin Taylor. Viking: New York, 2010. xxxvi + 571 pp. \$35.00.

Readers long familiar with the distinctive polyphony of the Bellowian American urban voice are well acquainted with its wacky compound of ancient Hebrew, 19th century literary language, Yiddishisms, classic Jewish immigrant humor, great radio show one liners, philosophical musings, zaniness, immigrant street slang, professorial erudition, and driving tones of complaint. Such readers will find that demotic voice intact and in full vigor in these letters. The same authoritative voice that changed Anglo-American literary idiom after World War II echoes through the letters, displaying the whole symphonic range of Bellow's emotional register—some epic, deferential, and intimate; others chatty, funny, profound, and warm. But no matter the recipient or topic, and regardless of emotional register, the voice is always surely and authentically Bellow's. His voice was, after all, his greatest literary achievement. This might be its greatest value to readers of Philip Roth who also shares this polyglot Yiddish, Hebrew school and American heritage. That, and the fact that Roth and Bellow shared a significant friendship and correspondence, the latter of which is sadly, barely represented in this volume.

Benjamin Taylor's *Letters* contains 708 letters representing about two-fifths of Bellow's known output. A great number are obviously missing from the larger collection from which Taylor culled these selections, and undoubtedly these too have been previously vetted. Most obviously missing are the letters to Isaac Rosenfeld, Philip Roth, Delmore Schwartz, his many lovers, his surrogate son, Martin Amis, and a host of other known and suspected correspondents, including relatives, sons, young daughter, European contacts, grandchildren, and wife Janis. Scholars and readers looking for a deeper, more complex picture of Bellow than that provided in James Atlas biography will be pleased to see a more complicated, multi-faceted Saul Bellow than the monolithic, womanizing narcissist revealed in that narrow account. Those hoping for more elucidation of his stormy relationships with editors and friends will not be disappointed, nor will those hoping for more sparkling wit and lively essayistic prose. Those not previously aware of just how intensely engaged and busy Bellow's turbulent life was will be surprised. However,

those hoping for “the dirt” will find no shattering personal secrets, scandal, or gossip.

Overall, the collection evokes the sense of a great *lacuna*, perhaps more than most collections of this kind. Some letters seem mere puzzling snippets, while others are richly substantial. Scholars will fervently wish for more adequate footnotes, a much better index identifying many of the names mentioned, and a more precise scholarly apparatus. Literary critics hoping for more backstory, textual insights, and literary secrets hidden within the fiction will have to wait for the publication of the vaunted Bellow daily Notebooks. There are no secrets here. **[End Page 221]**

Benjamin Taylor’s “Introduction” and “Chronology” are usefully annotated, and his organization of the volume sensible. The volume is divided into roughly decade-long sections organized as follows: Part One: 1932–1949; Part Two: 1950–1959; Part Three: 1960–1969; Part Four: 1970–1982; Part Five: 1983–1989; and Part Six: 1990–2005. Taylor’s epigraphs for all of the sections are remarkably apt as they sum up thematically the literary obsession of each era. For instance the epigraph for his “Introduction” is telling: “This Caring of Believing or Love Alone Matters.” It captures Bellow’s finest wisdom, which always rises above the fascinatingly messy rest.

Despite the shortcomings of this volume, these letters are valuable in that they represent what is likely to be one of the very last collections of such “great man literary letters” in the tradition of Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, Evelyn Waugh, John Cheever, and Flannery O’Connor. Bellow died in 2005 just before he turned ninety, a part of the last group of great literary figures of his generation to actually write letters. No doubt many people are still hanging on to Bellow letters because they deem them too private, too revealing, or too valuable to risk sharing. We will only become aware of these letters as estates are settled and more...

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