Introduction

by Stanley Crouch

BARBAROUS ON EITHER SIDE: THE NEW YORK BLUES OF *MR SAMMLER'S PLANET*

There are no two ways about virtue, my dear student; it either is, or it is not. Talk of doing penance for your sins! It is a nice system of business, when you pay for your crime by an act of contrition! You seduce a woman that you may set your foot on such and such a rung of the social ladder; you sow dissension among the children of a family; you descend, in short, to every base action that can be committed at home or abroad, to gain your own ends for your own pleasure or profit . . . That man with yellow gloves and a golden tongue commits many a murder; he sheds no blood, but he drains his victim's veins as surely; a desperado forces open a door with a crowbar, dark deeds both of them! You yourself will do every one of the things that I suggest to you today, bar the bloodshed. Do you believe that there is any absolute standard in this world?

VAUTRIN, in *Le Père Goriot*

We are now mightily perplexed by the vulgarity and the brutal appetites of our culture, which Mr Sammler sees so, so clearly, startled from page to page and in passage after passage of Saul Bellow's 1970 novel. The terrible children of our day, the worst of our politicians, and the rampant sleaze that slides up and down the classes, across the races and religions, from the cynical students to the unrepentingly jaded and old, can be traced back to the elements that are so alarming to the protagonist of *Mr Sammler's Planet*. As a

well-educated man who has smelled the molten breath and felt the bloody teeth of European fascism, Mr Sammler is obsessed with understanding what makes or breaks a society, what causes a civilization to embrace ruthlessness as the best way to realize its ambitions and handle its fears. A veteran of World War II, he has seen killing and he has done it himself, which makes him a man for whom none of his questions exist in a speculative air unfouled by the odor of murder. His intellectual ponderings are thereby part of a drama in which he has seen the lowest the Western world has to offer. This lack of innocence makes him a hero and a thinker who is haunted by his past and startled to uneasiness by the present. Oh, yes: Artur Sammler knows firsthand how quickly the metamorphosis from the refined to the smugly savage can take place. 'Like many people who had seen the world collapse once, Mr Sammler entertained the possibility it might collapse twice.'

The very conception of Mr Sammler is expressive of Bellow's gift for bringing together the intellect, the passion, the spirit, and the flesh. The physical responses to stimulation are rendered with the same attention given to all of the many things that Mr Sammler contemplates as he tries to get a grip on New York, America's financial capital and the pinnacle of the nation's culture. Mr Sammler's ideas are counterpointed by feeling and sensuality to such a degree that the thoughts are themselves elements of emotion, which is something only our finest writers can bring off, the literary condition of character so complete that every aspect of consciousness takes form within the container of a body equal in the life of its senses to the spirit it carries. We get the feeling of a human being in repose, in grief, in rage, in self-protective contemplation, in unsparing self-examination, in attentive motion through Manhattan, on foot, in public transportation, in chauffeured limousine.

New York's power over the country was central to why it was chosen as the place of action. Mr Sammler could not be in a better setting if he were to wrestle with the identity of the United States. One part of it obviously has to do with the character's Jewishness. Manhattan and Hollywood are the two places where Jews have made their deepest imprints on the country. Unlike the dream

factory of Hollywood, New York is the city in which Jews took such high and influential positions across the professions – in law, medicine, education, theater, finance, fashion, music, politics, real estate, literature, science, and so on – that within fifty years the Jewish middle and upper classes became fundamental to setting the tone of the town and maintaining the Big Apple's nationally admired high culture. This was also true of the broad, popular entertainments, where Jews added the almost blues-like cynical joie de vivre of their vision to the crass vitality of the commonly understood. There were also spiritual tar pits. The theories of psychoanalysis and the rags-to-riches statistics of social history, if cleverly misinterpreted, made it possible for those mottled souls among the monied Jews to effectively respond when questioned or attacked. They used the peculiarly American tactic of the worst among the newly rich – celebration of their amoral appetites as undimmed and unpretentious vigor straight from the gutter! So, in almost endless ways, New York allowed stellar realization of the immigrant dream – access to the best one could get, given talent, discipline, luck, and moxie. The Big Apple had plenty of room for the ambitious, whether the intellectually illuminated or the crude and oily.

As a Polish Jew, Mr Sammler feels at home and alienated. He hears these New York Jews playing their cultural music in three keys, one bright, witty, down-to-earth, and high-minded; another croaking along in confused or desperate obsession with the fashionable; the last dark and daunting. He has no belief in the passing of attitudes through the blood. Mr Sammler knows that Jews are often linked rather flimsily by some choice tales of atrocity passed down from generation to generation, and by a few religious rituals that are just as often felt no more deeply than the kind of American patriotism in which holidays inspired by the historical sacrifice and grief necessary for grand achievement are seen as yearly chances to have big, partying fun, not occasions that spark tragic recognition of the country's identity. Mr Sammler believes that the society is threatened by a spiritual jungle rot that moves up from the depths and knows no limitations of social position or gender or power, infecting even the traditional outsiders. It is carried by those Jews who profit

from pimping the chilling memory of the death camps, and it spreads all the way to the tainted grace of the suavely dressed and handsome black pickpocket Mr Sammler observes on the bus as the novel opens.

What Bellow saw rising up from the sewers of our continental spirit has since gotten a more cavalier grip on our national passions. We aren't close to done for, but in this time of low democratic morale it is good to remember that some writers in this country aren't afraid of the big bad wolves of popular culture and refuse to slink along with the cowards of our academies, those who are all too willing to add material they despise to the reading lists of their courses – if that means their most self-serving colleagues and the orneriest students will pick some other people to harass. Bellow knew that the desire to be left alone and the willingness to make small adjustments are often at the bottom of social disorder. All of the single pieces of trash thrown out the windows add up until the streets are filled with garbage and the stink is everywhere. Nesting inside that stink are vermin of every distinction.

When it arrived, the deeper meanings of *Mr Sammler's Planet* were missed by those afraid that Bellow had become a racist and a fuddy-duddy who didn't recognize the importance of all the changes that were streaking – butt naked – across the American scene. Bellow had no doubt that the loud, sour trumpeting of decay was mistaken for the spirited tune of true rebellion against all of the country's unarguable shortcomings. From the large frame to the intimate close-up, Bellow was addressing the dangers that arrive whenever the authority that comes of disciplined and responsible quality is pushed aside. As those dangers applied to the United States, the writer saw clearly the jagged quest for power from the people in the street to the talk show hosts of the mass media.

Power, Stokely Carmichael liked to say in those days, is the ability to define. In *Mr Sammler's Planet*, the scuffle for power is such an important theme because the various styles of confrontational social change that came in the wake of the civil rights movement were more than different techniques; they expressed completely different visions. There was unflinching rejection of King's emphasis

on individuality – 'the content of our character' – in favor of a false set of surface symbols, some shocking, some pretentious, some driven by adolescent dismay, but all pushing the society into a bizarre *bal masqué*. It was important to recognize that representatives of every element of the society were in bitter struggle against what one writer called 'the ordeal of civility.'

The novel didn't hold back criticism of one group in order to reduce another to the pulp of the stereotype. It was made even richer by Bellow's knowledge of world history, which allowed him to nail the particulars of time and place while stepping back from the provincial concerns of American life and putting those problems within the context of the gangster politics Napoleon introduced, rejecting the Enlightenment and the democratic ideas it engendered. Bellow also reexamined the soul-slaying narcissism of impersonal sexuality and material greed. The erotic high jinks, spawned by the pop psychological battle with guilt and the freely imposed sterility of birth control pills, made a griddle of the glands upon which the spirit of romance was charred to a bitter crisp. Unapologetic greed is the perpetual nemesis all capitalist democracies must hold at bay – if they are to meet the imperatives of making money while sustaining the empathetic morality that underlies democratic policy and is equally central to the civilizing processes of modern life.

Mr Sammler is as complex as the worlds of meaning that speed and twist into his life like fastballs, pop flies, curves, line drives, sinkers. He doggedly tries to read the codes and numbers on each one, then respond with a well-placed smack before it moves past him and thuds into the muddy leather of incomprehension or self-deception. However differently they might arrive, and wherever in time they may have begun, the rapidly shifting human themes of order and disorder, pity and heartlessness, scientific clarity and the befogging machinery of murder are eventually ordered in Mr Sammler's mind, each revealing aspects of its opposite. Those opposites are perfectly reflected and developed in the character of this elderly Gotham but European gentleman. There is great compassion in Mr Sammler and there is the

bitchiness of old age. He is patient and impatient. Life has brought him down a peg, however.

Before World War II, Mr Sammler traveled in the high British air of intellectual exchange, slurping up all sorts of theories and becoming a snob in the process, one who felt that he had worked himself up out of the common worm bucket. From his superior position, he had the right to turn the miniature serpents of society with the tip of his umbrella and make note of their distinctions, either for conversation or personal entertainment. He remains an autocrat in his winter years, but, having been partially blinded by a rifle butt, stripped naked, shot, and pushed into a mass grave by the Nazis, Mr Sammler doesn't overestimate the resources of his learning – or the values and resources of civilization itself. This Old World remnant in a progressively mannerless America isn't sure that all of the books and culture that he has absorbed guarantee his superiority to those whose ways offend him. Yet his endless cataloguing is a way of keeping himself at a remove; it also allows him to see the people who threaten or disgust him, white or black, as categories of animals – as apes, as pumas, and so on. It is only when Mr Sammler is forced to face their human pain that he begins to achieve the kind of heroism our age demands.

Bellow lays down thematic elements early in the novel, observations that are interior monologues and stream-of-consciousness essays, sometimes the quick notes of harsh, broken phrases, sometimes sustained musings. Those who don't like that kind of thinking made expressive in novels miss what is going on. They fail to notice that those themes are realized three-dimensionally within the actions and attitudes of characters who turn up later, often using the symbols of Jewish, British, French, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish, and Asian culture in the design of their homes, the clothes they wear, the books they cite, the languages they speak, the mannerisms they appropriate, the ideas they spout. Those realizations through the characters are moral and sensitive, selfish and crude, even ignorant and compulsive. Variation is all. It allows the novel to reveal how interwoven our world is, how attitudes from across history have been mixed into the thick, rich, and befuddling gumbo of the

modern age. Through reflection and realization the novelist also brings together both the wonder and mathematical indifference of scientific precision with a reverse set of phenomena – the tribal urges to crush every aspect of the opposition and the individual contempt for all who collide with one's self-centeredness.

Mr Sammler keeps reassessing his perspective because such contradictions seem the most consistent aspects of his reality. The sexual obsessions of older men remind him of his late friend H. G. Wells, who he thought shouldn't have been going gaga over girls into his seventies. But Mr Sammler himself is the only child of a man who worked his seed into a woman when he was sixty years old. Mr Sammler's disdain for the rich is merciless – 'the rich were usually mean. Not able to separate themselves from the practices that had made the money: infighting, habitual fraud, mad agility in compound deceit, and strange conventions of legitimate swindling.' Yet he and his half-mad daughter, Shula, have lived for the past twenty-three years on the generosity of Elya Gruner, a wealthy relative who came to Europe after the war and brought them from the ruins to New York.

Shula, obsessed with Mr Sammler's finally writing a timeless memoir of his experiences and exchanges with big-time British intellectuals, steals an Asian professor's manuscript about potential space travel, *The Future of the Moon*. Though Mr Sammler's notes were destroyed in 1939 during the German invasion of Poland, Shula – a pack rat given to desperate certainty – has no doubt that her father only needs to be goosed by some speculations surrounding the moon, that inspiration for primitive rites and science fiction, and the last frontier for human technology.

Not for nothing does the moon rise over and over in the narrative, a full disc of reflected light. It is a symbol of both the magnetic force that turns the tides and the mythical influence on the collective madness Mr Sammler retreats from, hiding behind his interior parlor games of extremely intelligent analysis, or trying to hold at bay those referred to as 'loony' or 'lunatics.' As an aspect of what lies in *outer* space, the moon is also part of a fugue built on the subject of space – mental space, emotional space, urban space, erotic space,

and the space of the grave, where horror, equality, grief, and revenge gather.

Shula's ex-husband, Eisen, is a mad and violent Russian Jew who made it through World War II, moved to Israel, and now considers himself an artist worthy enough for fame to migrate into New York with a sack full of monstrous Stars of David and lumpy sculptures, one a childish 'abstraction' of a Sherman tank. Eisen's madness and his cheerful willingness to assault or destroy give his handsomeness a charisma in the age of the diatribe that cannot maintain itself within the narrow space of words. He is a man of action, waiting for a target.

Margotte, Mr Sammler's niece and landlady, is a German Jew who drives him mad with her analytical categories, which make her a lesser version of himself. The bulk of her family had its pulse stopped permanently by the Nazis. A bumbler who is also a fount of concern and compassion, 'Margotte swept on, enormously desirous of doing good. And really she was good (that was the point), she was boundlessly, achingly, hopelessly on the right side, the best side, of every big human question: for creativity, for the young, for the black, the poor, the oppressed, for victims, sinners, for the hungry.' However much Margotte's personality scrapes the blackboard of Mr Sammler's sensibility, her feeling for the world and all its trouble is a microcosm of the direction that the spirit of the novel will take.

A surgeon and a successful investor, Elya Gruner is kind and sentimental as well as intelligent and shrewd, cocky and full of style, but his children, Angela and Wallace, embody the self-obsession and iciness of the time. Even so, they look upon Mr Sammler with a certain awe, a self-entertaining respect. But the old man has few tribal stories from his position as noble patriarch: he wasn't ever very interested in his family at large; as an only child, he was – as his mother had been – spoiled and given all of the attention. Familial concerns were always immediate, from the tip of his own nose backwards. That quality, as he reflects upon it, creates an uncomfortable connection to Elya's children.

The beautiful Angela is well-dressed trash. She dutifully visits her shrink but understands nothing other than the baseness of her

appetites and the consensus of what is chic, from sexual mores to political causes. The smoothly handsome Wallace is a ne'er-do-well who – straight out of the box – tries to make a fast and dirty buck by going in with some straw Mafia types from Las Vegas. He promptly drops a bundle down the outhouse hole of their shady doings. That omnidirectional shadiness is a central theme of the novel. It even upholsters Elya's past in leopard skin: the now saintly millionaire who's brought off 'many stratagems of benevolence' has also done illegal abortions on the side for the rich, received large gifts of grimy cash, been repulsively chummy with Lucky Luciano, and is rumored to have hidden his boodle in his Long Island home with the help of Mafia plumbers.

These people prod the consciousness of Mr Sammler, a man who believes in privacy, refined deportment, and protocol. Embarrassed by the frankness of their concerns and how entranced they are by the gradations of filth, he measures them all as part of a belligerent era and shudders at the overall voyeurism, the obsession with the scummy and the lurid. Sure enough, 'However, Mr Sammler had to admit that once he had seen the pickpocket at work he wanted very much to see the thing again. He didn't know why. It was a powerful event, and illicitly – that is, against his own stable principles – he craved a repetition.' Then comes another turnaround. While he is shocked when the black pickpocket sees him observing this game, corners him, and forces the old European Jew to look at his sizable all-American johnson – a dark bat of flesh intended to smack him into submission through its mere unveiling – Mr Sammler later remembers something quite important as he thinks about that moment:

> Sammler now even vaguely recalled hearing that a President of the United States was supposed to have shown himself in a similar way to the representatives of the press (asking the ladies to leave), and demanding to know whether a man so well hung could not be trusted to lead his country. The story was apocryphal, naturally, but it was not a flat impossibility, given the President, and what counted was that it should spring up and circulate so widely that it reached even the Sammlers in their West Side bedrooms.

The phallic exhibitionism as proof of validity and power, common to both black pickpocket and white Commander in Chief, is an example of how these various elements are connected for a remarkable overall effect. The black pickpocket working the bus filled with middle-class whites is given an oblique variation when Walter Bruch, a German Jew who lived beyond Buchenwald, rides subways up into Spanish Harlem, the sole white passenger among the brown and darker. Erotically magnetized to fleshy, tan arms, he goes into a drugstore where he can buy from a woman whose bouncing upper limbs stiffen his impulses. Pressing against his briefcase as the black pickpocket pressed against Mr Sammler, Walter Bruch, who has given the girl a large bill so she has to spend time getting the change, excitedly looks upon the brown chubby arms until he loses control of the stickiness in his loins and wets his pants, humiliated and relieved by his climax.

Through Walter Bruch, we are also given a look at another of Bellow's symbols – the rat. Like Camus in *The Plague*, Mr Sammler has thought of the Nazis as rats, breeders in filth and spreaders of disease. After hearing of his problems, Mr Sammler tells Walter Bruch that he is not as bad off as Freud's Rat Man, which is also a reference to the novel's many anal and fecal images. Elsewhere, in a long, philosophical discussion, Mr Sammler refers to the human being as sometimes having the feeling of a rat scurrying through a cathedral. Even later, looking out the window of a limousine, Mr Sammler remembers once coming into the meat packing section of Manhattan and seeing a rat so large that he thought it was a greyhound.

On and on, Bellow explores his situations and his questions with writing possessed of the literary equivalent of Ted Williams, that Boston Red Sox giant of swat who could see the ball when it left the pitcher's fingers. Such clarity of context and detail gives *Mr Sammler's Planet* the hard sweep, contempt, pathos, and confidence of a contemporary Balzac. Balzac was the first who wanted the reader's eye and ear to travel from the fly speck to the footstep to the ballroom to the highest – and lowest – levels of startling speculation, where all was discussed in terms of what had become socially possible and what openings there were in the human personality for all the

vermin of temptation to run through. That long-seeing precision allows the novel to become epic, because the fundamental issue of the epic is the meaning of civilization; it is the judgment and drama of human conduct. In the epic, all of the repercussions and benefits of action are laid out against the agreeing or warring traditions that give context to the world of the characters.

The Balzacian similarity is furthered by reexamining the way things happen in *Le Père Goriot*, where the old man is surrounded by the dirty doings of those so much younger and so much more cynical. In fact, Vautrin, the criminal philosopher and homosexual who stirs and contemplates the rodent tar of the human soul, exposes his hairy chest to a younger man in order to intimidate him with a wound from a duel – exactly the same technique, however different the tool, used in *Mr Sammler's Planet* by the pickpocket and the President! (Some say the mythic exhibitionist was a johnson-waving Johnson.) This concern with cynicism and corrupton is also present in *Eugénie Grandet*, where the slave trade becomes the ultimate symbol of the dehumanizing process, the spiritual siphoning off that begins when the desire for profit determines all action.

Bellow, again like Balzac, gives the reader a thorough grounding in how the literate classes function in a time of corruption. The idea of a self-made American aristocracy of achievement has fallen, which means that human beings must be assessed by more than their surface trappings and their educational backgrounds. In *Mr Sammler's Planet*, it would even be inaccurate to assume substance based on the obvious facts of intelligence, as with the brilliant and avaricious Wallace, who cooks up one lunatic scheme after another, proving himself, willy-nilly, a 'high-IQ moron,' which is how he is described by Elya, his father. All must be understood by what they will do to realize their passions.

The reason the novel opens with a theft is that it sets the stage for the recurring themes of dishonesty, intimidation, violence, and underhanded alliances. Over and over, we are shown that the scent of crime is an addictive stimulant snorted by the better-off. Mr Sammler thinks about his experience with the pickpocket, then about the obsession with criminality that slides all the way back to

Baudelaire and moves up through the Russian writers and the German thinkers. Defined as a tonic for bourgeois boredom and an alternative to the cowardliness of the privileged, this love of criminality has led so many well-to-do people to get their thrills – or increase their fortunes – by lying down, one way or another, with small- or big-time gangsters. Eventually, Mr Sammler realizes that what has happened to him and to his family, and, finally, to Jews under the Nazi shadow of genocide, is another form of gangster politics, a variation on gang wars justified by the counterfeit science of the Reich. He also recognizes that however wonderful real science might be, its very impersonality always makes it a potential tool of murder, something he discovers again when he chooses to cover the Six-Day War for a Polish newspaper and views the charred and stinking bodies of Arabs slaughtered by the napalm the Israelis deny using. The Muslim corpses lie piled in holes just as Mr Sammler and other Jews were when the Germans shot them down into a mass grave. The old man is not above the Israelis, because his unflagging memory pulls him into the muck of his own past, as when his recurring fascination with the black criminal and with the murder committed by Raskolnikov evolves into a recollection of the way he, a half-blind Jew on the run, shot a German soldier to death for his bread and his clothes, feeling no pity, no regret, no tinge of identification when the man begged for his life as endless Jews had, hopelessly groveling in the face of their imminent murders served ice cold.

In the attempt to bring the West into dialogue with the East, to create a grand antiphony between the high intellectual probings of Mr Sammler and those of Govinda Lal, author of the stolen manuscript, *The Future of the Moon*, Bellow overshoots and the dialogue doesn't possess the snap and the revelations of character in almost every one of the other conversations. The rich and varied motion of the novel breaks an axle. But things are quickly repaired and the momentum is regained as Mr Sammler makes his way through a plumbing disaster created by Wallace's searching for his father's hidden loot. The Pole and would-be British aristocrat is driven in a Rolls-Royce from Elya's Tudor home into Manhattan, where his

benefactor lies dying in the hospital. On the way, Bellow brings the highways, the bridges, and the streets of Upper Manhattan to the page with the kind of accuracy and feeling for image all American writers, no matter how original, have learned from Hemingway. The streets made greasy by the butchers, the feel of the Puerto Rican blocks, the look and mood of Columbia University, and the melting pot of urban drive and melancholy have the slip, rhythm, tone, and collective force we expect of a master dishing out his talent with sublime and emotive nuance.

The novel then reaches a high point of violence when the Rolls-Royce comes upon a street hassle. Feffer, an admirer of Mr Sammler and an academic hustler anxious to photograph the black pickpocket so he can use the pictures on a talk show, is in the street fighting off the elegantly dressed thief, who is much stronger and overwhelmingly intent on taking the camera. Shula's ex-husband, Eisen, is there, standing on the toeless feet that came of being thrown off a winter troop train after the battle of Stalingrad when his fellow Russian soldiers reverted to anti-Semitic normalcy, as had the Polish soldiers, who were so outraged when the idea of a Jewish state in Poland was suggested that they went out killing the Jews who fought at their side against the Nazis – or the Pole who risked his life hiding Mr Sammler but gradually resumed his traditional animosities once the war was over. The old man and the mad Russian Jew share the experience of short-term camaraderie, since Mr Sammler was one of the Jews the Polish soldiers attempted to murder but was lucky enough to escape their miniature version of the Final Solution. Yet the short-term, and essential, defiance of injustice that lasts no longer than the time of extreme conditions, is something the unwillingly deified symbol of survival is grateful for. Earlier in the novel, Mr Sammler contemplated Cieslakiewicz, his 'savior,' and what his own survival had amounted to in New York:

> The old Pole was also a hero. But the heroism ended. He was an ordinary human being and wanted again to be himself. Enough was enough. Didn't he have a right to be himself? To relax into old prejudices? It was only the 'thoughtful' person with his exceptional demands who went on with

self-molestation – responsible to 'higher values,' to 'civilization,' pressing forward and so on. It was the Sammlers who kept on vainly trying to perform some kind of symbolic task. The main result of which was unrest, exposure to trouble. Mr Sammler had a symbolic character. He, personally, was a symbol. His friends and family had made him a judge and a priest. And of what was he a symbol? He didn't even know. Was it because he had survived? He hadn't even done that, since so much of the earlier person had disappeared. It wasn't surviving, it was only lasting. He had lasted.

Both his age and his experience make Mr Sammler the patriarch of the family line, the Père Goriot of his moment, the soul of his circle and of all the extensions, elaborations, and refinements the most gifted Jews had brought with them through the forced displacements of their history and the willful immigrations to a place that promised the chance to rise above the dark and bloody shadow of a discrimination made all the more absurd by its denial of individuality to the members of one of the most contentious groups in the history of the world – a people who cut the teeth of their endless variety on argument, high and low, the constant disruption of warring interpretations, the struggles to realize the meanings of the singular life in a briar-patch world where the thorns of tragedy and disillusionment were recognized as basic to the human tale but were fought, nevertheless, over and over and over, sometimes with the cantorial song so basic to the cry of flamenco and so much a long-distance cousin of the American blues, sometimes with the social and economic theories that toppled empires, sometimes with the rude humor of vaudeville and the urbane tunes of Tin Pan Alley, sometimes with labor organizing and the legal briefs that challenged traditional patterns of prejudice writ into law, sometimes with the hard work and shrewd decisions across the professions that lifted raggedy immigrants to the finest environs money could buy, and almost always with the willingness to pant and drool for a mile if given the opportunity to move an inch. That patriarchal representation of the tribe is Mr Sammler's unwelcome position but it carries the irony that he is understood and taken seriously by no one other than Elya, who lies in the hospital, suffering the emotional

abandonment of a contemporary Lear – which is also to say a Goriot – expiring as his children screechingly fiddle and fret over the inheritance they will or won't get. The role of the civilized man is, finally, to fight for a compassionate consciousness that is neither sentimental nor vulnerable to the stark and brutal facts of a world known to move with almost whimsical suddenness from the elevated to the barbaric.

The precise, technological magic of Feffer's camera and the ugly pieces of his own 'art' that Eisen carries in a baize bag become symbols of elevation and barbarism intertwining in a moment of bloodshed. When Mr Sammler gets out of the Rolls-Royce, leaves his air-conditioned symbol of aristocratic privilege, and steps into the hard stone of the street, he asks Eisen to do something in Russian, the two of them suddenly foreigners in a situation where the locals, both black and white, have chosen to be no more than spectators, not one moving to do anything. Here the earlier images that have had many variations come together – Raskolnikov's smashing an ax into his landlady's head and Eisen's recalling the Russian front, seeing 'men too insignificant to waste bullets on, having their heads smashed by shovel blows.' The monstrous, sharp-edged lunks and the thick abstraction of a tank are swung inside the bag Eisen tightly clutches, knocking the pickpocket down with a terrible blow that is followed by another. A third, perhaps a killing blow, is stopped by Mr Sammler, appalled by Eisen's cheerful readiness to crush the man's skull. As the old man summons the muscle to grab Eisen, we realize that, after all of the musing, it surely comes down to mad or to civilized action. The mad action echoes back to Eisen's response in the hospital – 'How can art hurt?' – when Mr Sammler told him his heavy creations shouldn't be pushed on Elya, because handling them might tire out the very sick man. Eisen's retort to Mr Sammler's disgust at his violence in the street pulls up their common experience: ' "You can't hit a man like this just once. When you hit him you must really hit him. Otherwise he'll kill you. You know. We both fought in the war. You were a Partisan. You had a gun. So don't you know?" '

This scene is also an exceptional metaphor for the complexity of race relations at the time. While the pickpocket represents the street

version of the criminality that Mr Sammler sees all about him, manifesting in almost every member of his family, he is also an apparent allusion to the priapic version of black 'manhood' that slithered from behind the black power movement's fly and throughout the 'revolutionary black art' in which white men were so often rendered as impotent or homosexual or terrified of what we recently saw in redux on a Spike Lee T-shirt, advertising one of his movies – 'Jungle Fever: Fear of a Big, Black Dick.' The thief's flashing of his privates also presaged Eldridge Cleaver's shot at fashion designing just a few years after the publication of *Mr Sammler's Planet*. While the revolutionary rapist was spurting out his Marxist rages in Paris, he also tried to huckster some 'real men's pants,' which featured large, dangling, black, cotton-stuffed penises. (Could this bold appropriation and extension of the European codpiece be the ultimate black revolutionary reference to the cotton fields back home?) Beyond that, through the machinations of Feffer, there is a merciless criticism of the Jewish opportunists who sold real and imagined black pathology under the banner of 'serious discussion,' while the only thing serious was the intention of buttering their own bread with controversy. The kind of black 'leaders' who made their money ripping off or intimidating middle-class whites, and the outraged Jews of the late sixties who reacted to the separatism of black power by going into Zionism, are brought together in a hard and shocking metaphor of that rift when the Stars of David, those religious symbols of the group, almost become a murder weapon in broad daylight on a city block in sophisticated Manhattan.

Throughout the novel, and on to its conclusion, when Mr Sammler is further shocked by the money-grubbing and the self-centeredness of his relatives, from his own daughter to Elya's children, we see all of these people reflecting a time when the possibility of riches remade the rules, and the low-down dirty blues of city life was played out across all lines of social distinction. Yet Mr Sammler's evolution from the kind of autocratic remove that makes him both a near-racist and a man who looks upon all mortal foolishness with hostile condescension is a very high moment in our literature. This old man, he plays his way through what become the three-tiered challenges of

the past and the present – the spiritual nicks and gashes that smart inside his scars and inside those that he sees on others; his own evasive knack for packaging the omnidirectional rush of life into brilliant but airless categories; the unpadlocked wackiness that threatens to knock his will to its knees. Fighting free of the sorrowful bitterness left by the thoroughbred and mongrel dogs of war that endlessly gnaw at the decomposing bodies and crack the bones of the many dead he's seen, Mr Sammler comes on home.

This old man pushes himself closer and closer to all the muddy human hearts around him. He learns to summon the heroic feeling of compassion through the stern memories of his own shortcomings. The thick, red blood of the black pickpocket lying wounded and helpless in the street turns him into a man before Mr Sammler, who feels again the butt of the Nazi rifle against his own head and knows that it partially blinded him to the humanity of others. The thief is no longer a dandified puma or an animal, but a human being vulnerable to the hysteria at the nub of injustice. We are not asked to forgive the pickpocket his sins, assuming that 'society' gave him no choice and that he shouldn't be punished. The point is far more subtle: the thief is on the receiving end of force so excessive that it reduces the potency of the law to a ruthless werewolf of totalitarianism right before the eyes of the onlookers.

In the hospital, Mr Sammler's feelings toward Elya's daughter change. Angela, whom he has always looked upon as one sort of a tramp after another, is recognized as a woman trapped inside the splendor of her own orifices and the childish ways of an era that coats itself with a phony knowingness, strategically avoiding the needs of the soul by compulsively satiating the senses.

Emboldened by his identification with the desperate ambitions that can twist the human spirit into a hill of fishhooks, Mr Sammler looks into all of our mysteriously human faces with his cyclopean eye until he recognizes – as Goriot did on his deathbed – how easily we begin the breakdown when we infantilize our children by spoiling them rather than showing them the most responsible kinds of love. Standing over the corpse of Elya, the old man closes out the book with what amounts to a splendid recasting of Lear's last words.

The meter is the same but the message isn't. What protects the world from the eradication of its humanity is the willingness to empathize with the range of mortal triumph, mortal folly, and mortal pain. This transcendent willingness allows us to say, even to the dead, 'we know, we know, we know.' *Mr Sammler's Planet* is the sort of achievement we will appreciate as long as we are willing to explore the chaos of our world and accept the humbling truths about the parts we all play in its making.

Mr Sammler's Planet

I

Shortly after dawn, or what would have been dawn in a normal sky, Mr Artur Sammler with his bushy eye took in the books and papers of his West Side bedroom and suspected strongly that they were the wrong books, the wrong papers. In a way it did not matter much to a man of seventy-plus, and at leisure. You had to be a crank to insist on being right. Being right was largely a matter of explanations. Intellectual man had become an explaining creature. Fathers to children, wives to husbands, lecturers to listeners, experts to laymen, colleagues to colleagues, doctors to patients, man to his own soul, explained. The roots of this, the causes of the other, the source of events, the history, the structure, the reasons why. For the most part, in one ear out the other. The soul wanted what it wanted. It had its own natural knowledge. It sat unhappily on superstructures of explanation, poor bird, not knowing which way to fly.

The eye closed briefly. A Dutch drudgery, it occurred to Sammler, pumping and pumping to keep a few acres of dry ground. The invading sea being a metaphor for the multiplication of facts and sensations. The earth being an earth of ideas.

He thought, since he had no job to wake up to, that he might give sleep a second chance to resolve certain difficulties imaginatively for himself, and pulled up the disconnected electric blanket with its internal sinews and lumps. The satin binding was nice to the finger tips. He was still drowsy, but not really inclined to sleep. Time to be conscious.

He sat and plugged in the electric coil. Water had been prepared at bedtime. He liked to watch the changes of the ashen wires. They came to life with fury, throwing tiny sparks and sinking into red

rigidity under the Pyrex laboratory flask. Deeper. Blenching. He had only one good eye. The left distinguished only light and shade. But the good eye was dark-bright, full of observation through the overhanging hairs of the brow as in some breeds of dog. For his height he had a small face. The combination made him conspicuous.

His conspicuousness was on his mind; it worried him. For several days, Mr Sammler returning on the customary bus late afternoons from the Forty-second Street Library had been watching a pickpocket at work. The man got on at Columbus Circle. The job, the crime, was done by Seventy-second Street. Mr Sammler if he had not been a tall straphanger would not with his one good eye have seen these things happening. But now he wondered whether he had not drawn too close, whether he had also been seen seeing. He wore smoked glasses, at all times protecting his vision, but he couldn't be taken for a blind man. He didn't have the white cane, only a furled umbrella, British-style. Moreover, he didn't have the look of blindness. The pickpocket himself wore dark shades. He was a powerful Negro in a camel's-hair coat, dressed with extraordinary elegance, as if by Mr Fish of the West End, or Turnbull and Asser of Jermyn Street. (Mr Sammler knew his London.) The Negro's perfect circles of gentian violet banded with lovely gold turned toward Sammler, but the face showed the effrontery of a big animal. Sammler was not timid, but he had had as much trouble in life as he wanted. A good deal of this, waiting for assimilation, would never be accommodated. He suspected the criminal was aware that a tall old white man (passing as blind?) had observed, had seen the minutest details of his crimes. Staring down. As if watching open-heart surgery. And though he dissembled, deciding not to turn aside when the thief looked at him, his elderly, his compact, civilized face colored strongly, the short hairs bristled, the lips and gums were stinging. He felt a constriction, a clutch of sickness at the base of the skull where the nerves, muscles, blood vessels were tightly interlaced. The breath of wartime Poland passing over the damaged tissues – that nerve-spaghetti, as he thought of it.

Buses were bearable, subways were killing. Must he give up the bus? He had not minded his own business as a man of seventy in New York should do. It was always Mr Sammler's problem that he