A "LAND OF EMIGRATION." EUROPEAN EXILE AND THE AMERICAN IMAGINARY IN SAUL BELLOW'S *THE DEAN'S DECEMBER*

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This paper is part of a wider work in progress that starts from the representation of Europe as a "land of emigration" for the Americans in the work of one of the most prodigious American expatriates, Henry James, to look at the image of Europe in a selection of American texts from across different historical periods. More specifically, I intend to investigate the extent to which Europe is a land of exile in the American imaginary, looking at the modes in which the center-margin model of colonialism is subverted and inverted in this new geography, in which America is akin to an imperial metropolis and Europe becomes an outpost of imposed or voluntary isolation.

My starting point is Henry James's perspective of the inversed geography that he observed at the close of the 19th century, an era anticipating, in critics' views, the age of globalization.[1] In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Mrs. Touchett, the American expatriate, decides to show her American niece "the world" by bringing her to Europe:

> It occurred to me that it would be a kindness to take her about and introduce her to the world. She thinks she knows a great deal of it--like most American girls; but like most American girls she's ridiculously mistaken. […] It may be that Isabel's a genius; but in that case I've not yet learned her special line. Mrs. Ludlow was especially keen about my taking her to Europe; they all regard Europe over there as a land of emigration, of rescue, a refuge for their superfluous population. Isabel herself seemed very glad to come, and the thing was easily arranged. (James, *The Portrait of a Lady* 53-54)

This text can in fact be taken as a matrix for a certain pattern of relationships between Europe and America, a matrix established perhaps

[1] Peyser for example shows how James anticipated patterns of globalization, creating the first "globetrotters" (Peyser 4-5).

with the coming of the Puritan fathers,[2] reiterated at the dawn of the age of globalization (to which this text belongs) and reiterated in 20th century transatlantic encounters, including encounters across the Iron Curtain. Europe, in this sense, is a testing ground for a certain type of exile, in an essentially American itinerary, and performs a double role. Firstly, Europe seems to signify the world, the worldly, and to provide a type of existential initiation of the type performed by the sea world in the famous American novel of globalization, *Moby Dick*[3] or in other Jamesian works, like *The Wings of the Dove*.[4] It is existential initiation that Europe - and, more particularly, the continent - seems to offer American heroes.

Secondly, Europe appears as a space of exile, a sort of end-of-the world where the American character encounters fully-fledged otherness – a relief, as in James's text, but nevertheless fraught with the perils and risks of alienation comported by a land of emigration.

Therefore, a starting point of the present paper, which will develop the theoretical part of my approach and will provide a case study, is that the complex relation between Europe and America seems contoured around notions such as exile, otherness, exoticity and alterity. Moreover, my perspective will emphasize, this relationship is almost never devoid of an ethical content.

I would like to use the ethical perspective to account for the difference of perspective between exotic depictions of exile – a form of otherness – associated with the orientalization of foreign space, and a more

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[2] The discussion of the ways in which constructing "Europe" contributed to shaping American identity is extremely complex, but a starting point would be to mention that European discourses present in early Puritan writings a model of otherness that helps Pilgrim fathers found the new colony – for example, Bercovitch's assessment of the rhetoric of the American Jeremiad is based on its radical difference from European models. In the 19th century, the European tour is an essential part of becoming American, as documented by Stowe, in his *Going Abroad. European Travel in Nineteenth-Century American Culture*. while the lost generation found American roots in European exile, as pointed out by Gray in his overview of American modernism.

[3] A starting point is a global and an American book, *Moby Dick*, described as an essential text by Bersani for understanding America and its position in the world. An insightful analysis into the type of situatedness in the world that the book offers is that offered by Marcel Cornis Pope, who identifies two types of initiation in *Moby Dick*: solomonic and existential. Ishmael, that arch-typical American character and orphan, undergoes existential initiation, and his pattern – exile, crossing and rebirth – seems to be part of an essential existential trajectory inscribing his position – and America's position – in the world.

[4] I discuss the initiation of the American character into the worldly, as represented by Europe, in my *Eternal America*.

cosmopolitan outlook. While it is never difficult to find an illustration of exoticity – and contemporary fiction abounds in such examples – it is a cosmopolitan act of ethical comprehensiveness that I have chosen to illustrate as my case study, devoted to Saul Bellow's *The Dean's December* (written in 1982). My paper will therefore focus on an attempt to transform the experience of exile into an ethical experience of otherness, and this text is salient for the relationship between America and Europe, superposed over the relationship between East and West.

I will first proceed with a clarification of the ethical perspective adopted in this paper by proposing the term ethics of globalization to capture the rich node of meanings in which geography, globalization and ethics intersect. The term global ethics, also used in this paper, is associated with political science, ethical, global movements that attempt to deal with the moral questions arising from globalization. Transatlantic novels can respond in a variety of registers to these questions, from the orientalisation of the exotic other to an attempt to comprehend otherness in an ethical act.

My reading also draws upon more nuanced visions of cosmopolitanism – post-Saidian, if we might say so. In this sense, Appiah's approach is highly useful, in that it speaks of an outlook that is situated in between imperialist gazing and the claim for local unreadability. Ethical criticism is also inevitably linked to cosmopolitanism as embodying an aspect of identity open to the other – which I will read as an ethics of the Other in Levinas's terms. This is illustrated in Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism*, where travel and the description of otherness do not necessarily pertain to an orientalising gaze but rather to an ethical approach and respect for otherness. Or, put otherwise, this is an approach that departs from what Venn would characterize as occidentalism, or the "becoming-modern of the world and the becoming-West of Europe such that Western modernity gradually became established as the privileged, if not hegemonic, form of sociality, tied to a universalizing and totalizing ambition" (Venn 19). It is also a view responding to Bhabha's plea for a third space, offering an option beyond the two frozen poles of the worldview criticized by Bhabha: "what is represented as the 'larceny' and distortion of European 'metatheorizing' and the radical, engaged, activist experience of Third World creativity" that actually rehearses "that ahistorical nineteenth-century polarity of Orient and Occident which, in the name of progress, unleashed the exclusionary imperialist ideologies of self and other" (Bhabha 19).

A keystone of my proposed interpretation of the transatlantic encounter staged in Bellow's work is also Levinas's idea of philosophy as wisdom of love, in which the other is unknowable and cannot be reduced to object, as in classic philosophy, a love of wisdom. In the relationship between the self and the world, the latter is hostile and potentially

destructive, yet there is a possible relationship between self and world that Levinas calls being "at home":

> The world, foreign and hostile, should, in good logic, alter the I. But the true and primordial relation between them, and that in which the I is revealed precisely as preeminently the same, is produces as a soujourn [sejour] in the world. The way of the I against the "other" of the world consists in *sojourning*, in identifying oneself by existing here *at home with oneself* [chez soi]. (Levinas 37)

Moreover, in its relationship to the world, in this relation to otherness, "The Other precisely reveals himself in his alterity not in a shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness" (150). This creates a responsibility that is intrinsically related to our subjectivity, rather than derivative, and therefore it is a basic ethical duty to the other. The ethical perspectives sketched out above can offer a nuanced understanding of the type of transatlantic encounter staged in a transatlantic setting that also cuts across even more rigid differences, as illustrated by Iron Curtain divisions.

The opening paragraph of *The Dean's December* sets the main lines of interpretation for the rest of the novel and shows, in effect, the parameters for the encounter between self and other. Corde, the American executive, finds himself in willing exile in a country of winter, a transparent winter of our discontent, yet warmed up, paradoxically, by the viewer's disposition to contemplate the face of the other:

> Corde, who led the life of an executive in America – wasn't a college dean a kind of executive? – found himself six or seven thousand miles from his base, in Bucharest, in winter, shut up in an old-fashioned apartment. Here everyone was kind – family and friends, warmhearted people – he liked them very much, to him they were "old Europe." But they had their own intense business. This was no ordinary visit. His wife's mother was dying. Corde had come to give support. But there was little he could do for Minna. Language was a problem. People could speak little French, less English. So Corde, the Dean, spent his days in Minna's old room sipping strong plumb brandy, leafing through old books, staring out of the windows at earthquake-damaged buildings, winter skies, gray pigeons, pollarded trees, squalid orange-rusty trams hissing under trolley cables. (Bellow 1)

The state of exile, an Ovid-like position for an active executive reduced to passivity ("shut up in an old-fashioned apartment"), is suggested by the physical distance from home, relegated, as he is, to the edge of empire, "six or seven thousand miles from his base." He is, moreover, banished to a state of loneliness and inactivity ("there was little he could do for Minna," "language was a problem") in a melancholy mood ("old books," "winter skies," "gray pigeons,"), in the presence of illness and death ("His mother's wife was dying"), stagnation and suffering ("pollarded trees," "earthquake-damaged buildings").

The potentially tragic encounter between the self and the world is explored by Levinas in his *Totality and Infinity*, in which, in the quote given above, he shows how the "world" can alter the "I" in a "the way of the I against the "other" of the world" (Levinas 37). Indeed, the "foreign an hostile world" (Levinas 37) seems to initially alienate Corde from what should be a universal human experience, suffering, as he feels the picture of the "inappropriate American" when it comes to mediating the conflict between his wife and the keeper of the hospital rules, the Colonel, who is angered by Minna's and Corde's second visit to the hospital, unauthorized. Far from his "base," the "inappropriate American" seems to be the picture of the self incapable of "sojourning" in an evidently hostile land of winter and totalitarianism:

> Minna, in tense asides, translated for her husband. It wasn't really necessary. He loosely sat there in wrinkled woolen trousers and sports jacket, the image of the inappropriate American – in all circumstances inappropriate, incapable of learning the lessons of the twentieth century; spared, or scorned, by the forces of history or fate or whatever a European might want to call them. Corde was perfectly aware of this. (Bellow 3)

Corde's incapacity to relate to the specific context reverberates, however, with wider connotations of the "inappropriate American" in exile not only in communist Romania but in the world. He feels "incapable of learning the lessons of the twentieth century" and has been exiled from a historicity that is not particular to the communist block, but associated with Europe itself. The specific personal situation of the American Dean spirals out to comprehend an age-old positioning of the American character who is innocent of the world. Whether this means spared or scorned is, of course, an issue that American writers with transatlantic concerns have often mused on. The reference to the writer who consecrated the international theme, Henry James, is inevitable. Milly, the American heiress of *The Wings of the Dove*, who is to be the victim of European scheming, and her compassionate

companion Susan Stringham, experience a similar sense of isolation from historicity – here expressed as the worldly – by virtue of being American:

> Mrs. Lowder's life bristled for her with elements that she was really having to look at for the first time. They represented, she believed, the world, the world that, as a consequence of the cold shoulder turned to it by the Pilgrim Fathers, had never yet boldly crossed to Boston - it would surely have sunk the stoutest Cunarder. (James, *The Wings of the Dove* I 170).

The situation of the "inappropriate American" who has turned a cold shoulder to the world, and is hence ignored by forces of history, seems to illustrate the ultimate unknowability of the Other in Levinas's perspective. This is felt in the frequent gaps, silences through which the novel is told, the novel itself being, as critics have noted, a meditation on the various iron curtains behind which people are trapped, including the Hegelian notion that

> man can never directly confront the real world because of the innumerable sensory phenomena that intervene. He seems to be rejecting the Hegelian notion of a world outside of humanly-perceivable phenomena and embracing of the notions of Walter Lippmann, who argues that we are limited to the reality we build within ourselves from everyday experience and borrowed explanations. ("Novel Overview")

The unknowability of the Other is shown at its most poignant in the lack of communication between a jet-lagged Corde and his wife's visitors:

> To Corde it looked as if they were gotten together for a Depression party. They chatted in rusty French, for his sake, sparing him their worse English; and as they talked they tried of course to make out the American husband who sat there, hangloose. He had pulled his clothing on half dazed, and felt insufficiently connected with his collar, socks, shoes, jacket. (Bellow 56)

The "Depression party" guests have no compelling attributes of exoticity, offering only the spectacle of inappropriateness, and lack of linguistic communication is the outward sign of a disconnectedness between a "half dazed" American and objects of his environment - "collar, socks, shoes, jacket" - but also the spectacle he is witnessing. Not only are the natives failing in their transatlantic encounter, but the American character is also inadequate to the situation, failing to provide the much sought-for consolation:

> The visitors would have been glad if the Dean had spoken intelligently about the United States in world politics. After all, he was from the blessed world outside. The West. He was free to speak. For them it was impossible […] In the sadness of the afternoon, the subdued light of the curtailed day, the chill of the room (so disheartening!), the callers would have been grateful to hear something so exotic as an intelligent American; words of true interest, words of comfort too – this dictatorship would not last forever. But he hadn't the heart to tell them things. (Bellow 57)

Together with linguistic barrier, the "disheartening" winter turns a promising transatlantic encounter – "he was from the blessed world outside" – into a failure of signification: "he hadn't the heart to tell them things".

However, the end of the novel about exile as the melancholy encounter with otherness comes with what might be termed an epiphany of Otherness, an exemplary meeting with Otherness which is neither exoticizing nor alienating. It is the episode when Corde, back in the U.S., visits the Mount Palomar observatory with his wife, the astronomer, and the encounter, read in philosophical terms by critics as the manifestation of Man as Seer, can also be understood as a final ethical encounter with Otherness, a version of Levinas's "face to face" encounter in which, in the epiphany of the face of the Other, proximity and distance are both felt: "The Other precisely **reveals** himself in his alterity not in a shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness" (150). Similarly, seeing the heavens provokes a fine tension between assimilation and rejection that exerts a profound fascination. Critics have made much of the philosophical moment at the end of the novel when, back in America, Corde and Minna go to the Mount Palomar observatory:

> This Mount Palomar coldness was not to be compared to the coldness of the death house. Here the living heavens looked as if they would take you in. Another sort of rehearsal, thought Corde. The sky was tense with stars, but not so tense as he was, in his breast. Everything overhead was in equilibrium, kept in place by mutual tensions. What was it that *his* tensions kept in place? (Bellow 311)

However, this openness towards nature as other, as a "primordial phenomenon of gentleness" is rehearsed and anticipated in other key moments that actually take place during Corde's Romanian adventure. In this sense, this type of encounter with the face of the Other – an encounter with exile – is anticipated in the encounter with radical otherness that takes place in Bucharest. One striking example is the visit to hospital, when Corde

looks into the face of Otherness quite literally – his dying mother-in law, old, dependent:

> On both sides of her face, the currents of hair were shining on the bed linen. Consciousness was as clear as it had ever been. No, more acute than ever, for when Minna signaled that he should take her hand […] she pressed his fingers promptly. He said, "We came as soon as possible." Then, as if he should not delay the essential message, he said in his deep voice, "I also love you, Valeria". (Bellow 128)

Later, musing on this impulse, Corde senses in this declaration a meeting of opposites, revealing themselves to each other, as in a Levinasian encounter, in their full alterity, unaltered (between Corde, "six generations in Joliet, Illinois, two in Chigaco" and the "dying old Macedonian woman in a Communist hospital"). And yet, they are comprehended by a common fear ("he must have reminded her again of her fears"), and are united by a common gentleness ("she must have been longing to hear this"):

> Anyway, he, Albert, was Corde. Six generations in Joliet, Illinois, two in Chicago, and he had just told a dying old Macedonian woman in a Communist hospital that he loved her. This was the measure of the oddities life had compiled for him. "I also love you, Valeria." But although she must have been longing to hear this, and although it was true […] she was so shocked that the machines began to flash and yammer and the doctor was scared witless. Why had he upset her? He must have reminded her again of her fears, which she would carry into the life to come, or at least up to the gate of death. (Bellow 132)

In fact, the encounter of opposites, a transatlantic encounter and an ethical encounter, spells out a union anticipating the half-gentle, half-shocking meeting with death itself: by his declaration, Corde also shocks Minna Corde, who is reminded of fears she would carry "up to the gate of death".

Returning to the philosophical moment at the end of the novel, and reading it from the perspective of the ethical moments provoked by encounters with the face of the Other, Corde's confrontation with the uncanny Otherness of the open sky is also a moment of sojourning in the world, again in Levinas's sense. "At home" in a hostile world, the self is doubly aware of exile, isolation but also of the sense of a shared "real". While the "real heavens" remain remote, the "partial realities" lead to an intimation of a sojourn in the world, as "what was spread over you" "had to

do with your existence, down to the very blood and the crystal forms inside your bones":

> And what he saw with his eyes was not even the real heavens. No, only white marks, bright vibrations, clouds of sky roe, tokens of the real thing, only as much as could be taken in through the distortions of the atmosphere. Through these distortions you saw objects, forms partial realities. The rest was to be felt. And it wasn't only that you felt, but that you were drawn to feel and to penetrate further, as if you were being informed that what was spread over you had to do with your existence, down to the very blood and the crystal forms inside your bones. Rocks, trees, animals, men and women, these also drew you to penetrate further, under the distortions […] to find their real being with your own. This was the sense in which you were drawn. (Bellow 311)

This ethical interpretation of a text about exile, otherness and Eastern Europe is an exemplary tale about how an encounter with exoticity and otherness (Communism, old age, death, alienating nature) can turn into an authentic cosmopolitan encounter, where the exotic is a rehearsal for the encounter with faces of the Other comprehended in what Levinas beautifully terms the "primordial phenomenon of gentleness". Comprehended by a cosmopolitan openness towards alterity, the transatlantic gaze can turn exoticity and alienation into a meditation on the I and the worldly, while also showing possibilities of a sojourn, where "tokens of the real thing" draw the on-looker to experience "their real being" and one's own.

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