

## 117 QUOTATIONS



### Saul Bellow

(1915-2005)

Saul Bellow is the most honored American novelist after Hemingway and Faulkner, winner of all the major literary prizes including the Nobel—some several times—standing virtually alone against the mob of liberal critics and defiant in the face of a Postmodern elite hostile to his conservatism. Bellow is the most explicitly intellectual novelist since Melville, the major Existentialist and the most articulate enemy of Postmodernism since T.S. Eliot. Like Eliot and Henry James he is so deeply rooted in European culture that he seems foreign to many American readers rather than a Realist from Chicago. He is Postmodern only in lacking religious faith, whereas he is Modernist in his Existentialism, in his tendency to pantheism, in his transcendence and in some of his techniques such as the “mythic method.” Bellow transcends ethnicity, yet he is Jewish, as well as European, in having a discursive and effusive rather than a subtle evocative style—the opposite of Hemingway, a writer he admired. *Henderson the Rain King* (1958), his Existential comic novel modeled on Hemingway in Africa, is the one of his works that fits most completely into American literary tradition and the one most likely to entertain the common reader.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, education, autobiographical, human nature, Existentialism, Realism, Modernism, Postmodernism, Postmodern literature, intellectual Expressionism, the humanities, multiculturalism, Political Correctness, Feminism, politics, rhetoric, America, psychoanalysis, writing, major theme, Transcendentalism, love, audience, style, independence, old age, decline of civilization, the soul, God, death:

#### YOUTH

My mother wanted me to be a fiddler or, failing that, a rabbi.

#### EDUCATION

I had begun at an early age to read widely, and I was quickly carried away from the ancient religion.

It was at the university that I began to work through the modern ideologies, Capitalist as well as Marxist, and the psychologies, the social and historical theories, as well as the philosophies (logical positivism, naturalism, existentialism, etc.).

People can lose their lives in libraries. They ought to be warned.

Life in a strictly academic village, in isolation from a great turbulent city, would have been a torment to me.

#### AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

You have to fight for your life. That's the chief condition on which you hold it.

I would never make a lion, I knew that; but I might pick up a small gain here and there in the attempt.

Whoever wants to reach a distant goal must take small steps.

Every man feels from his soul that he has got to carry his life to a certain depth.

Respect is better than love.

I have, perhaps, a slave-like constitution which is too easily restrained by bonds; it then becomes rebellious and bursts out in a comic revolution.

My balance comes from instability.

All a writer has to do to get a woman is to say he's a writer. It's an aphrodisiac.

#### HUMAN NATURE

When we ask for advice, we are usually looking for an accomplice.

I've never turned over a fig leaf yet that didn't have a price tag on the other side.

Everyone tries to create a world he can live in, and what he can't use he often can't see.

There are evils that have the ability to...go on for ever—money, for instance, or war.

History is the history of cruelty, not love as soft men think.

#### EXISTENTIALISM

We are all such accidents.

The challenge of modern freedom, or the combination of isolation and freedom which confronts you, is to make yourself up. The danger is that you may emerge from the process as a not-entirely-human creature.

You want to make us able to live with the void. Not lie ourselves into good-naturedness, trust, ordinary middling human considerations, but to question as has never been questioned before, relentlessly, with iron determination, into evil, through evil, past evil, accepting no abject comfort. The most absolute, the most piercing questions.

So now we have the universe itself to face, without the comforts of community, without metaphysical certainty, without the power to distinguish the virtuous from the wicked man, surrounded by dubious realities and discovering dubious selves.

I seem to have asked in my books, How can one resist the controls of this vast society without turning into a nihilist, avoiding the absurdity of empty rebellion? I have asked, Are there other, more good-natured forms of resistance and free choice?

The noble self-conception is everything. For as conception is, so the fellow is. Put differently, you are in the flesh as your soul is. And in the manner described a fellow really is the artist of himself.

### REALISM

No realistic, sane person goes around Chicago without protection.

The development of realism in the nineteenth century is still the major event of modern literature.

So I was doing nothing very original by writing another realistic novel about a common man and calling it *The Victim* [1947]. I suppose I was discovering independently the essence of much of modern realism.

I don't think that I've represented any really good men; no one is thoroughly admirable in any of my novels. Realism has restrained me too much for that.

Realism specializes in *apparently* unmediated experiences.

### MODERNISM

Gertrude Stein tells us in one of her lectures that we cannot read the great novels of the twentieth century, among which she includes her own *The Making of Americans*, for what happens next. And in fact, *Ulysses*, *Remembrance of Things Past*, *The Magic Mountain*, and *The Making of Americans* do not absorb us in what happens next. They interest us in a scene, in a dialogue, a mood, an insight, in language, in character, in the revelation of a design, but they are not narratives. *Ulysses* avoids anything resembling the customary story. It is in some sense a book about literature, and offers us a history of English prose style and of the novel...exhibits them with a kind of amused irony and parodies and transcends them all.

I like Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald. I think of Hemingway as a man who developed a significant manner as an artist, a life-style which is important.... I like Fitzgerald's novels better, but I often feel about Fitzgerald that he couldn't distinguish between innocence and social climbing. I am thinking of *The Great Gatsby*.... I have a special interest in Joyce; I have a special interest in Lawrence.

Modern literature was dominated by a tone of elegy from the twenties to the fifties, the atmosphere of Eliot in "The Waste Land" and that of Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

### POSTMODERNISM

Let us look at one of the dominant ideas of the century, accepted by many modern artists—the idea that humankind has reached a terminal point.

What is the philosophy of this generation? Not God is dead, that point was passed long ago. Perhaps it should be stated Death is God. This generation thinks—and this is its thought of thoughts—that nothing faithful, vulnerable, fragile, can be durable or have any true power.

In an age of madness, to expect to be untouched by madness is a form of madness. But the pursuit of sanity can be a form of madness, too.

### POSTMODERN LITERATURE

The fact that there are so many weak, poor and boring stories and novels written and published in America has been ascribed by our rebels to the horrible squareness of our institutions, the idiocy of power, the debasement of sexual instincts, and the failure of writers to be alienated enough. The poems and novels of these same rebellious spirits, and their theoretical statements, are grimy and gritty and very boring too,

besides being nonsensical, and it is evident by now that polymorphous sexuality and vehement declarations of alienation are not going to produce great works of art either.

No wonder the really powerful men in our society, whether politicians or scientists, hold writers and poets in such contempt. They do it because they get no evidence from modern literature that anybody is thinking about any significant question.

What does the radicalism of radical writers nowadays amount to? Most of it is hand-me-down bohemianism, sentimental populism, D.H. Lawrence-and-water, or imitation Sartre. For American writers radicalism is a question of honor.... Their radicalism, however, is contentless.

#### INTELLECTUAL EXPRESSIONISM

Some of our most respected novels have a purely mental inspiration. The results are sometimes very pleasing because they can so easily be discussed, but the ideas in them generally have more substance than the characters who hold them.

#### THE HUMANITIES

We live among ideas more than we live in nature.

A fool can throw a stone in a pond that 100 wise men cannot get out.

We mustn't forget how quickly the visions of genius become the canned goods of intellectuals.

The humanities are like the great old Paris Flea Market...masses of junk.

The humanities would be called upon to choose a wallpaper for the crypt, as the end drew near.

#### MULTICULTURALISM

Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus? The Proust of the Papuans?

#### POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Readiness to answer all questions is the infallible sign of stupidity.

If he has nothing to offer but his didactic purpose he is a bad writer.

It becomes art when the views most opposite to the author's own are allowed to exist in full strength. Without this a novel of ideas is mere self-indulgence, and didacticism is simply ax-grinding. The opposites must be free to range themselves against each other, and they must be passionately expressed on both sides.

Preoccupied with questions of Health, Sex, Race, War, academics make their reputations and their fortunes and the university has become society's conceptual warehouse of often harmful influences.

The heat of the dispute between Left and Right has grown so fierce in the last decade that the habits of civilized discourse have suffered a scorching. Antagonists seem no longer to listen to one another.

#### FEMINISM

Boredom is the shriek of unused capacities.

I guess nothing restrains people from demanding ideal conditions.

A great deal of intelligence can be invested in ignorance when the need for illusion is deep.

Everybody knows there is no fineness or accuracy of suppression; if you hold down one thing you hold down the adjoining.

It would not be practical for her to hate herself. Luckily, God sends her a substitute, a husband.

We are on a more brutal standard now, a new terminal standard, indifferent to persons.

If women are expected to do the same work as men, we must teach them the same things.

One thought-murder a day keeps the psychiatrist away.

She's very pretty but she's honey from the icebox.

Conquered people tend to be witty.

Fidelity is for phonographs.

#### POLITICS

*"I want, I want, I want!"*

In every community there is a class of people profoundly dangerous to the rest. I don't mean the criminals. For them we have punitive sanctions. I mean the leaders. Invariably the most dangerous people seek the power. While in the parlors of indignation the right-thinking citizen brings his heart to a boil.

#### RHETORIC

I have trained myself to pick up the endless variations of radical and right-wing themes so that I have become able (not an enviable skill) to detect the untreated sewage odors of a century of revolutionary rhetoric.

There is only one way to defeat the enemy, and that is to write as well as one can. The best argument is an undeniably good book.

#### AMERICA

Society is what beats me.

Ours is a bourgeois civilization. I am not using this term in its Marxian sense.

Burst the spirit's sleep. Wake up, America! [echo of Thoreau in *Walden*]

It's too bad, but suffering is about the only reliable burster of the spirit's sleep.

California is like an artificial limb the rest of the country doesn't really need.

In Los Angeles all the loose objects in the country were collected, as if America had been tilted and everything that wasn't tightly screwed down had slid into Southern California.

Things were too complex, but they might be reduced to simplicity again. Recovery was possible.

"I am a high-spirited kind of guy. And it's the destiny of my generation of Americans to go out in the world and try to find the wisdom of life. It just is. Why the hell do you think I'm out here, anyway?"

"I don't know, sah."

"I wouldn't agree to the death of my soul." [Henderson]

## PSYCHOANALYSIS

Psychoanalysis pretends to investigate the Unconscious. The Unconscious by definition is what you are not conscious of. But the Analysts already know what's in it—they should, because they put it all in beforehand.

## WRITING

A good novel is worth more than the best scientific study.

You never have to change anything you got up in the middle of the night to write.

Any artist should be grateful for a naïve grace which puts him beyond the need to reason elaborately.

I feel that art has something to do with the achievement of stillness in the midst of chaos. A stillness which characterizes prayer, too, and the eye of the storm. I think that art has something to do with an arrest of attention in the midst of distraction.

Art—the fresh feeling, new harmony, the transforming magic which by means of myth brings back the scattered distracted soul from its modern chaos—art, not politics, is the remedy.

I dislike my own early novels. I find them plaintive, sometimes querulous. *Herzog* makes comic use of complaint.

## MAJOR THEME

I seem to have asked in my books, How can one resist the controls of this vast society without turning into a nihilist, avoiding the absurdity of empty rebellion? I have asked, Are there other, more good-natured forms of resistance and free choice?

## TRANSCENDENTALISM

The earth is literally a mirror of thoughts. [echo of Thoreau in *Walden*]

Objects themselves are embodied thoughts. [echo of Emerson]

My purpose was to see essentials, only essentials, nothing but essentials [Thoreau], and to guard against hallucinations.

Some people found satisfaction in *being* (Walt Whitman)...

Others were taken up with *becoming*.

Unexpected intrusions of beauty. That is what life is.

Imagination is a force of nature. Is this not enough to make a person full of ecstasy?... It sustains, it alters, it redeems! [echo of Wallace Stevens]

Now you are a lion.... You are related to all.... The sky is your thoughts.

I couldn't get enough of the water, and of these upside-down sierras of the clouds. Like courts of eternal heaven. (Only they aren't eternal, that's the whole thing; they are seen once and never seen again, being figures and not abiding realities; Dahfu will never be seen again, and presently I will never be seen again; but every one is given the components to see: the water, the sun, the air, the earth.)

This is not a sick and hasty ride, helpless, through a dream into oblivion. No, sir! It can be arrested by a thing or two. By art, for instance. The speed is checked, the time is redivided. Measure! That great thought. Mystery! The sense of angels! Why the hell else did I play the fiddle?

## LOVE

A man is only as good as what he loves.

It's usually the selfish people who are loved the most. They do what you deny yourself.

In here, in the human bosom—mine, yours, everybody's—there isn't just one soul. There's a lot of souls. But there are two main ones, the real soul and the pretender soul. Now! Every man realizes that he has to love something or somebody. He feels that he must go outward. "If thou canst not love, what are thou?"

When fear yields, a beauty is disclosed in its place. This is also said of perfect love if I recollect, and it means that ego-emphasis is removed.

I am not dumb and blind, and I have observed a connection between woman's love and the great principles of life. If I hadn't picked this up by myself, surely Lily would have pointed it out to me.

## AUDIENCE

With a novelist, like a surgeon, you have to get the feeling that you've fallen into good hands—someone from whom you can accept the anesthetic with confidence.

A writer should aim to reach all levels of society and as many levels of thought as possible, avoiding democratic prejudice as much as intellectual snobbery.

*Herzog* appealed to Jewish readers, to those who have been divorced, to those who talk to themselves, to college graduates...

## STYLE

A writer is a reader moved to emulation.

In writing *The Victim* I accepted a Flaubertian standard.

I had to tame and restrain the style I developed in *Augie March* in order to write *Henderson* and *Herszog*.

## INDEPENDENCE

I've discovered that rejections [as from *The New Yorker*] are not altogether a bad thing. They teach a writer to rely on his own judgment and to say in his heart of hearts, "To hell with you."

European observers sometimes classify me as a hybrid curiosity, neither fully American nor satisfactorily European, stuffed with references to the philosophers, the historians, and poets I had consumed higgledy-piggledy, in my Midwestern lair. I am of course, an autodidact, as modern writers always are.

American readers sometimes object to a kind of foreignness in my books. I mention Old World writers, I have highbrow airs, and appear to put on the dog. I readily concede that here and there I am probably hard to read, and I am likely to become harder as the illiteracy of the public increases.

## OLD AGE

Everybody needs his memories. They keep the wolf of insignificance from the door.

I have begun in old age to understand just how oddly we all are put together. We are so proud of our autonomy that we seldom if ever realize how generous we are to ourselves, and just how stingy we are with others.... I now see that I have helped myself to the best cuts at life's banquet.

It wasn't that he was specially ungenerous but that he put things off to give his generosity a longer and more significant route.

You can spend the entire second half of your life recovering from the mistakes of the first half.

That's how it is with my ideas; they seem to get strong while I weaken.

#### DECLINE OF CIVILIZATION

New York makes one think of the collapse of civilization, about Sodom and Gomorrah, the end of the world. The end wouldn't come as a surprise here. Many people already bank on it.

I don't actually take much stock in the collapsing culture bit. I'm beginning to see it instead as the conduct of life without input from your soul.

I am a phoenix who runs after arsonists.

#### THE SOUL

He didn't ask "Where will you spend eternity?" as religious end-is-near picketers did but rather, "With what, in this modern democracy, will you meet the demands of your soul?"

#### GOD

God comes and goes in man's soul. And men come and go in each other's souls. Sometimes they come and go in each other's beds, too.

#### DEATH

Death is the dark backing that a mirror needs if we are to see anything.

Not that life should end is so terrible in itself, but that it should end with so many disappointments in the essential.

Some of these quotations are excerpted from  
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