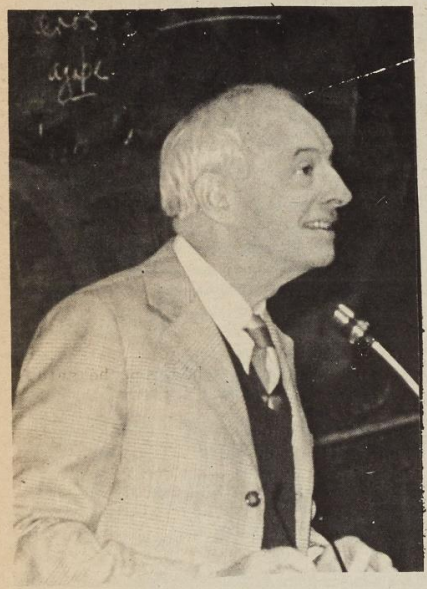


FOR WHOM NOBEL TOLLS

BRIG Reporter Finds Irony In The Saul

Public lectures are easy for poets. They can, and invariably do, spend the requisite hour rattling off poem after poem, pausing only to add the occasional oral footnote by way of elucidation. It's not so easy for the novelists; prose fiction in live performance is essentially an aberration - an artificial separation of the novel from its natural medium. So the novelist has, basically, two choices: to talk about his books or to talk about something else. Saul Bellow chose the latter alternative and I, for one, was glad that he did. There's nothing more boring than listening to someone talking about books you haven't read.



I prefer a ramble to a vasectomy...

My own acquaintance with Prof. Bellow's work amounts to all of Herzog, some of Dangling Man and about twenty pages of Henderson The Rain King, all of which left my psyche pretty much as they found it. To be brutally honest - and doctors agree that it does no harm to be brutally honest once in a while - I didn't like them much. When I heard their author had won the 1976 Dynamite Money, you could have knocked me down with an iron bar.

So why did I go to see him? More to the point, why did all those other people go? The attendance was such that the venue had to be shifted from ALT3 to Logie, and even that cavernous arena was packed beyond capacity. Is Saul Bellow that popular a novelist? Maybe. Or is it that, as Professor Dunn claimed in his closing remarks, "it is always a privilege to hear a great creative artist discussing the major issues of our time?". Again, maybe, though I doubt if it would have been much of a privilege to hear, for example, Ezra Pound or Wyndham Lewis expounding their

eccentric social philosophies. In the end, the most likely cause is curiosity (which, as well as being an infallible cat-destroyer, is the motive force of all human knowledge etc.). As someone said after the lecture: "Oh no, I don't like his books at all... ..I just wanted to see what a Nobel Prize winner looks like."

The beneficiaries of Alfred Nobel's penitential bequest to civilisation collect charisma along with their not insubstantial cheque. Past winners of the Lit. Section - Eliot, Faulkner, Camus et. al. - have given the award what, for want of a worse phrase, can only be called unique mystique. Sartre must have had superhuman willpower to refuse it; it's not so much like winning an Oscar as like being canonised.

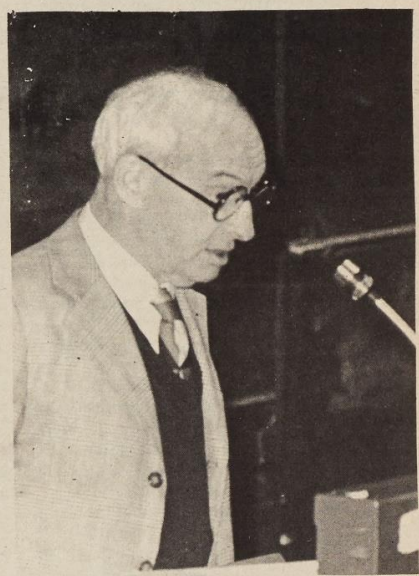
So we teemed into Logie, perhaps more intent on seeing than on hearing. The lecture itself was less than rivetting. Perhaps in order to emphasise how completely he is immersed in Gutenberg technology, Professor Bellow read mechanically from a printed page. I got the impression that he had given the lecture several times before. He spoke of aspiring, of kids from the backwoods and of sociology, all of which was sometimes interesting, but rarely inspiring. The high point came when he said: "In the end, I prefer a gamble to a lobotomy". That strikes me as the sort of inscrutably mysterious remark that Nobel Prize winners should bestow, like precious alms, on their enrapt audience. No applause ensued, probably because the crowd were too stunned to react.

Whatever the shortcomings of his lecture, Prof. Bellow must have satisfied all visual expectations. He's a small, neat man whose face would be unremarkable but for dark, piercing eyes under brows which rise and fall in a series of ironic, unasked questions. His is the look of a man who has the whole shtick pretty well taped, but doesn't much care to share the secret. Just about what you'd expect. I imagine the lengthy applause which rang round Logie at the lecture's conclusion wasn't so much for Presentation or Content as for Star Quality.

At the reception afterwards, he dealt patiently and charmingly with questions about his work and reminiscences of Chicago. I have to express unqualified admiration for a man who travels halfway around the world, only to be assailed with anecdotes about his home town - and still keeps calm. He has obviously developed a stoic attitude to redundant interrogation, for by all accounts he doesn't much enjoy the role of sixty-four year old smiling public man. As Mrs. Bellow said: "He hates being asked the same questions over and over again, and

having to give the same answers. It bores him, and he doesn't like being bored". Watching Prof. Bellow surrounded by a halo of admirers, it was clear that this was a duty being honourably discharged. And that was all that could be expected.

During the lecture he told the story of a Chicago newsman who, when he heard of Bellow's hostile attitude to the press, asked "Why did he take the Nobel Prize if he's going to act like that." In the end, we were all a little like that Chicago newsman; all imagining connections and consequences with no basis in fact. We supposed that a talent for writing



...or is it the other way round? novels entails any number of abilities and responsibilities in the person who has that talent. Such isn't the case. Saul Bellow obviously has neither the inclination to shake hands with the world nor the enthusiasm to converse with it. But we might have guessed as much. If authors were as interesting and communicative as their books, there wouldn't be any need for the books in the first place.

So, all in all, not the most profitable of evenings. The good Professor was giving little away, and least of all to amateur members of the press more intent on imbibing the English Dept's excellent vino than on probing the recesses of a novelist's mind.

But at least I know what a Nobel Prize winner looks like.

Andy Holmes

PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVE FINDLAY