
Reviews

A Worthy Kaddish

Juliana Geran Pilon

Ravelstein, by Saul Bellow. *New York: Viking Press, 2000. 233 pp. \$24.95 hardback. New York: Penguin USA, 2001. 240 pp. \$13 paperback.*

Witty, clever, elegant, *Ravelstein* has been hailed as a great read. But this is no ordinary novel: its characters are mercilessly recognizable; hardly anything has been altered beyond their names. Of course, claiming for it fictional status was not done out of a concern for privacy; rather, this clever conceit permits Bellow to make a philosophical statement. He deliberately sets out to defy Platonic Truth, worshiping the Shadows—the felt, believed, imperfect, flawed perception of touched reality. This—and nothing else—is truth, or at least the only truth that matters.

And so Bellow would craft this exquisite funny-tragic requiem to his late friend Allan Bloom, as he promised. Bloom had requested a faithful biography—which meant that Bellow should record his impressions. Bloom trusted those im-

pressions not because they were perfect but because they were not. He trusted that Bellow cared for him, and would therefore understand whatever “essence” Bloom might possess, in the only way possible: with his heart.

Bloom turned out to be absolutely right. Never maudlin, Bellow conveys admiration and affection for the erudite, fascinating professor who loved arguments and questions because they were interesting, and beautiful, and important. In his own quixotic, exasperating manner, Bloom had once searched for the great essences, for the Forms of human existence. Those essences however had turned out to be paradoxically elusive.

It is undoubtedly no accident that Bloom’s persona is named “Ravelstein.” “To ravel” is one of those

unique words that embrace two exactly contradictory denotations: it means “to perplex” yet also . . . “to clarify”! What a perfect way to describe a Socratic professor whose dialectic must perplex before it can hope to clarify. What an apt name for Bloom, who had the courage to accept that reality is at its clearest when most perplexing. But never mind Ideas. In the end, Bloom came to realize that what counted was not Ideas. It was, put simply and plainly, human love.

Bloom’s Socratic quest for love is described by the self-deprecatingly named narrator “Chick” (an amusing detail for anyone familiar with Saul’s haughty public ego): “I was no sort of scholar. Like all, or most, of the students of my generation I had read Plato’s *Symposium*. Wonderful entertainment, I thought. But I was sent back to it by Ravelstein. Not literally sent. But if you were continually in his company you had to go back to the *Symposium* repeatedly. To be human was to be severed, mutilated. Man is incomplete. Zeus is a tyrant. Mount Olympus is a tyranny. The work of humankind in its severed state is to seek the missing half. And after so many generations your true counterpart is simply not to be found. Eros is a compensation granted by Zeus—for possibly political reasons of his own. And the quest for your lost half is hopeless. The sexual embrace gives temporary self-forgetting but the painful knowledge of mutilation is permanent.”

Both Bloom and Bellow were thus

“mutilated” creatures keenly aware of the joke being played on sorry humanity. This is not to deny either that Chick-Saul truly loves his current young, beautiful, and intelligent wife, or that Bloom deeply cared for his various lovers. Nevertheless . . . the absolutes cannot be, for either of them. Only the search. (Which does not detract from the ecstasy of the sexual embrace—on the contrary. “To want” means both “to lack” and “to desire.” Unquenchable, passion is infinite.)

As Bloom plays Socrates in Bellow’s Platonic requiem, the contrast with the ancient *Apology* is palpable. For unlike the wise old Greek who took his hemlock joyfully, Bloom is clearly loathe to leave this tantalizingly sublime world. Yet Bloom too accepts the verdict of death with dignity: he is no more inclined to apologize than was Socrates. Both teachers had adopted the same basic philosophy of life: the apodictic requirement to examine it thoroughly and honestly lest it not be worth living. The difference lay in the diametrically opposite results: Socrates found the Absolute where Bloom found the Abyss. Bloom had no trust in a God who didn’t even bother to exist. At best, Zeus had played a joke on us; at worst, we wrote the punch line.

Still, Bloom can laugh; Bellow’s style is clever and entertaining. Its serious undercurrent notwithstanding—for surely this is a book about death, not merely Bellow’s or Bloom’s, but death as such—*Ravelstein* is very amusing. Gone is the tedious angst

of the existentialists, their self-indulgent, adolescent melodrama. Bloom explains why he is fond of the nihilists: "I suppose it's because they don't tell a lot of high-minded lies. I like the kind who accept nihilism as a condition and live in that condition. It's the intellectual nihilists I can't stand. I prefer the sort who live with their evils, frankly. The natural nihilists." Like Socrates, Bloom detested hypocrisy. The absence of truth is no excuse for falsehood—and certainly not for pathos.

But unlike most academics (even from the University of Chicago) Bloom never takes himself too seriously, not even during his terminal, horrible illness. Bloom as Job has decided to make fun of his boils. Bloom, like Bellow, is at once snobbish and humble—a reflection of his unbridled contempt for the great mass of humanity who do not realize how little we have to be smug about.

And they are both funny in a peculiarly Jewish way, betraying a particularly Jewish addiction to life. As Bloom lies dying, a friend (evidently Werner Dannhauser) reflects upon the fact that Bloom would "keep talking things out while there's a breath in his body left—and for him this is top priority, because it's connected with the great evil." Bellow agrees: "I well understood what he meant. The war made it clear that almost everybody agreed that the Jews had no right to live. That goes straight to your bones. Other people have some choice of options—their attention is

solicited by this issue or that, and being besieged by issues they make their choices according to their inclinations. But for 'the chosen' there is no choice. Such a volume of hatred and denial of the right to live has never been heard or felt"

And so what people like Bloom (and one may easily add, Bellow) "concluded was that it is impossible to get rid of one's origins, it is impossible not to remain a Jew." Which meant, in a word, that the Jews "were historically witnesses to the absence of redemption." The Jews had no choice: their enemies had refuted the very idea of salvation, demonstrating its absolute impossibility. The only alternative is a stubborn, desperate affirmation of life.

But Bellow stops mercifully short of preaching; as Bloom lay dying, Bellow admits being "too old to be a pupil," and anyway "what people called culture was nothing but a fancier term for their ignorance."

This is no false modesty. The "ignorance" to which Bellow refers is that profound ignorance of Socrates, the modesty of the wise. To know that one knows nothing is to admit the possibility of a harmony beyond human logic. It admits the possibility that we know not why we have been chosen. Why we have been chosen to be.

It isn't exactly faith. It does not deny the rage, the impotence of the dying. It does not presume to know why God—if He exists at all—had so harshly condemned his son Adam, and his children. It cannot—will not—explain the enormous

slaughter of innocents we witnessed in the last century. But it does argue against arrogance, and kitsch, and most important, against cynicism.

Ravelstein—no, Bellow—will be difficult to forget. With characteristic hubris (or is it *chutzpa*), Bellow has written his own *kaddish*.

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