

BETWEEN THE INSECT AND THE INSECTICIDE :

A review of Saul Bellow's novel The Deans's December

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Demasiadas palavras
fraco impulso de vida
travada a mente na ideologia
e o corpo não agia
como se o coração tivesse antes que optar
entre o inseto e o inseticida.

Caetano Veloso

When called on to comment on a novel that confronts the "free world" and an iron curtain country, the third world reader can hardly avoid becoming the third biased vertex of a triangle of world views, a geometric figure of opposing forces in which, as in a Bermuda triangle, all objective criticism may get lost. Being a Brazilian reader, I was as affected by Bellow's picture of Chicago (America) as Albert Corde by his contact with Bucharest (the Soviet bloc). In what Bellow himself sums up ironically as "A Tale of Two Cities" the main issue is undoubtedly the match Capitalism x Communism, abundance x poverty, individualism x socialism. As the excellent writer he is, Bellow would not present the issue in its dry nakedness, however anxious he might be (and I felt he was anxious) to make his point clear to his readers. Had he been a minor writer he would not have avoided sounding like a zealous shepherd calling wandering sheep to the fold. He

certainly is afraid of the "big bad wolf," but his skill in exploring the psychological depths of the main character and in filtering his detailed, apparently objective, descriptions through a very personal insight makes the novel so attractive, the narrative so earnest, that the reader is bound to go through its over-300 pages with continuous interest.

Bellow commits himself. That is what saves him from mere pamphleteering. The same can be said of Albert Corde the dean, and, indeed, it is easy to establish Corde as Bellow's mouth-piece. The ease with which the narrative shifts from the 3rd to the 1st person (e.g. from page 219 to 229) without the delimitation of quotation marks, is a sign of the author/character identity, which Bellow does not try to disguise. Corde is younger than Bellow, unburdened by Jewish tradition, but they both descend from foreign families, they are both Chicagoans, and can be said to belong to the same generation. Both cannot feel at ease in a society where the violence of marginal groups and the noncommitment of upper classes contrast so shockingly. However, they are home, they belong there. Both have chosen America, they have chosen Chicago as their home. Corde could have stayed in Europe, but it is in America, "of course," that "the real action is" (page 272). Bellow's family came from Russia and found in America a safe place to work, thrive, and rest.

The story develops as a thesis. Flashbacks and the flow of thought (to call it "stream of consciousness" would evoke the revolutionary technique of Virginia Woolf and Joyce, which is not the case) avoid the dullness of linear reasoning, but

the structure is there all right, not too difficult to see through those technical devices. I would call it the duality insect/insecticide. The insect would stand for dirt and the insecticide for cleanness. The novel is built, therefore, on a double duality: we have Chicago/Bucharest, dirty/clean Chicago, dirty/clean Bucharest. Permutation is possible and often occurs, but all the action is based on those contrasting pairs, and the point to be made is mainly: which does Corde choose, the insect or the insecticide? His unwillingness to choose one of them, his occasional bending towards one or the other, keeps the reader's attention awake through the whole book. We are shown people who have chosen: Mason is all for the insect, while his mother favours the insecticide. Minna can hardly allow insects to exist: they don't breed in the outer space. Spangler delights in torturing insects before spraying them with his "You Can't Beat the System" atomizer.

But what of Corde himself? He alone is unwilling and late to choose. In the months preceding the crucial December he had opened up the windows so that all the bugs could come in, but later, when the creatures begin to tease him too much, he faces a dilemma: should he kill them, should he keep a few as pets, should he fall a victim to their entropic force? In order to clarify the metaphor we must extend its meaning. The insect does not stand for dirt alone, but also for life, inasmuch as life includes dirt as its essential component. Complete cleanness is death, or absence of life. A totally stable society is a dead society. We have a sample of this in Bucharest. If it weren't for those lady-

bugs and their underground mutual-aid service, could their society as a body of individuals survive? On the other hand, repression (the insecticide) is to a certain point necessary, so that the "damn monstrous" "wilderness" (p. 228) does not take over. If left to spread disorderly, people like the black underclass will have "nothing but death" before them (p. 228). "They kill some of us. Mostly they kill themselves..." (p. 229). Corde can certainly do with an alarm system: "At home their doors and windows were wired" (p.172). But this is not enough. One's enemies can be inside oneself, so it is better to be on guard, warding off "random thoughts:" "Those were the worst - they ate you up " (p. 149).

Corde's cases for and against the "insects" are equally strong, it seems. That bewilders him and everybody about him. People want to figure him out, to press him towards a decision: "Is this the conclusion you aim at (...)" "Oh, I haven't even begun to reach a conclusion. So far I'm only in the describing stage"(p. 229). However, Bellow must reach some kind of conclusion as the end of the novel draws near. "The experience, puzzle, torment of a lifetime demanded interpretation. (...) So here was the emptiness before him, water; and there was the filling of emptiness behind him, the slums" (p. 316).

Later on we are offered the description of what affected me as the most shocking scene of the whole novel: a dog's birthday party. (Fancy ten educated grown-ups playing such fools, not one child around, as if they were almost celebrating ritually their detachment from common-sense. And just fancy what epithets the dog itself might be giving them!). Up there,

on the fortieth floor, the slums had remained far far below, insects could not reach them. The Negro driver goes just as far as the garage. The Mexican doorman remains on ground level. Although he can recognize decadence, Corde is at the same time exhilarated by the "altitudes of power," and accepts the ridiculous situation with a "why not?". He could always condescend that far for the opportunity of that agreeable sensation: "Though you were so high, you didn't really need to feel that you might fall, and you enjoyed the safe sense of danger " (p. 324).

In the last scene Corde climbs even higher, five thousand feet high to the top of the telescope at Mount Palomar. Up there it is terribly cold, cold as death, but he felt safe and free, free from all dirt, from disagreeable smells and breaths, so that, when his guide asks him if he minds the cold too much, he says: "The cold? Yes. But I almost think I mind coming down more." He won't be able to reject the insects down here, but he would certainly like to. His option is for the insecticide.