

SAUL BELLOW'S CURIOUS HEROES:  
THEIR MOVEMENT FROM ISOLATION TO INVOLVEMENT

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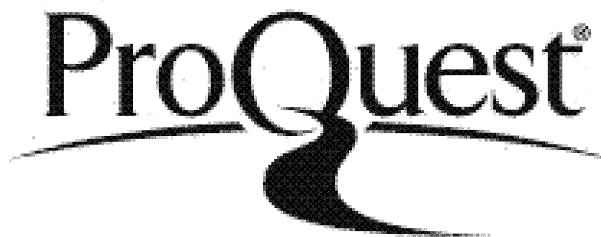
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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Saul Bellow's works have been discussed in many contexts - social, Jewish, contemporary American, existential. A great deal has been said about his relevance to his age. In this study I would like to consider him primarily as a psychological novelist, though other aspects of his writing will be dealt with briefly. Though I am concerned with the psychological approach, this is not to imply that other approaches to his work are invalid.

Bellow, after seven novels\* and numerous other writings, is clearly emerging as a major voice of the twentieth century, and is perhaps the most important of contemporary American novelists. One imagines he will be one of the most enduring. Although he is a Jewish-American novelist of this century, it is the insight into the problems of the mind which have preoccupied people of all centuries and cultures which is his most distinguishing feature, and therefore that which I intend to consider as being the critical focal point of his work.

Certain key questions are reflected throughout Bellow's works. Every hero, in his different way, faces the same problems. Briefly, what is under debate is the attitude

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\* Since this thesis was written, Saul Bellow's novel Humboldt's Gift has been published, and will be discussed in an appendix.

man should take to his existence, or, as Bellow puts it, "In what form shall life be justified?"<sup>1</sup> Bellow's heroes are all distinguished by their powers of intellect, but, this being said, they are representative of mankind because the questions they consider are only those which make everyone - intellectual or not - uneasy, instinctively if not consciously.

The Bellow hero thinks about existence. His main fear is caused by an existential void. Birth and death are arbitrary events, while the interval in between - the duration of which cannot be foreseen - is partly governed by oneself and partly by fate or chance. He feels strongly the burden of the self, the sense of isolation of the individual mind, and because of his preoccupation at times with this self he finds it hard to alleviate his isolation by contact with others. Knowing that a part of the human consciousness must always remain aloof, he withdraws all the more into his aloneness, distrusting any communication. With the first awareness of death (the great fear that is always in the back of the Bellow hero's mind) comes the feeling of his helplessness to control his life, and thence of the meaninglessness of existence. He ultimately has no power, and fears that the future may negate the present. Despite his isolation and panic he knows instinctively that everyone shares this helplessness; however much one may apparently order one's life or succeed on a worldly level,

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1. Saul Bellow, "The Writer as Moralist", Atlantic Monthly (March 1963), p.62.

the arbitrariness of life and the fact of death are the equalisers, and man's fate is a shared one.

In his works Bellow shows, through his protagonists' careers, that there are grounds for comfort rather than despair over existence. These lie mainly in the idea of the shared fate. He nowhere claims that a logical and theoretical confrontation with one's fate is the answer, or that irrational, emotionally-based fears can be easily and permanently overcome. He is primarily a novelist, not a philosopher, and is simply showing, through his heroes' efforts, ways of coming to terms, at least partially, with existence. The individual heroes do not change dramatically nor is it implied that their problems are resolved once and for all. However, through trial, error, and experience (rather than rational thought) they are able to find approaches to life which somewhat modify their fears. All are human and believable, and not mere mouthpieces for the author's ideas; their changes of attitude are convincing.

As stated, the chief consolation in life is to be found in the idea of the shared fate. Apparent success in life does not necessarily bring peace of mind (Tommy Wilhelm blames his unhappiness on his unfortunate career, but the millionaire Henderson, whom he would no doubt envy, has the same unease). Everyone has the same knowledge of the inevitability of death. To fear excessively, and to try to avoid thought of the future, while the ultimate end continues to nag subconsciously, is shown in the Bellow hero to be an isolating process, exaggerating his already great

misery. In denying both communication with and concern for others his attitude is also a selfish one. Where he particularly becomes isolated is in thinking that he can deal with his excessive awareness of fear by rational thought-processes. While his formulating of ideas can represent a great amount of knowledge (for example, Herzog's extensive, if disordered, philosophising), no amount of theory can help any but the most hardened beings to face the facts of existence as forced on them by experience. Herzog's logic does not prevent his being horrified by an actual court case of child murder.

To realise that his fears are shared by everyone does not bring automatic consolation to the isolated thinker, but the awareness can be seen as the basis for a more positive approach to life; for instance, it can lead to self-forgetfulness, the diminution of one's own sense of importance in the realisation of a moral duty to others, simply because we are all ultimately helpless, as Asa Leventhal discovers. Bumridge, in The Last Analysis, Bellow's two-act play, discovers a vocation to spread 'nonsense', comforting others with what has been his own salvation. The Bellow heroes are finally seen making positive steps towards communication as a change from their introverted existence. Sometimes a realisation of oneness with mankind brings a moment of supreme joy and a sense of the worthwhileness of living, which should be differentiated from what Bellow describes as 'potato-love', an emotion based on the need for love to cancel out fear: "a weak emotion that people often have of friendliness and a melting

heart towards other people, the real source of which is terror. It's a low-grade emotion, like potato sap."<sup>2</sup> A feeling of universal love, on the other hand, is an emotion reflecting the sense of brotherhood despite surface disparities, as well as the possibility of a natural unity among people despite the equally common emotion of hatred and the difficulty of existing peaceably with others en masse.

An individual's sense of love for mankind is, if nothing more, a spontaneously happy emotion not to be disparaged. If depression about life is a common emotion, happiness is also, and the Bellow heroes have plenty of experience in both. Again, a reprieve from isolation and fear can come through communication with a particular individual, in a love-relationship or friendship. Rogin, in the short story "A Father-to-Be", experiences the meaningfulness of a particular love in his reconciliation with Joan, his fiancée. Differences of self, and grievances, are forgotten in the outgoing nature of love, which is a strengthener and an antidote to selfish introspection. Furthermore, it provides a reason for existence in creating happiness in another's life, on a particular level as well as the universal one described in, for instance, The Victim.

The idea of acceptance of life and its problems through experience is crucial to Bellow's thought. Though death

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2. From Sanford Pinsker, "Saul Bellow in the Classroom", College English, 34 (1973), p.977.

is certain, one redeeming factor in life is, paradoxically, the uncertainty of everything else. Within the limits of life, despair is futile because it suggests that no change is possible in one's material state or in one's spontaneous emotional attitude. It denies any meaning in life and prevents the taking of positive action. Several times in the novels, people's fear of happiness is described; because happiness may not last, they are afraid to indulge in it, to enjoy the present to the full. At first, despair predominates over hope and happiness; Bellow is trying to show that there is a case for each, and that openness to change cannot cause greater unhappiness than closing one's mind to life. Living from day to day, accepting ups and downs, is likely to make one's life much more positive than trying to take on the whole burden of one's problems - past, present and future - and mankind's as well, as the Bellow hero does. Joseph finally achieves an acceptance of his limitations, Henderson experiences a sense of elation and of affection for the small boy he has befriended, as well as an earlier sense of wonder at the almost mystical nature of the African countryside, and Herzog finds peace at his country home - to give but a few examples. None of these moments is the result of painstaking logic, rather the opposite. Bellow is reminding us of the possibility of happiness although the weight of problems seems to predominate. Added to this is the need to see humour in life. The comic side of its absurdities is stressed in his works.

Bellow shows the practical impossibility of trying to fight life, suggesting instead the wisdom of the alternative - acceptance of reality. There is no merit in attempting a "five-cent synthesis"<sup>3</sup> as Herzog puts it, or in trying to control every eventuality, which is what reduces Tommy Wilhelm to a total inability to cope. Acceptance of past mistakes is also important. One must view the present unencumbered by them. Henderson is the most vociferous of the protagonists on the subject of finding reality, and the point is made that a search for 'reality' is unlikely to produce it, for reality is, simply, the absorbing of continuous experience. To seek for definitions is usually to abstract or distort the object of one's search, perhaps as a result of preconceived ideas, and false beliefs may arise as a result.

Finally, the sheer negativism of living without hope is implied. Assuming that man rejects the choice of suicide, if he then nevertheless also rejects the opportunities of his life-span he creates the very meaninglessness which he fears. But if he accepts the opportunity for action, discovery and above all communication, he will acquire a positive viewpoint and reason for living which will not arise simply through his thinking about his condition. Bellow himself, in an interview with David D. Galloway, has stressed the value of this positive viewpoint and of curiosity in facing life today:

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3. Saul Bellow, Herzog, Penguin Books, London (1971), p.215.



But I suppose things have become so bad that one can state the modern crisis in a single proposition: either we want to continue living or we don't. If that's the case, curiosity if only that compels me to say that I want to continue living.<sup>4</sup>

\* \* \* \*

Having considered the main precepts to emerge from Bellow's work, it is important to examine him in his context as a twentieth century novelist. While his stature as a writer is not limited by his consciousness of the age, his novels are nevertheless firmly set in contemporary America, with abundant descriptions of its social problems. The distinction to be made is that Bellow is writing about human questions which are timeless, but which appear in different guises in different ages, thence to be expressed in literature according to social trends and the ideas of the time - hence Bellow's similarity in many respects to the European existentialist writers. But he is also an individual voice, differing from them in that he rejects the nihilism of their views, and writes with a sincerely felt inner conviction of hope.

Most of the ideas mentioned have become particularly urgent problems for mankind because of the oppressive threats of the twentieth century, notably the nuclear threat. While the knowledge of impending death has been treated by writers

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4. From David D. Galloway, "An Interview with Saul Bellow", Audit, 3 (Spring 1963), pp.21-2.

and philosophers through the ages, for the first time the possibility exists of mass destruction and universal extinction, which creates new moral problems and brings immediacy to the fear of death. One individual may be capable of determining the fate of millions. Man is overwhelmed and mystified by rapid scientific progress and by the possibilities opened up; the new depth of knowledge is impossible for a single person to conceive of, let alone understand; hence an even greater helplessness ensues. Pursuit of knowledge is a process which cannot be halted, whether good or evil results; the consequences of discoveries must be taken. Lack of control is nowhere more apparent than in the discovery of nuclear or other deadly forms of warfare. The threat has become actuality in cases ranging from Hiroshima to My Lai. The use of such weapons can only be prevented by agreement - discoveries once in existence cannot be hidden again - and the collective forces generated by multitudes of minds existing together (perhaps an unconscious will towards destruction) are beyond an individual's or a nation's control. In this case man is governed by his own invention. Life seems devalued by such constant pressures and by the sense of a precarious balance which must be maintained in order to preserve humanity (consider the mass fear aroused by the Cuba crisis). Tragedies of destruction and the madness of murderers are now possible on a universal scale, and only the treaties of politicians stand in front of the deeper forces. Space exploration, too, adds a new dimension

to life, as dealt with in Mr. Sammler's Planet, the question being whether to seek ways of escape from the earth by extending man's potentialities, possible only for the few, or whether to re-affirm one's faith in life as it is despite its lack of apparent meaning. Bellow chooses the latter, and tries to show that the same fundamental problems, though more intensified, are what trouble people, and that the ways out of despair already described are no less valid. Again, the sense of a tremendous, if sad, comedy is felt - mankind's predicament is enormous, but equally absurd and laughable.

With such all-embracing powers in existence, the life of the individual is felt to count for little in the twentieth century. This is the reason why Bellow's heroes place such great stress on both individuality and the need for identity. Carried to its extreme, this becomes another self-isolating defence against life and people (for instance, in the cases of Augie March and Herzog, who avoid any involvement in order to preserve their independence).

As John J. Clayton has commented of Bellow's novels:

. . . he is forced to discard individuality, not simply because the individual is insignificant in the face of terrible forces, but also because individuality is undesirable, a burden which keeps the human being from love. The state of grace which his heroes approach is an anonymous state which is the polar opposite of the individuality Bellow loves and wishes to defend; but it is a state which enables Bellow to keep faith in the human being and in the possibility of his union with others.<sup>5</sup>

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5. John J. Clayton, Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, London (1968), p.4.

While loss of identity and of the ego in merging with those of others is certainly seen in the novels as a positive, communicative state and a joyful experience, there is no doubt that Bellow is worried about the deterioration of the quality of life for the individual in his day-to-day existence in a technological age - hence much of the social comment in Mr. Sammler's Planet. He has remarked on the situation:

. . . one might say that public life drives private life into hiding . . . Technical and political decisions, invisible powers, secrets which can be shared only by a small élite, render the private will helpless and lead the individual into curious forms of behaviour in the private sphere.<sup>6</sup>

Bellow is anxious in his novels to affirm the significance of the individual notwithstanding these pressures.

\* \* \* \*

Many critics wish to categorise Bellow as a Jewish writer. He certainly employs Jewish heroes and writes in a Jewish setting (with the exception of Henderson the Rain King), but does so in order to illustrate universal problems. The Jew in modern America, even if not first-generation, may in many ways still feel displaced and rootless, a misfit from an alien culture (though not, of course, to the same extent as the black American). He can be considered an

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6. Saul Bellow, "Some Notes on Recent American Fiction", Encounter, 21 (November 1963), p.23.

outsider in the social scheme, which is why he is such an apt symbol for the mental outsiders Bellow writes about. Bellow's heroes initially cut themselves off by their excessive intellectuality, their tendency to analyse their relationships and the simplest actions, rather than behave spontaneously. They try to account for everything mentally, to become superhuman. In the same way, the Jew's feeling, justified or otherwise, of not being accepted, of having had his roots torn up, causes barriers to understanding. Bellow uses Jewish backgrounds to good effect, with varying prominence through the novels. In Dangling Man Jewishness, while mentioned, makes no great difference; the preoccupations of Joseph as an existentialist outsider are what predominate. The Jewish element is integrated far more in The Victim, where the conflict between Leventhal and Allbee is seen on the level of Jew and Gentile as well as of man's responsibility to his fellow-men, which is what is finally seen to be crucial. Leventhal feels that his share in the affair is linked with his heritage; Allbee accuses him of harbouring enmity over an anti-semitic remark, and will not let him disprove the claim. However, Leventhal's consciousness of his Jewishness does not detract from the fact that the ultimate questions are not confined to his race. Seize the Day does not use Jewishness in any significant way. The Adventures of Augie March and Herzog show most of all a wealth of Jewish influence. To attempt to divorce this setting from the characters of Augie and Herzog is not useful; the integral nature of the

Jewish reminiscences and family scenes only enriches the heroes and the novels, far from making them provincial. Perhaps the point can be made by saying that, for instance, we can notice similarities in outlook between Henderson and Herzog without being aware of any intrinsic difference of culture. Augie comes perhaps closest of any Bellow hero to the traditional Jewish hero as found in the works of, for example, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud and Isaac Bashevis Singer, but this is due as much to his role as a picaresque character, a rootless wanderer, as to his being a Jew. Augie March, partly by being on the narrative, descriptive level rather than the introspective for a considerable amount of its epic length, appears Bellow's most Jewish work.

I make this point simply to show how the judgment 'Jewish writer' has been passed on Bellow, but it should be clear, even in this case, that to describe him thus is to detract from the depth of his work. He himself has stated: "I don't have any sense of ethnic responsibility. That is not my primary obligation. My primary obligation is to my trade and not to any particular ethnic group."<sup>7</sup> He has made his views on the subject of this kind of criticism clear: "This whole Jewish writer business is sheer invention by the media, by critics and by "scholars". It never even passes through my mind."<sup>8</sup> Mr. Sammler's

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7. From Jim Douglas Henry, "Mystic Trade", The Listener, 81 (22 May 1969), p.706.

8. From Sanford Pinsker, op.cit., p.982.

Planet describes explicitly, through Sammler's reminiscences, the oppression and massacre of the Polish Jews during the First World War. Yet this illustrates eternal characteristics of man rather than the horrors of anti-semitism. We are aware constantly in this novel of weighty implications about man's nature, of which the instincts of hatred and killing are facets. The Jewish problem, the legacy of fear and persecution, seems almost outdated; it is now the whole of mankind which is under threat.

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There seems to be no question of Bellow's challenging social patterns directly; he is more concerned with how the individual can survive in an increasingly problematical world. One might ask whether the Bellow heroes are really at fault, or whether their particular dilemma is a symptom of a society in which existence is bound to become intolerable for sensitive individuals - the need for the hero to adjust, rather than society, seems to be taken for granted. The distinction can be made, I think, that it is not the inadequacies of society with which Bellow is most concerned, but the hero's reaction to them - for instance, Herzog's realisation when listening to the court cases that he must accept the existence of cruelty. Bellow does not isolate social conditions from man's instinctive behaviour - man creates society in the first instance, and one cannot

detach the individual. The Bellow hero is an alien because he cannot accept the realities of behaviour which lead to hostility or misunderstanding in society. Bellow's subject-matter is the ways in which man can escape this alienation and create for himself a worthwhile mode of living. The responsibility is the individual's; Bellow never loses sight of the individual's mental struggles which create the collective activity of a society which then appears hostile and uncontrollable.

Because of the heroes' theoretical approach to and withdrawal from life, the novels depict a conflict, as it were, to be resolved - the hero versus the rest of the world - and the heroes eventually arrive at some kind of self-knowledge and are, at least temporarily, in harmony instead of discord with existence. Because of this pattern, some critics, such as Robert Boyers and Theodore Ross, have tended to look for a continual progression in Bellow's work, and definitive 'answers', forcing Bellow into the didactic role he resists. They cast the heroes as spokesmen, and then complain that the novels' endings are invalid in their affirmation because the resolutions do not seem to be based on fact. Such a view implicitly expects a foolproof formula to protect the heroes from further mental unease. Bellow, in the same interview in which he talks of the value of curiosity in the absence of concrete reasons for hope, says of such criticism: "The result is that a great burden is thrown upon the writer, who is asked to feel himself a prophetic



personality. . . . As for a massive statement of affirmation, I have none to offer."<sup>9</sup>

Bellow works on the level of suggestion rather than statement; obviously his heroes do progress towards peace and reconciliation with the world, but this is an instinctive, involuntary process arising out of experience, not the result of a deliberate search. It is irrelevant to ask questions such as what will happen to Henderson when he returns to the pressures of America, and whether the state of joy he experiences as we last see him at the airport in Newfoundland will be permanent, because Bellow is not suggesting permanence. What he is essentially trying to do in his writing is to transmit to the reader his own instinctive joy in life, to show that happiness need not depend on external circumstances and that a sense of the goodness and worthwhileness of life is possible despite the rational arguments against it - as, for instance, in Augie's discovery of the 'axial lines' of life once his efforts have ceased. Bellow's works show the possibilities of life rather than the negative elements. He is not providing philosophical answers but expressing an optimism available to anybody. That his views are not remote is shown by the popularity of Herzog, about which he comments: "'I received two or three thousand letters from people pouring out their souls to me . . . saying 'This is my life, this is what it's been like for me.''"<sup>10</sup>

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9. From David D. Galloway, loc.cit.

10. From Walter Clemons and Jack Kroll, "America's Master Novelist", Newsweek (1 September 1975), p.33.

To sum up, then, Bellow's aim in writing is based on his conviction of man's instinctive wish to live. He criticises the writers who reject life on an intellectual basis: "It seems to me that they can't know enough about it for confident denial. The mystery is too great."<sup>11</sup> In a discussion of art's place in a technological world, speaking of the problem of the individual in modern society, he says: "The sense that his existence is significant haunts him. But he can prove nothing. And the business of art is with this sense, precisely."<sup>12</sup> He believes - with the necessary inner conviction of the artist - that the contribution of his single viewpoint is worthwhile. He explains the crux of his optimism, and of Herzog's achievement of balance after his struggle, thus:

I think a person finally emerges from all this nonsense when he becomes aware that his life has a much larger meaning he has been ignoring - a transcendent meaning. And that his life is, at its most serious, some kind of religious enterprise, not one that has to do with the hurly-burly of existence.<sup>13</sup>

He continues, with regard to the concept of religion, referring to Sammler's comments at Elya Gruner's deathbed:

You read the New Testament and the assumption Jesus makes continually is that people know the difference between good and evil - as soon as you present it to them. And that is, in part, what faith means. It doesn't even require

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11. From Gordon Lloyd Harper, "The Art of Fiction: Saul Bellow - An Interview", Paris Review, 36 (Winter 1966), p.67.

12. Saul Bellow, "Machines and Storybooks", Harper's Magazine, 249 (August 1974), p.54.

13. From Sanford Pinsker, op.cit., p.977.

discussion. It means that there is an implicit knowledge - very ancient, if not eternal - which human beings really share and that if they based their relationships on that knowledge, existence could be transformed.<sup>14</sup>

The ideas of this inner, positive sense of meaning in life, and of the value of sharing, and achieving communication with others, are what emerge most strongly from the works of Bellow. I shall examine them in this light.

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14. Ibid., p.977.

## CHAPTER TWO

### DANGLING MAN: INDIVIDUALITY VERSUS COMMUNITY

Joseph, the protagonist of Dangling Man, Bellow's first novel, represents a type which becomes familiar to us in all his novels; 'alienated' 'isolated' 'displaced' are some of the words frequently used to describe him. Much has been written on the origins and significance in the context of American society of such a figure; in Bellow's case, I have felt it more worthwhile to dispense with exploring tradition and consider instead the aspects of personality with which he is most concerned. While there are, naturally, social factors involved, and a pattern from previous American literature to be traced, Bellow's works are transcendent of these considerations; he is writing first of all of the interior being, and there is no doubt that psychologically the implications are universal. The state of isolation, caused by various factors and with various mental effects, is the central point under discussion.

In each novel the protagonist moves towards some kind of enlightenment; something is resolved at the end, and correspondingly at the end of the sequence of the seven novels the affirmations made are much more positive than at the beginning; the protagonist progresses a little further. The need for communication with, and commitment

to, one's fellow-beings, however, which largely comprises the resolutions made, is quite clearly apparent in this first novel.

Joseph is introduced to us through his journal reminiscences. The strengths and weaknesses of this form will be discussed later. His situation is echoed in later novels; he is in an artificial state of inactivity after resigning from his job in anticipation of the call-up, and (showing another characteristic of the Bellow hero) his personality is such that he not only finds it difficult to use his 'freedom' (a term which will be elaborated upon) constructively, but is unable to avoid the constant presence of his thoughts, which tend towards heavy philosophy. At the beginning of the novel, then, Joseph has the illusion that given sufficient time (but not necessarily experience) he can solve all his problems, and furthermore, many of the world's, in his mind. His enlightenment, and paradoxically his failure, comes when this illusion is destroyed. As he puts his quest - at quite a late stage in the novel - "We are all drawn towards the same craters of the spirit - to know what we are for, to know our purpose, to seek grace."<sup>1</sup> This quest is inevitable, given man's nature, but Joseph (and other Bellow heroes) make the initial mistake of assuming there can be a concrete, neat answer.

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1. Saul Bellow, Dangling Man, Penguin Books, London (1971), p.128. Subsequent references in this chapter to this work will be included in the text.

The strangeness of Joseph's situation is seen at the beginning of the novel to have had various noticeable effects on him; the first, and most general, encompassing the others, is the breakdown of communication which he experiences. It is probably true to say that this breakdown is what leads to other mental extremes - for instance, neurosis through thinking too abstractly or too deeply - and that a return to a positive state of mind can be experienced only when Joseph regains a sense of proportion and sees the meaning of human fellowship and the importance of seeing oneself in relation to others; his deliberate isolation of himself from ordinary communication is the first cause of his problems. His isolation leads to self-loathing, artificial pride and over-sensitiveness, characteristics which are closely paralleled in the protagonist of Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground. Many incidents and ideas in the two works can be compared.

In Joseph's case we can see the process of change he has undergone, and an interesting psychological point is his recognition of this change, though he is nevertheless powerless in his condition to return to his former state of mind. He admits that, in spite of an ordered life, the old Joseph suffered "from a feeling of strangeness, of not quite belonging to the world, of lying under a cloud and looking up at it". (p.24) He speaks later of "Joseph, that creature of plans" who "had asked himself a question I still would like answered, namely, 'How should a good man live; what ought he to do?'" (p.32) This,

incidentally, is well known as a very old Jewish question. The 'old' Joseph was evidently already to some extent detached because of his tendency to philosophise; we learn that he had "not stopped thinking of himself as a scholar" (p.23); it is because of this trait that he has become what he now is. Joseph regards himself as two distinct personalities, the old and the new, and the change is undoubtedly there, but it is more a case of extremes of a man's personality being brought out by an extreme situation such as that in which Joseph has found himself; the reason for his breakdown is within himself.

Joseph's dissociation of himself from his family and friends is marked; he is unwilling or unable to make casual social contact or even to express any feeling towards his wife Iva. Suspicion and analysis take the place of spontaneous social response - such as when he is rude to Myron Adler, an old friend who calls to see Joseph some nine months after his resigning his job, wishing to extend friendship and help. At Joseph's brother Amos's house, while perhaps justifiably disliking his tactless offers of financial help, he makes his feelings so plain, rather than cover them up diplomatically, that the family cannot avoid regarding him strangely. His brother exclaims:

'I don't know what to do with you.  
I'm beginning to think you're not all  
there, with your convictions and your  
hop-! I wish I knew how it was going  
to turn out with you. You'll ruin  
yourself in the end. Think of Iva  
sometimes. What's her future going  
to be like?' (p.53)

Following this, Joseph leaves the house after shouting

aloud his feelings about his brother's way of life; in his honesty while on his intellectual 'search' he also alienates himself still further from his wife. Indeed, at the end of the novel, after demonstrating his lack of concern for her feelings in several incidents, he makes the important decision to request to be taken into the services without even consulting her. He likewise rejects his wife's family; he remarks, after refusing to make small-talk with Iva's cousin, "It's time I was uncivil to Sam. He has always, by his questions, exercised a social or family tyranny over me, checking on my suitability for Iva." (p.89) His disgust with social facades appears again in the party scene.

We may note from these scenes how introverted and self-tortured Joseph has become, and we realise that the well-meaning remarks which irritate him so much do so because to him his own state of mind is all-important; others regard him as temporarily eccentric, depressed perhaps, but can have no concept of the extent of his suffering, because he cannot or will not explain it to them (imagine a journal covering this period as written by Iva). In other words, he has become divorced from reality to the extent that communication with others is not possible; his quest has selfishly left out of account the need to consider others. Yet he needs some kind of contact, and is perceptive enough to admit this as a reason behind one of his arguments with the landlord:

Only, in my opinion, our rages are  
deceptive; we are too ignorant and



spiritually poor to know that we fall on the 'enemy' from confused motives of love and loneliness. Perhaps, also, self-contempt. But for the most part, loneliness. (p.121)

Realising this, he is nevertheless unable to see any value in communicating with those close to him; indeed, he seeks anonymity, going to different restaurants rather than be recognised as a 'regular' at any one.

The discussions with the 'Spirit of Alternatives' show the other side of Joseph's argument that logical thinking, the application of reason during a period of detachment, will resolve his struggles. He is unwilling to trust "Unreason", (p.112) feelings and instincts. In one of these imaginary conversations, Joseph remarks: "'There's a lot of talk about alienation. It's a fool's plea. . . . You can divorce your wife or abandon your child, but what can you do with yourself?'" and the Spirit replies: "'You can't banish the world by decree if it's in you. Is that it, Joseph?'" (p.113)

Mark Leaf describes Joseph's state aptly: "He is torn between an inner feeling of the common humanity he must share with other men, and the sense of otherness he feels when he actually comes into contact with people in society."<sup>2</sup> While Joseph recognises to some extent the invalidity of his approach to life, his problem seems to be perhaps that he lacks the will or interest to come to terms with real life and people; possibly he does not

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2. Mark Leaf, "The Novels of Saul Bellow", Kolokon, 2 (Spring 1967), p.13.

have the ability during his period of waiting, of feeling displaced, to make efforts in other directions of his life. Instead, he continues in what is almost a masochistic acceptance of his state until the enforced end of his waiting, and we conclude that he realises he will only be able to return to his former state of mind with the recommencement of an occupied life. Thus, there is no real reconciliation between Joseph and Iva or the family before his departure. Such a stage is yet to come. He admits "I had not done well alone. I doubted whether anyone could . . . Perhaps the war could teach me, by violence, what I had been unable to learn during these months in the room." (p.158) Reliance on reason and self-sufficiency have failed Joseph, and his lack of contact with others is just one resulting symptom.

The question arises as to whether it is in fact possible, or desirable, for man to exist without a daily occupation, and whether, if not, this constitutes a weakness. Joseph comments in the early pages of the novel:

I have thought of going to work,  
but I am unwilling to admit that I  
do not know how to use my freedom and  
have to embrace the flunkydome of a  
job because I have no resources - in  
a word, no character. (pp.9-10)

He foresees at this stage the damage the situation will do to him. Later, he is conscious of a limit to his endurance: "I feel I am a sort of human grenade whose pin has been withdrawn." (p.122) Joseph tries to create his own routine, eating breakfast early and then reading the papers, but soon the day begins to drag. On the

simplest level, the danger in lack of routine is boredom, leading to loss of self-respect, antagonistic feelings towards others, and exaggeration of events which would seem trivial to someone with an occupied mind, as when Joseph resents the fact of not being 'recognised' by his former party comrade, Jimmy Burns, or is angered by the bank clerk who refuses to allow him to cash his wife's cheque, or by his irritating fellow-lodger Vanaker.

Joseph suffers all these traits, and treats the incidents just mentioned as personal challenges to his integrity. We recall Sartre's Roquentin, who similarly feels isolated while in a crowded cafe, or searches for significance in every event, such as when he is unable to pick up a piece of paper from a puddle, his usual habit; his state of mind colours every aspect of his day-to-day living.

The question of the level of man's intelligence is also raised; someone with no interior resources would obviously not be able to cope with Joseph's situation (consider the connection between unemployment and criminality). At the other extreme, a creative artist would, one feels, put the situation to some positive use. Joseph discusses this in his journal at one point, and perhaps Bellow is here indicating that a rare type of man may be able to cope with being thrown constantly on his own resources, though in the novels as a whole he is trying to show that the 'dangling' situation leads to the dangerous one of a man's not applying limitations to his theorising, while being unable to reap any positive result, as one

would with an artistic creation. Joseph says of an artist he knows: "Those acts of the imagination save him. . . . Is there some sort of personal effort I can substitute for the imagination?" (p.75) He answers himself:

Besides, those acts of the imagination are in the strictest sense not personal. Through them he is connected with the best part of mankind. He feels this and he can never be isolated, left aside. He has a community. I have this six-sided box. And goodness is achieved not in a vacuum, but in the company of other men, attended by love. I, in this room, separate, alienated, distrustful, find in my purpose not an open world, but a closed, hopeless jail. (p.75)

It seems from this that if the artist can survive, it is because he has his own built-in sense of community, which the ordinary man lacks, and this bears out the theory of the importance attached by Bellow to the need for empathy with one's fellow-beings. Joseph compares himself unfavorably with the artist, describing himself as merely a 'citizen'. But, of course, Joseph's 'ordinariness' is relative; his problems arise simply because he thinks more than the 'man in the street' but is blind to the necessity of keeping a sense of proportion. If creative art is a saving grace for some, it is not so for Joseph, and Bellow is obviously here deliberately considering the plight of the less-than-brilliant man. None of Bellow's heroes can really be described as creative artists, though they have their talents; Herzog, for instance, can express himself to some extent in his thesis and his letters, and Sammler has done so in his journalism, but it seems nevertheless that it is the problems of the majority and not of

the élite which are at issue.

Joseph, denied the creative outlet, is aware of many of the reasons behind his changed behaviour; he realises that he needs some kind of outlet, and thus, for instance, makes scenes which he knows he could have avoided because "Trouble, like physical pain, makes us actively aware that we are living, and when there is little in the life we lead to hold and draw and stir us, we seek and cherish it, preferring embarrassment or pain to indifference." (p.67) He echoes Dostoevsky's Underground Man, who says: "Why, suffering is the only cause of consciousness. And, although I declared at the beginning that consciousness is man's greatest plague, I know that he likes it and won't exchange it for any advantage."<sup>3</sup> While Joseph continues to fight and to rationalise, he will be subjecting himself to unbearable mental pressures. The basis of his intellectual problem is that his situation has forced him to consider the question of man's control over his destiny and the possibility of solving questions by reason. He mistakenly sees order and control as being what man needs in order to lead a worthwhile life; he is terrified by the possibility that chance may prevent one from living one's life to the full. He puts forward the idea that man should explore all paths open to him and allow no limitations. Of course the majority of men do, paradoxically, need some kind of limitation such as an organised career

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3. Fyodor Dostoevsky, Notes From Underground, Signet Classics, The New American Library of World Literature, New York (1961), p.118.

in order to have peace of mind and happiness, but the thinker (the Bellow hero) is disturbed at the thought of not experiencing life fully. "Shall my life by one-thousandth of an inch fall short of its ultimate possibility?" (p.72) Such a man idealises, but wanting to do everything and wanting only the best can prevent one doing anything:

And then there are our plans, idealizations. These are dangerous, too. They can consume us like parasites, eat us, drink us, and leave us lifelessly prostrate. And yet we are always inviting the parasite, as if we were eager to be drained and eaten.

It is because we have been taught there is no limit to what a man can be. (p.73)

Joseph sees this as being due to historical and social reasons; man has created his own idols and aspirations in place of the church, and feels "responsible for his own salvation". (p.73) On the theme of social influence, Joseph earlier discusses with his brother Amos the alterations wrought by the onset of war; life has become changing and uncertain, and the future is left out of account; Joseph says "'There is no personal future any more.'" (p.54) Anticipation seems pointless to him; he has still to face the possibility of death and the inevitable psychological effects that war will have. Yet it is not really those outward factors which cause social malaise with which we are concerned; the situation serves merely to bring into prominence ideas which Joseph, in more routine circumstances, might not have felt the need to confront. The problem is an inner one, firstly of an individual's learning to cope with his self-knowledge, then the aloneness

and awareness of self that Joseph experiences, and lastly the fear of leading a limited life.

The foreknowledge of death is one source of Joseph's discontent; it destroys the possibility of man's shaping his own life by its often unexpected arrival. Joseph may try all he can to shape his destiny, but he cannot foresee his end and plan his life accordingly. He considers this on seeing a man fall dead in the street (the death scene is a favourite Bellow situation, in order to introduce the familiar theme of arbitrary death and what it means to his protagonists). Joseph describes death, in an emotion-ridden recollection of the event, as "the agent who takes you, in the last unforgiving act, into inexistence. . . . The moment is for him to choose." (p.101) Civilisation, he thinks, teaches the paradox that "each of us is an inestimable prize" (p.98) and that death must nevertheless be accepted quietly and incuriously. He challenges this view: "But I must know what I myself am." (p.99) Death, to Joseph, is a negation of certain values - freedom, dignity, the ability to choose. The major question of choice versus chance is involved in this argument:

Continued life means expectation.  
Death is the abolition of choice. The  
more choice is limited, the closer we  
are to death. The greatest cruelty is  
to curtail expectations without taking  
away life completely. (p.122)

In his second talk with the Spirit of Alternatives, Joseph asserts that there are no values, nothing outside life, and that death is the end to everything. Remembering

Spinoza's philosophy, he asks if it is right that he should try to preserve himself; he speaks of the self, following this theory: "Chance must not govern it, incident must not govern it. It is our humanity that we are responsible for it, our dignity, our freedom." (p.139) If total choice is to him an ideal, Joseph sees that it is nevertheless frightening:

'We are afraid to govern ourself. Of course. It is so hard. We soon want to give up our freedom. It is not even real freedom, because it is not accompanied by comprehension. It is only a preliminary condition of freedom. But we hate it. And soon we run out, we choose a master, roll over on our backs and ask for the leash.' (p.139)

Joseph's argument shows his appreciation of the problem, but he is over-simplifying it. For instance, he says that man, not chance or incident, must govern man's soul and life. This, however, is too arbitrary. Chance and incident do play a part in life, and the most for which man can hope is to be at least an active and not a passive being. Joseph, rightly, rejects the idea of waiting for things to take their course (this is symbolised by his particular situation and final action). He sees dignity in shaping one's own life. But he realises that 'freedom' is a quality in some cases misunderstood. The difficulties of, say, total lack of occupation and freedom of action at every moment may bring unwanted responsibility.

Joseph sees the war as an 'incident' and says that it does not affect the essential question; it will not decide the major issues of existence, or "rescue us



spiritually". (p.140) Physically, war can destroy, but he says that it need have no effect on man's inward nature. Though he realises that chance is not all-controlling and overpowering, his determination to exclude it completely seems questionable; he is looking for a philosophical answer to something essentially practical, the conducting of one's day-to-day life. If he could indeed control the effect of the war, or any other adverse event, these external circumstances would be superfluous and he would become a kind of visionary; in fact, he argues that with a complete vision of life the war would not affect him. Nevertheless, he is fighting the nature of chance events in searching for the security of rationalisation. If he were to stop seeing events as good or bad, right or wrong, and if he were to accept uncertainty as a condition of life (each point in time being a basis from which choices are made) without the precaution of trying to account for every eventuality, many worries of the Bellow hero would become superfluous. Dignity can come from dealing with the unknown, and the unknown need not destroy dignity. Denis Donoghue puts this succinctly: "If Mr. Bellow's fiction is a search for value, the value is moral responsibility and the search is for the strength to overcome the fear of choice."<sup>4</sup>

'Freedom' is not a question of having as much control as possible, but rather a state of conscious responsibility.

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4. Denis Donoghue, "Commitment and the Dangling Man", Studies, 53 (Summer 1964), p.181.

Freedom implies choice, and Joseph likes the idea of total choice, but Bellow is putting forward this theory only to reject it as being an unworkable ideal. Helen Weinberg speaks of Joseph's "inability to use freedom positively and creatively when relieved of routine occupations."<sup>5</sup> So a limit has to be set to the possibilities of freedom - of movement or of mind; freedom must be countered by the necessary self-discipline, and freedom of choice can be taken to mean the freedom not to think, not to indulge in reason to the point of despair, and the freedom to undertake occupation. Joseph is a far more 'free' man in one sense when he learns that he must stop forcing himself into an impossible situation. Accepting this fact, and accepting chaos rather than reason, constitutes his first step forward. He knows all along that "my beliefs are inadequate, they do not guard me" against "the chaos I am forced to face." (p.102) H.M. Harper remarks of Joseph's avoidance of this reality: "Chaos, he finds, is a fact of life, and to insist upon rational order is to insist upon an existence which is "other than human"."<sup>6</sup>

Part of Joseph's insistence on reason is the denying of the possibility of the existence of a God, since a

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5. Helen Weinberg, The New Novel in America: The Kafkan Mode in Contemporary Fiction, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London (1970), p.55.
  6. H.M. Harper, Desperate Faith - a study of Bellow, Salinger, Mailer, Baldwin and Updike, The University of North Carolina Press (1967), p.14.

divine influence, the idea of pre-destination, is not intellectually acceptable as it precludes complete choice and control. Joseph's rebellious attitude towards the idea of death, his insistence that life is all, of course accords with this outlook. However, as in other novels, he, the protagonist, does not appear to recant this theory as part of the change in attitude which he undergoes; if he has resolved to face the reality of a difficult world, he is still doing it without the help of belief in a deity. We feel that a person of this type would scorn such a way out as being an easy panacea, an outlet for the most unbearable aspects of life. Yet in the overall message of the importance of humanity, and of a unifying force linking all men, some kind of faith, though not overtly religious, is surely implied; Henderson's and Herzog's revelations of the worthwhileness of life suggest something akin to a mystical experience, as described in the introduction. There may be no God in Bellow's works, but there is a force transcending everyday reality, even if it is only an acknowledgment of the mystery of life and of an instinct for living.

As far as the style of the novel is concerned, it is worth considering in what ways the choice of form affects the value of the statements made. We have to accept the validity of much of what Joseph is saying, while realising his errors. The device of employing a journal written by the protagonist suits the Bellow's hero's tendency to philosophise to himself, and the idea of the journal as being

his only confidant symbolises Joseph's isolated state of mind (just as in Herzog's letter-writing). We are able to build up a portrait of Joseph's mental state from a subjective angle, and the device enables Bellow to make use of flashbacks (for instance, comparing the former and the present Joseph) without too much contrivance. Thus far it is a suitable form for its subject. On the other hand, it would be optimistic to expect the thoughts of a man such as Joseph to provide a suitably full and balanced picture, and the author's licence to comment at times gives Joseph an aura of unreality. For instance, his thoughts are recorded extraordinarily lucidly, and sometimes at such length that we almost forget that we are supposed to be reading a journal. One long entry of reminiscence and reflection is followed by a detailed description of a fire in the lodger Vanaker's room, and the two types of writing seem harshly juxtaposed as though a deliberate balance between thought and everyday reality were being made. Conversation is recorded with the precision we might expect in the more usual narrative description. We can, of course, assume that Bellow sees Joseph, with time on his hands, as having the makings of an expert diarist, but an anomaly remains. Joseph seems to have almost too much perception at some points. His understanding of his own motives, for instance when he is rude to Adler, shows an intelligence which does not always accord with his obstinacy and the continuation of his depression (though intelligence does not, of course,

preclude blindness in certain directions). But one sometimes hesitates to accept Joseph's comments.

Certain symbolic patterns appear which again belong perhaps more to the narrative novel than the journal, for instance in the descriptions of environment. While Joseph's inner feelings are shown to be due more to his personality than to his situation, which is only the immediate catalyst, outward conditions certainly affect his mood, but often a shade too symbolically; squalor and anonymity are the keynote of his haunts, and detailed descriptions of sordid lodgings, of unknown faces at windows (as in the passage where Joseph leaves Kitty's apartment) lend this effect. Joseph's vision of the city as a swamp is a very self-conscious one, and the poetry of some of the description seems to belong more to the author than to his protagonist: as with "the armour of ice on the street" and "Fog . . . rising in spongy grey blooms from the soaked walks, hovering in the yards and over the hollows blinking with rain and changes of colour from the muffled signal lights . . . " (p.78)

The artistic device of the journal form is of course unlikely to seem as spontaneous as an actual journal, but the criterion for its success is to what extent the author's hand is concealed, or at any rate prevented from obtruding. Points such as those mentioned certainly cause doubt, but in this novel the protagonist's personality is sufficiently convincing to hold one's interest, and the question is put aside temporarily. One danger

in this particular novel is that of Joseph's necessary humourlessness, and therefore that of the work as a whole; in Bellow's other novels, the author's humour is often overt, and humour of situation is frequently indulged in. There are moments of relief, naturally, in Dangling Man, and one welcomes them, even if they appear consciously included: the description, for instance, of how Vanaker, Joseph's fellow-lodger, sets his room on fire with a cigarette while drunk on New Year's Eve. At another point, Joseph concludes a long, intense entry with "Life is hard. Vae victis! The wretched must suffer", the next day's entry, three words, being "Fairly quiet day." (p.92) The humour in the contrast is, one suspects, ironical.<sup>7</sup> Joseph has made the descent from the sublime to the ridiculous 'unconsciously', and it is the more effective as we are left to imagine exactly what he means by a 'fairly quiet day'; we know his routine by now. Two days later, he is back to his more usual form with a discourse on the significance of cleaning (prompted by seeing the maid at work).

Bellow succeeds in using the device of the journal only because the interest of the subject carries it along and we fail to notice where the journal really ceases to be such. A journal is, after all, a method for an individual to express his thoughts selectively, and need

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7. John J. Clayton has also made the comparison between these two entries: Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, London (1968), p.57.

reflect nothing more than that individual's thoughts at any given point. On the other hand, the literary note seems somewhat prominent at times; many journals are of course written for publication, with corresponding forethought and arrangement, but Joseph is not a writer, just a man who keeps a journal, and the control he displays over his diary entries seems at odds with his confused state of mind. As in the above examples, Bellow has chosen and ordered his material in a way which is here and there only too evident, and if Joseph's plight seems at times remote from reality, this is the reason. The later novels, whether the first or third person in speaking, have more structural solidity and integrity in this respect.

This aside, there is a valuable promise in the subject-matter for the future novels. Joseph has come through his period of mental struggle, not as he would have originally wished, but with a knowledge that he lacked at the start. One comment which sums it up well is Ihab Hassan's that "The discovery of reality, in the end, is the discovery of the limits we wilfully impose on the real."<sup>8</sup> The ending of Joseph's mental search is also the beginning of his participating in active life again; though we do not see this, we have seen that theorising fails when it is cut off from experience; Joseph will, at least, no longer be concerned only with abstractions. His way of life

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8. Ihab Hassan, Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel, Princeton University Press, New Jersey (1961), p.291.

has obviously left other people out of account. It denies him any enjoyment, even of a simple conversation, and breeds distrust. It is implied that his obsession, apart from being unrealisable, is morally selfish - that is, there is no such thing as living without contact with others, and Joseph is hurting most those with whom he is most involved. He feels isolated, but ignores the means closest at hand to remedy this. Going into the army, a communal life, symbolises that, consciously or not, Joseph finally chooses to accept the fact of humans' need for one another and their interaction in everyday life; Bellow is invoking a basic social law, denying Joseph his right to alienation. Joseph is able in the end to celebrate this fact: "I am no longer to be held accountable for myself; I am grateful for that. I am in other hands, relieved of self-determination, freedom cancelled." (p.159) We can believe this remark without seeing irony in it; Joseph has realised that his quest is doomed, and the relief is genuine. It is not a step down from a position of superiority, but a step up to a more balanced one. Joseph has realised the wisdom of choosing limitation, and of attaching less importance to himself in the decision to live with others.



### CHAPTER THREE

#### THE VICTIM: HOW FAR RESPONSIBLE?

Like Dangling Man, its predecessor, The Victim deals with the problems arising when a man is jolted out of his usual way of life by unprecedented circumstances, and is forced to cope with issues previously left in abeyance. The novel is again a vehicle for the consideration of various intellectual questions which recur in Bellow's work, as well as the treatment of the main theme - the degree of responsibility which men owe one another, or, as Tony Tanner has put it, "what the self owes the self and what the self owes the rest of the world".<sup>1</sup>

Asa Leventhal, the protagonist, unlike Joseph, the 'dangling man', is shown at the start in circumstances as near 'normal' as possible; after initial difficulties he has made a happy marriage, is progressing satisfactorily with his job in the newspaper business, and seems to hold a balanced attitude towards life and people. He appears the most sane and responsible in the opening crisis when Elena, his sister-in-law, sends for him because her son Mickey is ill. There is no reason to imagine that his life could not continue in the same way quite happily -

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1. Tony Tanner, Saul Bellow, Oliver and Boyd, London (1965), p.26.

as he says, "'I was lucky. I got away with it'"<sup>2</sup> - until, that is, the appearance of Kirby Allbee, one of those who did not. Though we are told that before this event, Leventhal was "frequently mindful" of "the part that did not get away with it" (pp.22-3) it is clear at this point that a complexity of new issues immediately arises from Allbee's claiming his help, and Leventhal (in the conscientious manner of the Bellow hero) feels bound to give them some consideration. His peace of mind, once destroyed, cannot be lightly restored.

The way in which circumstances are set in motion has a much more obvious structure than in Dangling Man. Mary, Leventhal's wife, has disappeared on a family errand, then Mickey's illness arises, and finally Allbee appears. As stated, there is no reason at first to doubt Leventhal's being a man of judgment. The reader, however, is immediately forced into a position of choice, questioning the validity of Allbee's and Leventhal's claims on various levels - Jewish, intellectual and moral. The structure's very neatness means that the abstract discussion is always visible behind the framework of events; this will be further discussed later.

Allbee's and Leventhal's first meeting undoubtedly leaves us on Leventhal's side; Allbee is offensive, and is reluctant to state his business at first. He appears

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2. Saul Bellow, The Victim, Penguin Books, London (1971), p.22. Subsequent references in this chapter to this work will be included in the text.

only pathetic in his ridiculous accusations, convinced that the matter is in black and white and that Leventhal is plainly guilty. Allbee accuses him of deliberately making trouble with Rudiger, his employer, after Allbee had arranged an interview for him, out of spite because of an anti-Jewish remark made by Allbee at a party. This has all taken place years previously. The positions of the two men are now reversed; Allbee is the one who is down-and-out and jobless. Leventhal has made successful headway in his career, and concludes that Allbee is looking for a scapegoat, for someone to blame for his own faults of character - he was known to be a heavy drinker - and ill-luck.

Bellow treats the Jewish problem explicitly in this novel, though it is impossible to separate the Jewish issues from what are certainly deeper ones. Leventhal's eventual feeling of guilt and need for atonement, of 'victimisation', may be symptomatic of Jewish insecurity, but Allbee, on the other hand, is as much a 'victim' in some ways. Indeed, it is ambiguous to whom the title refers. It is true that Allbee, to his own detriment, is continually taking opportunities to 'get at' the Jews, and the scenes with Leventhal and his acquaintances are pervaded by a strong sense of Jewish loyalty. However, at the risk of stating the obvious, the novel could have been written without representation of religious differences; this prejudice is only the most superficial aspect of the discord between accuser and accused. The use of

anti-semitic hostility by Bellow, however, lends the novel the social reality which is always a strong point in his work, despite the apparent abstractness of some of his ideas. Indeed, the successful integration of the different levels suggests the impossibility of separating these levels in everyday life. Man is an individual, but is a social being. Personality and heritage are hard to separate. He can be an intellectual, but he cannot ignore the trivial. So Jewishness is in this novel used as a concept of human behaviour and reaction which is in particular harmony with its issues, and expands, rather than limits, the importance of the themes in its use.

The root of the question of guilt and responsibility is man's inequality, which may be seen as an unfairness caused by chance as much as its being due to man's success being in accord with his character. He has not deliberately caused inequality, but it does not therefore follow that he need not concern himself with the problems of the less fortunate. The very idea of chance playing its part means that the man who has 'got away with it' (as has Leventhal) is bound to consider the fate of someone less privileged. Except for circumstances, their fortunes might have been reversed. Leventhal, to begin with, ascribes his comparative success to the fact that "his character was different", (p.37) and therefore feels that Allbee's fate is his own fault. Later he wonders why he has been chosen by Allbee:

In a general way, anyone could see that  
there was great unfairness in one man's

having all the comforts of life while another had nothing. But between man and man, how was this to be dealt with? . . . Admittedly there was a wrong, a general wrong. Allbee, on the other hand, came along and said 'You!' and that was what was so meaningless. (p.69)

Leventhal has to learn that responsibility cannot be measured definitively, according to his part in the situation, and to accept the role that Allbee has forced on him, that of a symbolic scapegoat. Though not guilty in a specific sense, he is involved, in that Allbee has chosen to claim his help; Leventhal is finally forced to acknowledge this claim in the name of humanity (the general responsibility which makes men interdependent on one another) and the sense of connection which causes the innate guilt which he is led to feel. An argument can be made for the stronger being responsible for the weaker. Because Leventhal is a man too conscientious to dismiss Allbee's claims entirely, and because his thoughtfulness implies a greater ability to cope, his logic and sense of fair play make it personally necessary for him to offer help. He sees where advantages of character and of chance have favoured him and not Allbee. In another situation where his help is asked for, that of Mickey's illness, his strength of character enables him to bear the responsibility that should have been his brother's, without an assessment of the situation in terms of reason.

Bellow does not suggest any simple answer to the problem of man's guilt; it is clear that this is at the last a personal choice, and that in a situation such as

Leventhal's there can be no absolutes of right and wrong; everything depends on a man's conscience and sensitivity to others' problems. Too great a sense of guilt, conversely, can be paralysing and damaging, since man has a responsibility to himself as well as to others; in order to maintain personal integrity, a balance must be kept. Leventhal realises the personal nature of the decision he has to take with regard to the acknowledgment of Allbee's claim:

It was, after all, something he could either take seriously or dismiss as an annoyance. It was up to him. He had only to insist that he wasn't responsible and it disappeared altogether. It was his conviction against an accusation nobody could expect him to take at face value. And what more was there for him to say than that his part in it was accidental? At worst, an accident, unintentional. (p.83)

Leventhal looks for a factual answer - his 'guilt', in this sense, of inadvertently causing Allbee to lose his job, is no more than that of his being an accidental link in the chain of events leading to Allbee's decline. Allbee was, after all, unfortunate and distrusted even before Leventhal met him and went to see Rudiger. But factual guilt, as stated, is not what Bellow is considering, but rather general guilt, that is, the sense of owing a debt to others - which is what divides men into the categories of the helpers and the helped. Bellow finally emerges on the side of man's necessary responsibility to his fellow-humans, wherever the fault for injustice lies. The debt cannot - and should not - be measured by reason.

Participation in life, in others' lives, is not just a question of responsibility, but also of self-respect; the isolated non-participant may give nothing and demand nothing, but will lose awareness and pleasure if he does not take part. He must take the risk of being vulnerable in order to experience life fully. On the other hand, a sense of proportion must be applied to the search for experience, and limits must be imposed; such is one of Bellow's main pleas to his ever-searching heroes. Leventhal, considering the emotions of love and hate, reflects that man's feelings are not automatically charitable, that certain people provoke an instinct of dislike. This means that some rational code must be applied to counteract this reaction. "Would we have to be told 'Love!' if we loved as we breathed?" (p.70) He sees the rest of nature as being 'bounded', or naturally controlled, unlike man. Man's consciousness leads him beyond the natural physical limits of animals or plants; he differs from them in having the faculty of choice. "'But we,' he thought, 'we go in all directions without any limit.'" (p.70) Looking forward to taking out his other nephew Philip for the afternoon, he makes the point:

You couldn't find a place in your feelings for everything, or give at every touch like a swinging door, the same for everyone, with people going in and out as they pleased. On the other hand, if you shut yourself up, not wanting to be bothered, then you were like a bear in a winter hole, or like a mirror wrapped in a piece of flannel. And like such a mirror you were in less danger of being broken, but you didn't flash, either. But you had to flash. That was the peculiar thing. Everybody wanted to be what he was to the limit. (p.85)

Leventhal reflects that the wish in people to be themselves to the limit is what leads to crime as well as to good deeds. It is a form of self-assertion which, because of man's capacity as a thinking being for making mistakes through wrong reasoning, may misfire. Emotions, Bellow says, must be balanced.

Leventhal's attitude to his own problem shows the need to keep a balance between the consideration of oneself and of others - or, as Marcus Klein says, "to meet with a strong sense of self the sacrifice of self demanded by social circumstance."<sup>3</sup> Another instance of the necessity for keeping a sense of proportion is shown when Schlossberg, the talkative old man, introduces the important idea of being 'more or less than human'. For someone to try to be perfect, to cope with everything, will mean that he is removing himself from the outlook of people with problems. The Bellow hero is usually seen detaching himself from life by trying to be 'more than human'. On the other hand, to show no emotions and have no interest in others is also life-denying. As Schlossberg says, "'More than human, can you have any use for life? Less than human, you don't either.'" (p.113) Bellow is suggesting that in order to be himself, man has to admit to some limitations - including that of death; death is part of his being. To attempt to deny this produces a

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3. Marcus Klein, "A Discipline of Nobility: Saul Bellow's Fiction", in Irving Malin, ed., Saul Bellow and the Critics, University of London Press (1967), p.8.



negative outlook: "'We only know what it is to die because some people die and, if we make ourselves different from them, maybe we don't have to?'" (p.112) This particular attitude to death is a recurrent theme in all Bellow's work, but it here especially symbolises the wider issue in The Victim, that is, man's seeing himself as one with others and, in consequence, taking on their suffering.

Leventhal is unable to grasp the principle of retaining his 'self', his integrity, as well as acknowledging his social debt. His initial attitude is one of self-righteousness. It denies any involvement with Allbee; however, as he begins to consider the problem more deeply, he loses control (and self-respect) by treating the matter out of all proportion. In the beginning Leventhal's old friend Williston sees more justification in Allbee's case than Leventhal does, but by the end Leventhal is involved to an extent that Harkavy, another friend of his, is unable to understand. He allows Allbee to stay in his apartment and even agrees to try to get him an interview. Harkavy says: "'It looks as if he really did a job on you, sold you a bill of goods'", and Leventhal replies, "'I must have wanted to buy'". (p.212) Because of the pressure of the situation, Leventhal's whole personality is threatened; he becomes unable to decide on a course of action. He passively allows Allbee to move into his flat and become a nuisance, his judgment having become clouded.

Though it is outwardly due to the ambiguity of the

situation, and to the fact that Leventhal wants to find out precise facts - where none exist - in order to judge his part in the situation, his increasingly tortured state of mind is seen to spring, in part, from inherent personality traits. Leventhal's approach to life needs too many defences. He exhibits a sensitivity to other people's opinions which verges on the paranoid. Harkavy says to him "'You want the whole world to like you. There's bound to be some people who don't think well of you. As I do, for instance. Why can't you accept the fact that others never will?'" (p.76) Leventhal wishes to learn the whole story of the accusations against him, and his main concern is with putting himself in the right in other people's eyes, rather than with whether he has in fact done Allbee any damage. Leventhal's own insecurity leads him to wish for perfection in his friends. He is horrified by the possibility that Williston may believe him guilty of intentionally making trouble for Allbee, and by the fact that Harkavy did not defend him to Williston as thoroughly as he feels was necessary. The suspicions he nurtures lead him to rather abrupt behaviour with his friends. As in other situations, he tends to see things in black and white; he allows for no margin of error in others. In order to defend himself, he goes to see Williston. He takes an accusing attitude, even telling Williston that he must have a prejudice against his being a Jew to believe the story against him. This accusation is, as it happens, an imaginary one; by

it, Leventhal brings out another aspect of the Jewish problem - the feeling of persecution - when he anticipates prejudice in others.

Williston puts his finger on the problem of asserting one's self and personality which Leventhal experiences. Concerning the fact that he chose to answer Rudiger back, he points out Leventhal's need to think well of himself, to over-assert himself, in order to compensate for an innate lack of confidence and self-respect. After the conversation, Leventhal recognises this point for himself; he takes the blame for losing his temper with Rudiger, realising that he did so because "he, he himself had begun to fear that the lowest price he put on himself was too high and he could scarcely understand why anyone should want to pay for his services." (p.102) Harkavy says to him at the party in the closing scenes of the book, when Leventhal is sounding him about an introduction to Shifcart for Allbee, "'Is this an attack of your old weakness - worrying whether people like you?'" (p.202) Leventhal has made the decision to get Allbee the requested introduction if possible, but in doing so has alienated even the friends who were originally on his side and thought well of him. Unable to view Allbee's position objectively, he has gradually become more helpless and pathetic in trying to deal with the situation (shown, for instance, in the remark where he begs Harkavy not to refer to his "going off his rocker" (p.214) because of his mother's having gone mad). His inability to deal with other people

leads to a growing isolation which affects the situation with Allbee directly in that it intensifies the problem; wanting others' opinions first prevents Leventhal from defining his own beliefs.

The fact that Leventhal cannot dismiss the situation, yet does nothing positive either way as regards Allbee, leads him into a moral weakening. Though he agrees to Allbee's suggestion that he should give him an introduction to Shifcart, Leventhal never really makes a judgment regarding the validity of the situation, until an end to it is forced by Allbee when he brings a prostitute into Leventhal's bed, and later when he attempts to gas himself, endangering Leventhal. By these acts Allbee violates any claim to his help, and Leventhal feels justified in no longer worrying about him.

In the closing chapter, Leventhal, though pondering the inequalities of life, seems to have arrived at a state of greater calm, thinking only occasionally about the past. The question of chance absolves Leventhal from his sense of the injustice of his having a job while others have not; he thinks: "this was not even a true injustice, for how could you call anything so haphazard an injustice? It was a shuffle, all, all accidental and haphazard." (pp.230-31) Allbee, in one anti-semitic attack, accuses Leventhal of thinking that "'There's no evil in life itself'", (p.122) that any misfortune he has suffered must be his own fault. He says on another occasion "'there really is such a thing as luck and those

who do and don't have it. . . . But it's a blessing, in some things, and especially if it gives you the chance to make a choice. . . . But having a few choices . . . makes you seem less of an accident to yourself.'" (pp.158-59)

The question of chance versus choice is a central one. The point that Allbee makes is that chance happenings do not preclude the worth, and indeed the necessity, of making choices; the moral point of the novel lies in man's ability to shape his life and that of others at least partially. Allbee's failures may perhaps be ascribed to what is at times his over-fatalistic outlook: "'You don't agree that people have a destiny forced on them? Well, that's ridiculous, because they do. And that's all the destiny they get, so they'd better not assume they're running their own show.'" (pp.62-3) Man can of course choose, but where his control fails is that he cannot predict the results of his choice, or the workings of chance on that choice. Jonathan Baumbach thinks that the "central moral dilemma" of the novel is "How far can a man be held responsible for the unintentional consequences of his acts?"<sup>4</sup> Reuben Frank makes a statement which can be taken as the only way of answering this question: "Chance subtly pervades our world, so thoroughly that we can never tell to what extent we are responsible for the effects of our actions."<sup>5</sup> One cannot evaluate conscious

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4. Jonathan Baumbach, The Landscape of Nightmare, Peter Owen, London (1965), p.51.

5. Reuben Frank, "Saul Bellow: The Evolution of a Contemporary Novelist", The Western Review, 18, No.2 (Winter 1954), p.107.

action in the way that Leventhal would like to; the intention of the doer creates the validity or otherwise of an act, and to judge an act in retrospect is simply to blame unforeseen consequences on an individual person, whereas in fact they are part of a chain of events not subject to control by man. Therefore, to judge Leventhal's act as an isolated one is meaningless; chance, the history and character of Allbee, as well as the character of Rudiger and the social factor of the Depression at the time in question, all play their roles.

What is finally important is that Leventhal has come to some realisation of why his own failings caused him to create a scene with Rudiger. Even more important, he does realise the arbitrariness of certain events, but is nevertheless prepared to see some value in trying to right things which have gone wrong, pending any personal decision about Allbee (which he never makes until Allbee does it for him). Leventhal does not, after all, ignore Allbee from the start as he might have done, and is prepared to offer some compensation simply because of the fact that Allbee is worse off than he. The question of who is to blame, of who is persecuting whom, is unanswerable. Man, whether innocent or guilty, is responsible for others, because his personal moral sensitivity tells him that happiness is a privilege rather than a right, and that he has more than he deserves if he has more than the man who is the most unfortunate example of humanity. To Bellow, the man who does not feel this is one of those 'less than human'. His

message towards commitment is clear. At one point Leventhal has what can be taken as a vision of this truth. It follows a dream in which he is frustrated by officials while trying to catch a train; partially awake, he experiences a great sense of relief: "But it was supremely plain to him that everything, everything without exception took place as if within a single soul or person." (p.139) However, he feels that he will not be able to hold on to this belief the following day; it is, after all, only a temporary enlightenment. Bellow does not imply that these moments of enlightenment for his heroes signify a lasting change; involvement with life naturally includes problems which overshadow peace and happiness for much of the time. What such visions do provide is a relief from problematic self-absorption and an indication of the capacity to feel hope. In the same fleeting way, Leventhal occasionally experiences a feeling of closeness to Allbee, an involuntary emotion, as though he recognises them to be somehow connected. He wonders at the changeability of his feelings, illustrating the narrow margin between love and hate, and the complexity and inexplicable nature of man's thoughts.

Artistically, the novel is apparently far more ordered than Dangling Man. The two central characters oppose each other over their points of view. The general question posed by Allbee, of man's responsibility to his fellow-men, is paralleled by the specific one of Leventhal's family; in any particular situation, Leventhal has no doubts about

offering his help, nor does he consider how far his duty towards them should extend. The fact that the main situation is a symbolic one is illustrated by Allbee's claim being left deliberately vague for a large part of the novel. He gradually unfolds his story and increases his demands in proportion to Leventhal's becoming more involved in the situation. Much of Allbee's role is concerned with making Leventhal admit responsibility rather than actually do anything. Leventhal never has to help Allbee as far as finding employment is concerned, for by the time he is prepared to do this Allbee is committing the outrages which make it morally unnecessary for Leventhal to take any further interest in him. However, the somewhat abstract level of the question accords with the unanswerable nature of the problem which Bellow wishes to stress. The impression with which one is finally left is of a novel in which argument largely replaces action. Principles are discussed in the abstract as well as being shown through events. Schlossberg, a 'neutral' character, is rather obviously used as a spokesman on occasions, and Allbee, too, sometimes seems less of a real person than an allegorical-type figure, a tester of Leventhal's reactions. Other devices which may, at times, seem artificial, are the convenient removal of Mary before the opening of the novel, the 'vision' Leventhal has after his dream, and, as mentioned, the way out of the situation, without any conclusive resolution on Leventhal's part, provided for him by Allbee's behaviour. As Denis Donoghue has said, "the novel allows



external circumstances to lift the burden of guilt and responsibility which is his condition. . . . It is a generous contrivance, but a contrivance."<sup>6</sup> Leventhal himself is almost without the Bellow protagonist's usual charm, and we are less concerned with his problems as an individual than with their general application. From time to time, it is hard to sympathise with him.

As in Dangling Man, a good deal of weight is placed on the use of symbolic descriptions of public, impersonal places such as indifferent restaurants, or the airless cinema where Leventhal takes Philip, in order to suggest spiritual isolation. An atmosphere of isolation is also created by descriptions of New York as an anonymous, oppressive place, as for instance when Leventhal crosses to Staten Island to see his sick nephew:

The towers on the shore rose up in huge blocks, scorched, smoky, grey, and bare white where the sun was direct upon them. The notion brushed Leventhal's mind that the light over them and over the water was akin to the yellow revealed in the slit of the eye of a wild animal, say a lion, something inhuman that didn't care about anything human and yet was implanted in every human being too, one speck of it, and formed a part of it that responded to the heat and the glare, exhausting as these were, or even to freezing, salty things, harsh things, all things difficult to stand. (p.47)

Once Leventhal's flat is dirtied by Allbee it offers him only further annoyance and no place of refuge; Allbee's destruction of his physical comfort obviously parallels his loss of mental calm.

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6. Denis Donoghue, "Commitment and the Dangling Man", Studies, 53 (Summer 1964), p.177.

The ultimate question in the novel, left unanswered, comes when Leventhal, seeing Allbee some years later in more prosperous circumstances, asks him: "'what's your idea of who runs things?'" (p.238) He is asking what hope of order there is in a life often governed by chance, and where responsibility lies. How much, in other words, is a man responsible to his fellow-beings? Leventhal has come to terms with his past, and has achieved personal peace once more; nevertheless, the question shows a continued longing for direction. The only answer implied is that a man can do no more than make his own judgments in a particular situation. He must accept that his power is limited to making choices without knowing the outcome. A related point, voiced by Schlossberg, is the importance of the affirmation of dignity in life. In the absence of any absolute proof of the validity or otherwise of life, only man's instinctive feeling, at times, of its value, there is the choice, the logical and positive one, towards dignity:

'And really we study people so much now that after we look and look at human nature . . . you might say, "What is all the shouting about? A man is nothing, his life is nothing. Or it is even lousy and cheap. . . ." But I say, ". . . If a human life is a great thing to me, it is a great thing. . . . Have dignity, you understand me? Choose dignity. Nobody knows enough to turn it down.'" (p.113)

Seeing dignity in life is paralleled by being aware of the importance of others' lives, and of preserving not only oneself but seeing the self as part of a whole to which one owes an innate moral responsibility. John J. Clayton

has said of Bellow's novels that "the heroes find that only by becoming unburdened of their guilty selves and entering the "shared condition of all" can they hope to become worthy."<sup>7</sup> Leventhal, when he progresses almost unconsciously to a realisation of this, to an acceptance of some responsibility, without reasoning, for other people, reaches the turning-point in his problem. Paul Levine has remarked that "to be alive is to be responsible for one's actions and to be human is to have a moral vision."<sup>8</sup> 'Alive' and 'human' are key words in considering Bellow's philosophy, and until he learns the value and meaning of participation in life, the Bellow hero will not be fully alive or human.

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7. John J. Clayton, Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, London (1968), p.4.

8. Paul Levine, "Saul Bellow: The Affirmation of the Philosophical Fool", Perspective, 10 (Winter 1959), p.166.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE ADVENTURES OF AUGIE MARCH - A FATE GOOD ENOUGH?

The Adventures of Augie March, Bellow's third novel, represents a departure, at least superficially, from the novel of ideas to the novel of action. In contrast to the more deliberately structured Dangling Man and The Victim, this is a novel with a chronological story, a description almost epic in scope of its hero's life. It is narrated by the first person in a colloquial, often humorous, sometimes reflective, but above all plausible manner. Themes usual to Bellow are present but are absorbed into the description of events and the conversations of the numerous characters (though some obviously bear the stamp of 'reality-instructors', those characters who, possibly through their opposing views or life-styles, cause a conscious change in the hero's perception of life. These characters will be discussed more fully later.) In the evolving of Augie's fate we see that his characteristics and not the effects of society or of chance are what ultimately determine his course in life. Like other Bellow protagonists, his particular reaction to circumstances and his attitude to chance are the determining factors.

However, the surrounding society - for instance, Augie's childhood environment - is described with a wealth of detail, whereas the previous novels only hint at the

atmosphere of their environment. Here the atmosphere is reminiscent of the colour found in Russian novels. The details of the Jewish way of life provide an especial authenticity. The insecurity of Augie's own particular background compels a certain amount of struggle; one fights one's way through life rather than taking such factors as ease, employment and income for granted. Augie is illegitimate; his family struggles against hardship and is not averse to a little deception in the process.

The structure of the novel differs from both the two previous ones significantly. It is retrospective (unlike Dangling Man) and is narrated in the first person (unlike The Victim). The questions of the validity of Augie as spokesman and of the author/hero interaction are raised. Augie is a thinker to the extent that he can formulate and analyse his ideas, though not, for example, in the intellectual manner of Herzog. Augie has to be the moral judge in the absence of an outside narrator. The epic style is lively; the raising of moral and philosophical questions does, however, pose a problem. Bellow introduces dialogue to show differing viewpoints, as he frequently does in other novels. This can be seen in the conversations between Augie and Mintouchian, the Armenian lawyer, or Basteshaw, the ship's carpenter with whom Augie is shipwrecked. Both these characters attempt to advise Augie, who actually refers to Mintouchian as a "teacher".<sup>1</sup>

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1. Saul Bellow, The Adventures of Augie March, Penguin Books, London (1971), p.558. Subsequent references in this chapter to this work will be included in the text.

Augie's approach to life makes him, on the whole, open-minded and receptive to others' views. A didactic element creeps of necessity into the reality instructors' speech. However, in creating Basteshaw's character, for instance, Bellow does cause us to question whether his views - or any views - can be taken at face value. Some of Basteshaw's ramblings are clearly eccentric, although others provide the basis for some important considerations (Basteshaw, obviously, represents the man of ideas as opposed to feelings, or theory in opposition to life). Important comments are sometimes given to otherwise insignificant characters, such as the old lady in Florence who wants to show Augie around the churches, in an incident towards the end of the novel, and tells him about her life, reminding him of the pain for the individual in man's condition, despite its universality. This device is perhaps to avoid the feeling of having particular spokesmen, perhaps to illustrate the unexpected sources of wisdom in life. Thus the reader himself is left in a position of moral judgment.

Augie's colloquial manner of speech makes his thoughts more accessible, in spite of their philosophical nature. Often, as throughout Bellow's works, the ideas themselves are those which may occur to anyone. What philosophers couch in abstract terms, Bellow brings to a concrete level, and he furthermore shows the workings of these ideas through action - as when Augie tries to operate his life on the basis of not wanting to set any limits on his

experience. The consistency and integrity in the careful drawing of Augie's character ensure that his thoughts are in accord with the person; in no sense do they strike one as unwieldy interjections by the author. The variety of action and dialogue in Augie's encounters with a large number of other characters prevents his thoughts from seeming like an inner monologue. Bellow has remarked of the novel's style, showing his dissatisfaction with it:

In 'Augie March' I got stuck in a Sherwood Anderson ingénue vein: here are all those people and isn't life wonderful! By the last third of the book I wasn't feeling that way any more. I've always thought that the germ of a novel is found in the first few pages. You start a certain way because it's liberating, and before you're through you find it inhibiting. I didn't know what to do with those inhibitions in the last third of 'Augie March' and I can't bear to reread it.<sup>2</sup>

Notwithstanding Bellow's feelings, however, the difficulties inherent in the style are largely overcome.

From the very opening chapter of the novel, Augie describes his life in terms of the infinite possibilities of existence, putting forward the observation from Heraclitus that "A man's character is his fate", (p.7) and his interpretation of this maxim leads to the essentially passive way in which he conducts his life. He says that he does things "as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way". (p.7) He rejects the idea of accepting any kind of role defined by society,

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2. From Walter Clemons and Jack Kroll, "America's Master Novelist", Newsweek (1 September 1975), p.34.

as this to him represents a loss of individuality, an acceptance of second-best instead of the 'fate good enough' for which he is constantly striving. His philosophy, then, is one of waiting to see what experience brings to him rather than make any positive move by which he might better define his role in life. Passivity can, in his terms, be redefined as openness to experience. When he writes of Bellow's heroes as 'dangling men', J.C. Levenson, in an apt metaphor, puts it another way: "The true dangler wants to read all the terms of the covenant, study the clauses in fine print, before he signs the social compact."<sup>3</sup> One of Augie's fears is that of settling for one life-style, however satisfactory at the time, while so many others remain unexplored. Like other Bellow heroes, he is awake to the concept of infinite possibilities in life, and his dissatisfaction results in great measure from this awareness. Yet he cannot, in his approach to life, be accused of taking an 'easy way out'. Rather, it is an approach necessary to him for reasons indigenous to his character, but his mental attitude shows that he is aware of the difficulty of this approach and is not merely avoiding decision and responsibility. H.M. Harper makes the following remark (he applies it to Herzog, but I think it is just as relevant to The Adventures of Augie March):

A man can choose, of course, to live  
an insulated life, to make a deal with  
fate, to ignore the existential abyss.  
But in doing so he loses his soul, for

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3. J.C. Levenson, "Bellow's Dangling Men", Critique, 3  
(Summer 1960), p.3.



the transcendent meaning of the soul  
lies not only in its relation to the  
infinite, but also in its individuality.<sup>4</sup>

Augie sees no possibility of combining individuality with the roles in which others would see him. In order to avoid the limitations of deciding on a fixed role, he adopts the passive stance mentioned in which he moves through a series of episodes while being manipulated by others who continually try to make him fit into their schemes. Mrs. Renling wants to adopt Augie as her son, with the resultant gain of position and success. His brother Simon wants him to marry Lucy Magnus and thus enter his own newly-found world of riches and commerce. Thea sees Augie as a hunting-companion, a partner in her scheme of taming an eagle, thinking of him not as a person in his own right but as a subordinate to her first love, that of power. So while Augie accepts people's suggestions for a time, and perhaps even deceives himself that he wishes to continue the alliance with them, his instinct for individuality causes him each time to break away at the last moment and free himself from others' influence. Einhorn says of him: "'All of a sudden I catch on to something about you. You've got opposition in you'", (p.137) and Augie himself says: "I never had accepted determination and wouldn't become what other people wanted to make of me." (p.158) As Richard Chase writes, Augie "wants to take the "unsafe" road and be a "personality"

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4. H.M. Harper, Desperate Faith - a study of Bellow, Salinger, Mailer, Baldwin and Updike, The University of North Carolina Press (1967), p.59.

rather than take the safe road and be a "type". He resists being "recruited" to other people's versions of reality and significance."<sup>5</sup> Eventually, when Augie marries Stella, he finally commits himself, though without changing radically in character. Whether this is a compromise of his ideals, or a positive step forward which represents some degree of enlightenment, will emerge with further examination of his career.

To consider why, in the first place, Augie becomes so involved at all with a large number of people to whom he is not prepared to commit himself wholly, we should look again at his views on fate, with particular regard to the workings of chance. He wants the best for himself, in spite of knowing that he is not in control of his own fate. His rebellion against the arbitrariness of death determines the premium he places on individuality, while his yielding to others' suggestions represents his attempt - almost a compulsion - to take whatever life has to offer rather than to define the limits of his own existence. So passivity is to him a virtue which implies perhaps an acceptance of life's variety as well as its unmanageable quality. Yet he does not find peace of mind, but remains constantly striving. The question of passivity versus activity is discussed between himself and Mintouchian, who comes out against passivity:

'And you can't sit still. I know this double poser, that if you make a move

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5. Richard Chase, "The Adventures of Saul Bellow",  
Commentary, 27 (April 1959), p.325.

you may lose but if you sit still you will decay. But what will you lose? You will not invent better than God or nature or turn yourself into the man who lacks no gift or development before you make the move. This is not given to us.' (p.559)

Augie prefers to take his chance with fate, rather than exercise the privilege of free will, which he sees as not necessarily productive; in the end, man's life is shaped by arbitrary forces: "from vast existence in some way you rise up and at any moment you may go back. Any moment; the next, maybe." (p.421) Basteshaw, the eccentric seaman with whom Augie shares a lifeboat after the shipwreck on his first journey in the Merchant Marine after his marriage to Stella, echoes these ideas:

'The shoving multitude bears down, and you're nothing, a meaningless name, and not just obscure in eternity but right now. The fate of the meanest your fate. Death! But no, there must be some distinction. The soul cries out against this namelessness. And then it exaggerates. It tells you, "You were meant to astonish the world."' (p.580)

Basteshaw says that these thoughts are neurotic, but that the alternative is to adjust to the reality he has described. Likewise Augie scorns adjustment in the name of integrity and individuality. To him, the goals which Simon, Thea and others set themselves are ways of escaping the real issue of the meaning of life; so, he continues to search for a 'fate good enough', refusing to accept such ways out. Hence, "I touched all sides and nobody knew where I belonged. I had no good idea of that myself." (p.134)

In spite of his passivity, Augie is paradoxically ambitious; not in a worldly or materialistic sense, but in that already mentioned, of not wanting to accept second-best, despite the advice of others. Clem Tambow jokes, "'How is your campaign after a worth-while fate, Augie?'" and Augie says "Why, it was a crying matter, no fooling, to anyone who might know which side was up, that here was I trying to refuse to lead a disappointed life." (p.499) Life without great aspirations, without some goal to attain, becomes pointless in Augie's eyes. He says, quite late in the novel, after his and Thea's separation: "So in a way I died somewhat, and if there was anything I knew by now it was how impossible it was to live without something infinitely mighty and great." (p.478) Augie's ambition tends to the spiritual rather than the material, as Clem points out: "'You're not concrete enough'" (p.501) and we inevitably ask whether his years of drifting, of meeting fate as it comes, are justified in terms of their result. Mimi Villars would deny the validity of this way of living: "'You can't let your life be decided for you by any old thing that comes up.'" (p.319) Certainly, Augie learns more about man's nature and does achieve a greater degree of discrimination through, for instance, his observation of Simon's corrupt business tactics. His own attempts at book-stealing for a living further this; he becomes gradually more aware of himself and of the fact that by yielding to others' schemes and accepting material dependence he risks losing his own integrity.

By the time of the Trotsky plan, after Thea has left Augie, when Frazer, the revolutionary, asks him to pose as Trotsky's nephew to help him travel incognito as a tourist to escape the police, Augie actually dreads any sort of involvement, though he fears that he will not have the initiative to refuse.

As a way of life, Augie's is obviously not commendable in its outward manifestations, but, rather than overtly making this judgment, Bellow is, I think, trying to show that, with such a temperament, Augie can only find his destiny by his initial refusal to compromise. Thus, as so often in the novel, we sympathise with Augie rather than with those who would instruct him as to how to achieve success in life. Augie must become less extremist, must accept some definition as to his path in life, but whether or not his way is a valid means to an end, we view his exploration as showing a worthwhile, if temporary, solution. One critic who has commended the integrity of Augie's way of life is G.J. Goldberg, who comments: "Augie's search is ultimately for self-realization, and while his way may seem aimless and circumscribed by external influences, his quest demands courage of a truly high order."<sup>6</sup> This remark is certainly justified; Augie's courage is a point which needs stressing. Throughout the novel we feel that the easier way out is not his, but rather that taken by his friends and relatives. Yet

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6. G.J. Goldberg, "Life's Customer, Augie March", Critique, 3 (Summer 1960), p.19.

finally, his way of life must be regarded as a transitional one. Augie suffers, in fact, from the Bellow protagonist's common problem of wanting to think and to experience without limit. That Augie is aware of this is shown; Sophie Geratis, for instance, remarks to him "'Nothing is ever good enough for you to stick to"' (p.521) and Augie reflects:

Well, she meant why wasn't I going to set my feet on a path of life and stop looking over the field. Why, there was nothing I longed for more than that. Let it come! Let there be consummation, and superfluity be finished from the next drop of the pendulum onward! Let the necessity for the mystical great things of life, which, not satisfied, lives in us as the father of secret miseries, be fulfilled and have a chance to show it's not the devil himself. Did Sophie think I didn't want to have a wife, and sons and daughters, or be busy at my appropriate daily work? (p.522)

What Augie needs to look for, then, is a way of channelling his determination and optimism, but so as to provide fulfilment and some way of avoiding compromise. Even if his life is unsatisfactory, compromise, to him, is the greater of the two evils. He believes, from instinct, that "'It can never be right to offer to die, and if that's what the data of experience tell you, then you must get along without them.'" (p.503) It is, of course, Augie's very nature which makes him able to lead his kind of life; were he not an optimist, with an innate sense of the worthwhileness of life, depression would have caused him to seek refuge in a career or some other rigidly structured way of life. His attitude can be seen as a direct contrast to Joseph's in Dangling Man.

Augie's perpetual consciousness of the problems of individuality and of how to remain independent in a society where the pressure seems to him to be towards the stereotype has one notable danger. He experiences isolation, a feeling of being unique among others. He erects barriers because of his rigid beliefs and displays a lack of sensitivity to others' feelings because of his preoccupation with himself. His tendency to see people in the roles of manipulator and manipulated means that he denies himself true communication, thus accentuating and isolating his problem. He fails, for example, to consider whether others see life similarly, and he regards people as incidental to his life - not requiring any effort whatsoever towards any responsibility on his part. One encounter becomes to him very much like another. He himself admits the trouble: "I couldn't be hurt enough by the fate of other people." (p.522) This calls to mind a passage of Teilhard de Chardin's, in a discussion of the problem of man's need for identity in a rapidly changing world, which illustrates well one limitation of Augie's way of thinking:

I know very well that by a kind of innate obsession we cannot rid ourselves of the idea that we become most masters of ourselves by being as isolated as possible. But is not this the reverse of the truth? We must not forget that in each of us, by our very nature, everything is in an elemental state, including our freedom of action. We can only achieve a wider degree of freedom by joining and associating with others in an appropriate way.<sup>7</sup>

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7. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, The Future of Man, Collins, London (1971), p.189.

Augie's view is the opposite of this; he seeks strength by defending himself against the world with artificial barriers. Speaking of the difference between people's real natures and those they show to the world, he says: "nothing genuine is allowed to appear and nobody knows what's real." (p.465) This pessimistic observation shows one major danger of egotism - whether Augie's or that of others - as he realises; to behave thus artificially prevents any real sincerity or spontaneity, or the unself-consciousness necessary for one to hold any true interest in one's fellows. Mintouchian, whom Augie sees as "another of those persons who persistently arise before me with life counsels and illumination throughout my entire earthly pilgrimage" (p.552) discusses with him the failure and distortion of truth inherent in much of man's communication: "'I stand in awe of the genius of the race. But a large part of this genius is devoted to lying and seeming what you are not.'" (p.559) Mintouchian advocates a return to simplicity and "pureheartedness". Augie, in his reply, puts forward another problem in the way of attempting to communicate 'naturally'. This is the problem of his feeling inferior; he doubts the worth of his true self: "'I have always tried to become what I am. But it's a frightening thing. Because what if what I am by nature isn't good enough?'" (p.559) He realises, however, encouraged by Mintouchian, that his only hope for a positive future is in accepting himself as he is. Bellow is thus implicitly demonstrating that this will lead



to greater satisfaction in communication with others. Earlier, Augie has already recognised that his desire to follow the plans of others is due to an inferiority complex rather than to his professed 'love' for them:

So if I wanted to please, it was in order to mislead or show everyone, wasn't it, now? And this must be because I had an idea everyone was my better and had something I didn't have. But what did people seem to me anyhow, something fantastic? I didn't want to be what they made of me but wanted to please them. An independent fate and love too - what confusion! (p.464)

Augie is as isolated as the other Bellow heroes who actually avoid human communication, but in a significantly different way. Although he is seemingly gregarious and adaptable, his nature prevents any real, two-way relationships from forming. He recognises, in a passage at the very end of the novel, that man's desire to be independent is shown also by his choice of pursuits; he speaks of the need "to prove full and ultimate self-sufficiency". (p.609)

In his relationships with women in particular, Augie suffers from a wrong view of love, a selfish, one-sided attitude. He can be compared in this respect to Herzog, who shows the same obsession with self and absence of trust when pursuing a relationship. Augie uses people and is used by them. Despite an only half-hearted affection for Lucy Magnus, he is willing to play his brother's game for a time, and yet we can foresee (and feel Augie knows subconsciously) that the engagement must end. Augie employs the device of creating a situation unacceptable to the other person in order to force an

ending to his involvement, breaking a New Year's Eve date with Lucy in order to help Mimi after her abortion. In his relationship with Sophie Geratis, Augie takes advantage of the fact that Sophie seems to consider herself 'second-class' to him, and is willing to step aside on Thea's arrival, but to return to him on his own terms when he is once more alone. Thus there is no threat for Augie of a two-way involvement; though he shows some consideration towards her, from the start he has mentally opted out of responsibility. Augie's relationship with Thea is the first serious and significant one in his career, for it demonstrates his attitude to love for what it really is. It precedes, of course, his later love for Stella, which he regards as strong enough for marriage.

Augie is at first interested only in Thea's sister, Esther, but when Thea contacts him some time later, he falls surprisingly easily into an affair with her - possibly, as Thea later accusingly suggests, because of the flattery of being pursued by an attractive woman. Because of Thea's strong and independent personality, and Augie's lack at this point of any clear direction, she, predictably enough, takes the initiative in organizing the trip to Mexico and the iguana-training scheme. Augie professes a genuine love for Thea, but keeps a certain detachment. Though he objects to the strangeness of her plans he acquiesces in them, but eventually pursues his own instinctive inclination to help Stella to escape from Oliver when she asks him, regardless of

the effect this will have on Thea. Thea says to Augie, after the episode with Stella, that "'perhaps love would be strange and foreign to you no matter which way it happened, and maybe you just don't want it.'" (p.459) Augie sees love in terms of extremes; either one must remain totally detached in order to retain one's independence and personality, or one must submit completely. He observes, concerning his feelings for Thea in the early days, that "The great astonishment of this state was that the unit of humanity should be maybe not one but two. Not even the eagle falconry distressed me as much as that what happened to her had to happen to me, too, necessarily. This was scary." (p.378)

When Stella approaches Augie to help her escape, he thinks that "I perhaps needed an opportunity to be definite and active and to believe that definiteness and action still existed", (p.442) and, on Stella's request that he should take her to Mexico City: "I shivered, as if my fate had brushed me. Admitted that I always tried to elicit what I hoped for; how did people, however, seldom fail to supply it so mysteriously?" (p.445) Just as in his relationship with Lucy Magnus, he is subconsciously provoking a break. His actions are a form of self-assertion which he feels compelled to make, even though he risks the destruction of his relationship with Thea. Logically speaking, he claims to love Thea and wants to marry her, yet he cannot resist the opposing force of Stella's wishes; he remarks of the night spent with Stella on the

mountain after the car breaks down during the escape trip: "After much making with sense, it's senselessness that you submit to." (p.453) After the event, of course, and after his break with Thea, he suffers desperately from his misery. He comes to a realisation through this of the essential isolation to be experienced within any relationship. Though he had wanted to be free himself, he had, in his mind, challenged Thea's own independence, and perhaps now recognises this:

I had wanted to marry her, but there isn't any possession. No, no, wives don't own husbands, nor husbands wives, nor parents children. They go away, or they die. So the only possessing is of the moment. If you're able. And while any wish lives, it lives in the face of its negative. This is why we make the obstinate sign of possession. Like deeds, certificates, rings, pledges, and other permanent things. (p.471)

When he meets Stella again, Augie is convinced that his love is greater than in any of his previous relationships and strong enough to justify marriage. However, Stella's weaknesses and the incompatibilities of the two are eventually discovered. Augie accepts, though, as he has not done before, the imperfections to be expected in a relationship, and he is able despite these to hope that he will be a father and may finally lead a more settled life. He also shows a general optimism about life: "the animal ridens in me, the laughing creature, forever rising up." (p.617)

Augie's relationship with his family seems to vacillate between fierce emotional love and indifference; as in

his encounters with other people, he puts his own activities first, even to the extent that he may not see the family for months, before suddenly renewing contact with them, nursing feelings of guilt. Augie does show a genuine, if spasmodic, love for and compassion towards his mother and mentally handicapped brother George, whereas Simon's attentions are concerned only with his appearance to others, with doing the 'right thing'; he needs the semblance of order and social correctness in his life, seeing it as a condition of happiness, in contrast to the disorder of Augie's life. Simon's and Augie's feelings towards each other fluctuate between love and hate. Although they are different in spirit, they feel an inexplicable tie, though not, of course, one which could ever jeopardise Augie's independent approach to life.

Throughout Augie's searchings, one topic of discussion frequently reverted to is that of the nature of reality. Augie is a seeker after reality, for illusion is part of the 'escape' compromise which he is trying to avoid. Augie's optimism is his weapon for coping with reality, his assumption being that people will often avoid or ignore situations they cannot cope with. "Everyone tries to create a world he can live in, and what he can't use he often can't see." (p.440) This attitude, in Augie's opinion, is a weakness to be recognised and avoided. But he is not unaware of the problem of the need for illusion; during a long contemplative passage following his separation from Thea, he maintains that illusion is simply the

inclination of people to see themselves in a particular role. Illusion fills the world with all kinds of institutions and edifices, so that actuality consists of a series of man-made conventions which detract from any serious consideration of life's real meaning. A quotation from Sartre's Nausea provides an apt comparison: "Each of them has his little personal obstinacy which prevents him from noticing that he exists; there isn't one of them who doesn't think he is indispensable to somebody or something."<sup>8</sup> Thus life is reduced to a contest of presenting one way as being more 'genuine' than another. Augie considers this in relation to himself:

That's the struggle of humanity, to recruit others to your version of what's real. Then even the flowers and the moss on the stones become the moss and the flowers of a version.

I certainly looked an ideal recruit. But the invented things never became real for me no matter how I urged myself to think they were. (p.466)

Augie's failure to attach himself to any one role in life because of his refusal to accept 'second-best' is connected, then, with his scorn of those who look at life in illusory terms. However, since in his view 'reality' is a nebulous thing to strive after in any case, we wonder whether there is not some compromise implicit in his final decision to marry Stella, which is in itself a move towards a 'role' to halt the continual drifting, or whether on the other hand there may be some answer for him

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8. Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea, Penguin Books, London (1965), p.161.

which may enable him to accept what he would once have considered, and perhaps still does, an 'imperfect' situation, without losing his idealism or becoming one of the breed he scorns (such as the Magnuses, with their emphasis on money and position). The question of reality is discussed again between Augie and Basteshaw. To Basteshaw the reality people avoid is clear, "'A billion souls boiling with anger at a doom of insignificance.'" (p.580) Indeed, the main questions which emerge from the epic of Augie's life are whether, in the end, he overcomes this feeling - that of the fear of the meaninglessness of life, which affects most of Bellow's heroes - and whether his optimism can find sufficient grounds to refute the theory.

In relation to Augie's wish for significance in his life, and to his compulsive honesty, the question of happiness is much at issue: whether happiness is a noble aim, and also the fact that it is frequently feared on the grounds that it must be impermanent. For some, to have had happiness and lost it makes life accordingly unbearable. In a very simple example, Augie refuses to believe that he and Basteshaw, drifting in their lifeboat after the shipwreck, are within reach of land until there is some proof. In general, Bellow seems to argue that happiness is a valid state but one which necessarily implies that of its opposite. By its nature it will not last, but is to be experienced, if people will allow it, as a positive feeling to be thought of as productive rather than as a basis for cynicism. For instance, Basteshaw tells the story of a

German goldsmith whose works of art were eventually melted down, so that his life's work had been in vain. He turned to religion, falling back on God, as Basteshaw puts it. Basteshaw asks also what he would have suffered without a God. Drawing as his conclusion the impermanence of, in this case, art and beauty, Basteshaw nevertheless makes the point:

'Didn't this saintly German wake up many mornings inspired, with joy in his heart? What more can you ask? He couldn't be both happy and sure of being right for eternity. You have to take your chance that being happy is also being right.' (p.578)

Augie is impressed by this speech. The word 'inspired' seems relevant; happiness is not a condition to be sought after, but one that comes arbitrarily. It is valid to act on one's happiness, as did the German (in his case the impulse to create) in spite of subsequent negative events. Accepting impermanence removes, of course, much of the necessity to define and to search which besets all Bellow's heroes. There is here a plea for trusting instinct, and for the dignity of existence even though it is governed, in large part, by chance. Conversely, one should not seek happiness as an end in itself, as a means of making life seem worthwhile; Simon's final discontent, as Charlotte points out, arises from a conviction of his need and right to be happy.

After examining Augie's career, one must raise the question mentioned before - whether or not and to what extent the conclusion is affirmative. As far as Augie's personal discoveries go, he has accepted the 'tie' of



marriage and its ensuing role. But it seems that the conclusion is not so much one of his having found security and contentment in one of the roles he had previously rejected. Instead, it is his realisation that outward definitions do not matter; he is ready to accept that his wishes at the moment are for marriage with Stella (no longer questioning the validity of the role). He also realises that things may change : "And how long would I be right now? But I had great confidence in my love of Stella and her love of me." (p.578) He has all along been trying to answer an abstract question, what the best approach to life is, in terms of concrete action. His marriage represents a ceasing of this effort, but not subsequently a limitation of the possibility of fulfilment. He still retains his optimism. Augie has mentioned, in a discussion with Mintouchian, his belief in basing his life on the "axial lines", a term which, because of its abstractness, represents his personal and not entirely explicable insight, and has described the visionary and blissful view of life they have brought him. The lines "with respect to which you must be straight" (p.524) are a metaphorical guideline to the ideal direction of one's life. Augie refers to them again towards the end of the novel, making the point that a cessation of effort is necessary:

I said when I started to make the record that I would be plain and heed the knocks as they came, and also that a man's character is his fate. Well, then it is obvious that this fate, or what he settles for, is also his character. And since I never have had any place of rest, it should follow that I have trouble being still, and

furthermore my hope is based upon getting to be still so that the axial lines can be found. When striving stops, the truth comes as a gift - beauty, harmony, love, and so forth. Maybe I can't take the very things I want. (pp.591-2)

Augie has, then, come to this important realisation, that an effortless, trusting approach to life will bring him the conviction of its validity which he seeks, whereas searching will not.

In his final recollections, Augie is once more optimistic; the difference between this and his earlier states is that he is optimistic in spite of acknowledging the possibility of defeat, something he has previously been reluctant to do (as exemplified in the scene when he recognises his own self-doubt and the need nevertheless to accept himself as he is). He ends thus:

What's so laughable, that a Jacqueline, for instance, as hard used as that by rough forces, will still refuse to lead a disappointed life? Or is the laugh at nature - including eternity - that it thinks it can win over us and the power of hope? Nah, nah! I think. It never will. But that probably is the joke, on one or the other, and laughing is an enigma that includes both. Look at me, going everywhere! Why, I am a sort of Columbus of those near-at-hand and believe that you can come to them in this immediate terra incognita that spreads out in every gaze. I may well be a flop at this line of endeavour. Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America. (p.617)

As in much of Bellow's work, the affirmation of this last comment consists primarily in an inward ordering of one's approach to life. This is the extent to which one can put forward any basis for optimism. Bellow suggests

that of two possible approaches to life, the optimistic and positive is the better; one has nothing to lose, from a practical point of view, by trying it. The real losers are those, like Simon, who fight life with logic and materialism. This approach is also valid in view of the instinctive moments of a vision of joy in life which Augie has experienced. The progression in the novel consists in Augie's final change in favour of acceptance rather than strife, the importance of which has already been shown. His existence at the end of the story is by no means blissful or settled; he argues with Stella, wonders about death, and discovers the unhappy state of his brother's marriage. But a revolutionary change would be alien to Bellow's honesty; Augie is, most importantly, still plausible. He paves the way for those later Bellow heroes who in similar ways find peace only on realising that too much analytical consciousness is, finally, futile. He illustrates an approach to life, and ensuing peace, which can be attained for the having by anyone if their priorities are right. "And I believe that any man at any time can come back to these axial lines, even if an unfortunate bastard, if he will be quiet and wait it out." (p.524) For Augie's own part, he has moved on from the sense of falsity and isolation contained in most of his relationships to the situation with Stella where he is prepared to act positively and to hope for the future in spite of some obvious discord. He has lost nothing and given up no ideals, but has gained in self-confidence and self-

knowledge. The outcome must be regarded as not negative or static, but, finally, positive. We need not doubt that he will have a "fate good enough".

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SEIZE THE DAY - THE CHANCE OF REDEMPTION

In Seize the Day Bellow explores the nature of determinism and free will in greater detail than in the previous novels. The question of man's control over his life is considered; to what extent he can plan his life, and whether the factor of ill-luck negates any attempt to create order, thus reducing the worth of life. The novel works towards the conclusion that life should be lived in such a manner that one may enjoy a fulfilling present (as the title implies). This idea was suggested at the end of The Adventures of Augie March in the conversation between Augie and Basteshaw. Basteshaw claimed that the possibility of future mischance did not negate the present; in Seize the Day the influence of the past is discussed. What finally determines the sense of the positive is, as in the other novels, an acknowledgment of human brotherhood. This brings relief from isolation and subsequent anxiety; Tommy Wilhelm's failures can largely be explained by his initial inability to recognise this.

Although the social climate of the Depression pervades the novel, the essentially inward and private nature of Wilhelm's failings should be stressed; some critics, for instance Leslie Fiedler, have seen him as an outsider purely because of the failure inherent in poverty and his distaste for the cynical, money-making ethic of the times.

Certainly, the social situation leads Wilhelm to place importance on money and success, but only as a means of ending his worries, rather than in the 'money for money's sake' attitude of the stock market, which Tamkin equates with aggression, even murder. Wilhelm is not so much a victim of the times as of himself. However, though the themes are of deep psychological import, the novel reflects Bellow's belief in "the human tragedy-comedy",<sup>1</sup> in Dr. Tamkin's words. The comedy of life is never lost sight of; much of it lies in the ironic distance between Wilhelm's intentions and his actions, some simply in the ridiculousness of Tamkin or in the idiosyncrasies of Dr. Adler, Tommy's father.

At the opening of the novel Wilhelm is in a position now familiar to the reader of Bellow; he is another 'dangler', who has lacked a routine since he left his job as a salesman. As does Joseph, he creates his own artificial routine - getting up early, breakfasting, buying his paper ("The getting out had in itself become the chief business")(p.8) - and gives his day some importance by imagining, or at least telling other people, that this is the day he is going to find a job, though in practice he does nothing about it. Wilhelm lacks Joseph's intellectualism and love of the arts, Leventhal's sense of conscience and Augie's enthusiasm for 'doing'; hence he may be seen as a somewhat negative character, who sits back,

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1. Saul Bellow, Seize the Day, Penguin Books, London (1971), p.77. Subsequent references in this chapter to this work will be included in the text.

nurses his grievances, and allows his appearance and habits, as well as his mental state, to deteriorate.

Wilhelm is Jewish, but the Jewish background is rarely mentioned, and it otherwise appears only in general factors, such as the strong sense of the importance of the family and of material success. He is alienated from his family perhaps more violently than previous Bellow heroes. He lives in the same hotel as his father, who publicly keeps up the appearance of interest in his son, but privately has no warmth towards him. Wilhelm has left his wife, Margaret, who only communicates with him in order to demand money. Nor does he appear to have any real friends (a mistress, Olive, is mentioned from time to time, who would marry him if his wife would divorce him - if this is not wishful thinking on Wilhelm's part - but her role is vague in the extreme). Lacking any fulfilment or self-respect, Wilhelm is an alien in society in general as well as in his personal relationships. His only wish for contact with people seems to come from a desire to take, to receive help, and not to give. If others are unfeeling towards him, he is equally unable to see their point of view. His self-interest is the cause of his disastrous association with Dr. Tamkin, the quack psychiatrist and con-man.

At this stage Wilhelm's life is a failure in every respect - in business and in his attempts to win over his father and restrain his wife's demands. He is worried, too, about the stock-market gamble he has taken at Tamkin's

suggestion, investing his last seven hundred dollars, although this was against his better judgment. He looks back over a life of past mistakes, in which he has changed his name in the process of trying to create a new person of himself. Earlier, he persuaded himself, on the advice (subsequently withdrawn) of a small-time talent scout, Maurice Venice, that he should go to Hollywood and give up his studies. More recently, he has failed even to keep his job as a salesman. Wilhelm remembers the episode of the talent scout: "Why, he thought, he cast me even then for a loser". (p.25) We might well ask, in the face of his obvious lack of judgment and our feeling that he has only himself to blame for his present position, how it is that Bellow can maintain our interest and sympathy in such a character. Though Wilhelm is said to have charm, we see little evidence of this in the man as he is presented to us, only a rather abject, self-pitying, hopeless being. But it is here that the strength of the novel lies. Just as in The Victim, Bellow's manipulation of his themes makes us aware that the human condition is a shared one; we inhabit a world of losers as well as of winners. More precisely, it is because of the extent to which certain character traits of Wilhelm's, rather than the bad luck which he mentions, have shaped his life that we take so much notice; his faults are recognisable and his mistakes are easily made. The feelings he expresses in public are those common to everyone in private.

Wilhelm is certainly not as intelligent as, for



instance, Joseph or Herzog; he is not able to analyse his situation in the same way that they do. However, he has in common with their initial views a wish for fairness, perhaps for an easy way out. Wilhelm is ambitious, but in an eager, get-rich-quick fashion without any real motivation or self-discipline, deluding himself that there must be a simple answer to his problems. He is given to self-deception, while in turn deceiving others, so that he avoids overt recognition of the truth behind his actions. He says of going to Hollywood "'I was too mature for college. I was a big boy, you see. Well, I thought, when do you start to become a man?'" (pp.18-19) By this remark, he proves, conversely, his immaturity. Realising his mistakes, he recriminates with himself, but not without self-pity; he wants others to acknowledge his unfortunate state. When he describes to his father how his wife treats him, he makes a melodramatic gesture of being strangled. Preoccupied with his troubles, Wilhelm is unable to maintain any reserve even while talking to strangers, though at the same time he hates himself for it. He sees others as possible instruments of his salvation, not as beings with their own problems, and is thus taken in by Tamkin, hoping some good will come of the association. "That the doctor cared about him pleased him. This was what he craved, that someone should care about him, wish him well. Kindness, mercy, he wanted." (p.78) In an argument with his father, he cries out: "'What do I expect? . . . I expect help!'" (p.58) His association with

Tamkin and with Maurice Venice shows him wanting to believe them, and yet he is unable to trust them entirely. This indicates the lack of self-respect in his choice of doubtful business partners; it also suggests that he is easily led. He seems unable to stand alone; lack of judgment and perversity over his indecision cause his mistakes: "After much thought and hesitation and debate he invariably took the course he had rejected innumerable times. Ten such decisions made up the history of his life." (pp.26-7) For all his hopelessness, he retains a stubborn pride about not returning to his old job - a weak man's attempt to give an appearance of strength.

Wilhelm's realisation of his faults helps us to pity him. He says of his father: "And why . . . should he or anybody else pity me; or why should I be pitied sooner than another fellow? It is my childish mind that thinks people are ready to give it just because you need it." (pp.100-101) It is perhaps also because of Wilhelm's good intentions that he can claim our sympathy. Despite his bungling and other unattractive qualities, he has an essential goodness and feeling for life (lacked by his father) which cannot be cancelled out by weakness. As with other Bellow heroes, such as Herzog, if he is at fault, nevertheless his contemporaries are often far more despicable; it is partly his refusal to fit into the money-making, cut-throat world of New York in the Depression which causes his apparent purposelessness. Sympathy is built up by hints along these lines throughout, before

Wilhelm's final affirmation of love.

What can be inferred from the novel, then, is Wilhelm's need to progress from self-delusion, false hope, and passivity, to the realisation that life is what one makes it - to use an apt cliché. His resorts to fantasy when the truth is unsatisfactory prevent him from adjusting to the realities of his situation. He lies about his education, and the story of the talent scout. Perhaps these are echoes of the lies of his father, who is unable to talk about his children without elevating them into imaginary successes, though he really despises them for not fulfilling his wishes. The clouding of reality by Wilhelm's lies enable him to believe, impatiently, in the possibility of 'instant success', first with Venice, who tells him: "This way, in one jump, the world knows who you are."

(p.25) After constant failures, Wilhelm looks for a formula, believing there must be some simple key to success if he can only find the right person to give it to him - perhaps Tamkin: "Secretly, he prayed the doctor would give him some useful advice and transform his life." (p.78)

In the stock market with Rappaport, he is desperate to try to recoup his losses: "Silently, by a sort of telepathic concentration, he begged the old man to speak the single word that would save him, give him the merest sign." (p.94) Bellow maintains that success in life - a fulfilling mental attitude rather than material success - is something that Wilhelm must learn can come only from within; no-one else can supply the answers. Like Augie March, he must avoid

this type of passivity. As his father rightly, if unsympathetically, puts it : "'And people who will just wait for help - must wait for help. They have got to stop waiting.'" (p.117)

As mentioned, Wilhelm's relationships point to the dangers of sham and selfishness, while emphasising the need for true communication. While not entirely responsible for the lack of feeling his father and wife exhibit towards him, Wilhelm allows the relationships to become destructive to his peace of mind. Though he finds no warmth in the family, he is nevertheless obsessed by and emotionally tied to it, spending a large amount of time and energy vainly begging his father for consideration (if not money), and is unable, because of his selfish concern for his children, to deal firmly with his wife's excessive demands for money. In this attitude he is the precursor of Herzog. Wilhelm's fault lies in his basically self-interested approach; he is unable to detach himself from his father or to respect his reserve, and his feelings for his children are based on guilt, together with the wish to keep their love. Granted that there are many faults on the other side, Wilhelm needs to learn to approach others with a more objective attitude, and to keep things in proportion. If his father will not treat him as a son, he still has to lead his own life. Immaturity is inherent in his behaviour towards his father, as he notices: "Furthermore, it's time I stopped feeling like a kid towards him, a small son." (p.15) Even without Wilhelm's own awareness of

his desperate, pleading approach to his father, we are aware that Wilhelm's bad opinion of him and of his wife may be exaggerated. But, as we see later in the case of Herzog and Madeleine, it is not the injustice of their treatment of him that causes his problems. Nor would their indulgence help his basic need for a positive and independent approach to life, the antithesis of his present demand for some kind of justice: "Wilhelm had a great knot of wrong tied tight within his chest, and tears approached his eyes but he didn't let them out." (p.58)

Wilhelm's whole life is lived on a negative basis, dominated by the fear of failure rather than the possibility of success. He is terrified by the prospect of chance, as symbolised by his agitation while watching the prices of lard rise and fall. He is conscious of chance as a destructive factor; he remembers bad luck rather than good. For instance, he is dismayed by the misfortune of having to waste time helping Mr. Rappaport across the road when he is anxiously trying to get back to the stock market. Having lost his money seems to Wilhelm, albeit serious, a failure of character, partly because he knows he was wrong to gamble money on which his solvency depended and also to trust Tamkin's advice, partly because he is unable to accept the factor of chance implicit in any gamble. Though the uncontrollable events of chance in life are alarming, complete control would most probably present just as terrifying a prospect. To look back to Dangling Man, Joseph cannot cope with the responsibility of the

freedom to plan his life, at least outwardly, and opts for some form of external order and distraction. The only approach to chance is to see it as an integral part of life, potentially lucky as well as unlucky, and to develop discernment as to when to accept one's life, and when to try to alter it. Wilhelm tends to let chance destroy him, and to do this is to deny life as it is and to avoid facing reality. Knowing that chance may bring setbacks, he fails to exercise his right of choice. On the subject of chance and choice, Tony Tanner makes a relevant quotation from Kierkegaard:

'So it is too that in the eyes of the world it is dangerous to venture. And why? Because one may lose. But not to venture is shrewd. And yet, by not venturing, it is so dreadfully easy to lose that which it would be difficult to lose in even the most venturesome venture ... one's self.'<sup>2</sup>

Wilhelm has to learn to avoid this tendency to live without making choices, as did Augie.

As a result of attaching too much importance to chance, rather than trying to come to terms with it, Wilhelm allows the past to take an exaggerated part in his life. The past becomes a burden; his mistakes weigh him down, and he constantly indulges in regrets. He says to Tamkin "'You can spend the entire second half of your life recovering from the mistakes of the first half.'" (p.99) Because of his belief that "trouble rusts out the system" (p.57)

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2. Tony Tanner, City of Words, Jonathan Cape, London (1971), p.65. He quotes from Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, Anchor Edition.

Wilhelm can see only a present which is warped by failure in the past. He is so overwhelmed by these feelings that he thinks of bearing his mistakes as part of a necessary burden: "Maybe the making of mistakes expressed the very purpose of his life and the essence of his being here. Maybe he was supposed to make them and suffer from them on this earth." (p.61) While everyone has to suffer mistakes as a condition of man's ability to think and to choose, Wilhelm loses all sense of proportion when regretting his mistakes; he needs to acquire a more moderate perspective.

The burden of self, of one's own character, is Wilhelm's explanation of a problem much wider in scope which is common to all the Bellow heroes; the burden of existence itself, of the isolation of and ultimate responsibility for one's self:

. . . this Wilky, or Tommy Wilhelm, forty-four years old, father of two sons, at present living in the Hotel Gloriana, was assigned to be the carrier of a load which was his own self, his characteristic self. There was no figure or estimate for the value of this load. But it is probably exaggerated by the subject, T.W. Who is a visionary sort of animal. Who has to believe that he can know why he exists. Though he has never seriously tried to find out why. (p.44)

On this theme, suffering as a actual emotional need is discussed. Tamkin, in a parallel with Basteshaw's advice to Augie, sees how Wilhelm has become used to his troubles, indeed almost perpetuating them, and warns him (as regards his wife's oppression of him) not to marry suffering, as some people do. Wilhelm admits this as a truth among all

Tamkin's falsehoods: "suffering is the only kind of life they are sure they can have, and if they quit suffering they're afraid they'll have nothing." (p.105) There is a security implicit in consistency, and happiness seems too risky to enjoy; the possibility of losing it (as mentioned in the previous chapter) makes it an invalid state for some people. This is of course linked with the fear of chance, and with Wilhelm's inability to live in the present. Possibly this distrust of happiness is behind Wilhelm's compulsion to take what he knows is the wrong course. He perversely perpetuates his misery, thus adding to his stock of remembered mistakes. In this attitude there is a destructive tendency to see things in black and white; suffering and joy are put forward as alternatives, but what the sufferers do not realise, in dwelling on a wrong past and a risky future, is that they could be far worse off. They are at only one stage out of many in their lives, and to deny any possibility of change for the better, even of an instinctive change in attitude, is to allow the existential burden to remove any meaning in living. This Wilhelm is in danger of doing.

It is Tamkin, Wilhelm's 'reality-instructor', who eventually helps open his eyes to these negative traits - even by his final betrayal of Wilhelm, which forces him to realise that he was wrong, after all, to trust Tamkin. In common with some of the other reality-instructors in Bellow's fiction, Tamkin is in some ways a charlatan, at least to the point of making Wilhelm seem far more in the



right than is the case. He is given to lies, is eccentric in behaviour and suspect in his abilities, but is nevertheless capable of pinpointing the necessary precepts which elude Wilhelm's reasoning. As Wilhelm himself asks, "How can he be such a jerk, and even perhaps an operator, a swindler, and understand so well what gives?" (p.106) This anomaly of Tamkin's alternating despicableness and wisdom puzzles Wilhelm:

He spoke of things that mattered, and as very few people did this he could take you by surprise, excite you, move you. Maybe he wished to do good, maybe give himself a lift to a higher level, maybe believe his own prophecies, maybe touch his own heart. Who could tell? He had picked up a lot of strange ideas; Wilhelm could only suspect, he could not say with certainty, that Tamkin hadn't made them his own. (pp.88-89)

Tamkin is the spokesman for, but not the embodiment of, important principles in life. Wilhelm's thoughts offer reasons why this should be so; also, apart from the obvious realism in creating a multi-faceted, imperfect character, Bellow may again be making the point that perception is not enough, does not preclude other faults. Tamkin lacks Wilhelm's essential goodwill, and perception thus remains for him a negative asset. Mr. Perls, Dr. Adler's neighbour in the hotel, points out that Tamkin could be sane as well as crazy; the two can be indistinguishable. Tamkin's appearance is strange, and his stories and assertions about himself even stranger. His philosophy can descend to truisms: "'everybody is alike, common or aristocrat'". (p.73) Even Wilhelm, with his readiness to trust,

questions Tamkin's character, yet is taken in sufficiently to continue associating with him. The ironical difference between what Wilhelm privately thinks of Tamkin's bizarre poem on humanity, which he cannot understand, and his non-committal, even complimentary, remarks to Tamkin's face, is amusing (not that Wilhelm, for all his weakness, is incapable of telling Tamkin to shut up now and then).

On a practical, and stylistic, level, Tamkin is a character who arouses Wilhelm's questioning instincts and puts him in a position where he is forced to judge. Were Wilhelm able to trust him without reservation, there would be no testing of his powers of decision. Eventually, he decides to "take a good close look at the truth" (p.103) which he might not have done had Tamkin, paradoxically, been more believable. Tamkin's role is not to instruct Wilhelm with good advice, but to motivate him to work things out for himself. In other words, Wilhelm must become self-reliant. Wilhelm has depended on Tamkin, but comes to feel trapped instead of reassured. Having fulfilled his 'mission', when Wilhelm decides to "go back a ways and try once more", (p.107) Tamkin promptly disappears, leaving him completely penniless. In this novel Bellow again avoids, by the ambiguity of Tamkin, the risk of having a moral spokesman, an especial risk here since Tamkin is the only person to influence Wilhelm significantly, and is a prominent figure throughout the novel (in contrast to the many minor reality instructors met with by Augie). Tamkin's very ambiguity and absurdity are

important to his effect on Wilhelm, as explained. He is one of the most colourful and humorous of Bellow's characters, in a novel written with considerable attention to comedy.

Through Tamkin's influence or through his own increasingly perceptive observations, Wilhelm is seen gradually replacing his negative views with more positive ones until the final resolution, which amounts to a declaration of the worthwhileness of life. But first he has to acknowledge the possibility of change, which, at the beginning of the novel, he denied as a possibility for man: "he has only a little scope and maybe a foreboding, too, that essentially you can't change." (p.28) In contrast to the useless gesture of changing his name, and his wish to be let "into a different life", (p.30) Wilhelm must learn the true meaning of change - the possibility, on a practical level, of sometimes reversing mistakes, of a new attitude to life, and of the ability to live without being governed so heavily by the past. Deciding to change indicates a positive approach which reduces the feeling of helplessness against chance. To make such a fresh start, past mistakes must be kept in proportion: "You had to forgive. First, to forgive yourself, and then general forgiveness. Didn't he suffer from his mistakes far more than his father could?" (p.29) Wilhelm recognises this early on, as he does many of his other faults; it is not ignorance, but lack of conviction and instinctive optimism which prevents him from changing. Anyone can come up with logical

answers, but Bellow is pointing out the discrepancy between the statement of logic and the actual practice of it, a discrepancy which bothers all his heroes. Even the most intelligent cannot solve their problems solely by an analysis of them. Tamkin states that in order to combat the attitude of hopelessness, in which past mistakes weigh one down, the habit of living in the present should be cultivated. "'The past is no good to us" he states. "The future is full of anxiety. Only the present is real - the here-and-now. Seize the day.'" (p.72) The difference between theory and practice is comically indicated, however, when Tamkin tries to persuade Wilhelm to practise "here-and-now" exercises in the stock market, when all he can think of is the price of rye, in between recollections ranging from playing the bagpipes as a film extra to Margaret's reading to him when he was ill. As Wilhelm says, "Many people know what to do, but how many can do it?" (p.84)

Mistakes, then, should be seen as an integral part of experience and not something to be singled out for regret. Life is a collective series of events, and mistakes occur because of lack of foreknowledge, as well as chance; but the existence of mistakes testifies to a certain freedom of choice. To judge actions in retrospect on the basis of a vain wish for order has no purpose. To learn from experience and from cumulative events, on the other hand, is valuable. Making a mistake is not what matters, but repeating the same types of mistakes, as Wilhelm's negative

outlook causes him to do. For instance, he insists stubbornly on going to Hollywood through pride, and leaves his job and then refuses to go back to it for the same reason. Conversely, the past should not be idealised because the present is unsatisfactory, for this again limits the mind's capacity to experience the present fully without comparing it unfavourably with the past. There is also, of course, the danger of distortion in retrospect. Wilhelm, looking back on his days with the Rojax Corporation, remembers only the peace and not the troubles, and has an impression at one point of a happy family past, a happiness denied by him elsewhere. Thus he tries to recapture this happy childhood (possibly imaginary) in wanting to reconcile himself to his father: "And here he was still struggling with his old dad, filled with ancient grievances. Instead of saying, 'Goodbye, youth! Oh, goodbye those marvellous foolish wasted days. What a big clunk I was - I am.'" (p.34)

Tamkin introduces Wilhelm to the idea that everyone has two souls, the true and the pretender soul. Because man feels the need to love, and because he is aware of his insignificance, the pretender soul distorts the truth in order to comfort him, and his 'love' becomes selfish, the result of egotism and vanity. The pretender soul represents the "society mechanism", (p.76) that is, the preserving of appearance. The idea of the two souls parallels both the facing and the avoidance of reality. Having the strength to face the truth is the only way to true

understanding and communication, since pretence puts up a barrier which the pretender subconsciously knows to be false, adding to his unease; dishonesty with himself makes him dishonest with others. The price of following the pretender soul, Tamkin says, is lack of freedom:

'The true soul is the one that pays the price. It suffers and gets sick, and it realizes that the pretender can't be loved. Because the pretender is a lie. The true soul loves the truth. And when the true soul feels like this, it wants to kill the pretender. The love has turned into hate.' (p.76)

Wilhelm, sceptical of Tamkin's bizarre descriptions, is nevertheless struck by the application of the doctrine to his own life. Tommy is his pretender soul, and Wilhelm does not know if even Wilky is really himself. If we look back to the role-playing indulged in by Augie, we can see that the danger is underlined. By fitting into outward circumstances and compromising for the sake of peace or of gaining friendship, one may lose sight of one's true self, and communication from within this self is cut off by the inability to be open. Contact is based on deception.

Wilhelm, following the recognition of his mistakes, must begin to believe in the possibility of renewal, of an attitude of hope. He must realise that even a whole life apparently wasted does not necessarily jeopardise one's future. Prior to the final stock market scene, Wilhelm begins to develop a right approach, but is still hampered by worry about his invested money:

He believed that he must, that he could and would recover the good things, the happy things, the easy tranquil things of life. He had made mistakes, but he

could overlook these. He had been a fool, but that could be forgiven. The time wasted - must be relinquished. What else could one do about it? Things were too complex, but they might be reduced to simplicity again. Recovery was possible. (p.84)

In connection with this theme, Tamkin just touches on what is to become a major precept in Henderson the Rain King: wanting to live, rather than merely to exist. Describing the passive, resigned lives led by many, he says: "'Then there's a small percentage of those who want to live. That's the only significant thing in the whole world of today.'" (p.106) He also brings Wilhelm to the realization that effort is self-defeating: "I am trying to stay alive and work too hard at it." (pp.106-7) Life cannot be subjected to conscious control, and struggle prevents peace of mind. This repeats Augie's experience in finding his "axial lines".

The human predicament of imperfectly understanding others has to be faced as a common problem, and not as a self-isolating one. In his inability to come to terms with himself, Wilhelm despairs of communication, an inward problem, though he relates it to an outward factor, the anonymous atmosphere of New York:

You had to translate and translate,  
explain and explain, back and forth,  
and it was the punishment of hell itself  
not to understand or be understood, not  
to know the crazy from the sane, the wise  
from the fools. (p.90)

When he reflects on a life in which control and contact are denied him, Wilhelm goes further in his thoughts, concluding that "There is a larger body, and from this you

cannot be separated. . . . There truth for everybody may be found, 'and confusion is only - only temporary". (p.90)

He sees this as the privilege of the "real" soul. He is beginning to experience a sense of brotherhood - instinctive but as yet vague - with the realisation that his problems are common to all. These ideas result from a sudden feeling of love for mankind in general, imperfect as it is, uniting him to it, which comes to him while he is walking in a tunnel beneath Times Square. Tunnels and subways are often the setting in Bellow's works for such thoughts; the anonymity with which all kinds of people are brought together in a limited space suggests collective humanity.

Even though the feeling of brotherhood disappears a few moments later, Wilhelm finds this vision valid and helpful, and recognises himself as part of a larger pattern. So, on his day of reckoning, as he describes it (he anticipates in the morning, at the start of the novel, a major change in his life before the evening), he thinks: "I must go back to that. That's the right clue and may do me the most good. Something very big. Truth, like." (p.91)

The ending of the novel, when Wilhelm goes into a stranger's funeral and is no longer able to restrain his weeping, is ambiguous in its effect. Has he acknowledged the truth of death, and come to participate in common human sorrow, or is his outburst merely selfish? He first thinks "A man - another human creature", (p.125) expressing his sadness at the human fate, then remembers his own problems. As far as Wilhelm's crying is concerned,



the dead man is simply the catalyst which causes the release of his feelings, a cathartic effect which is the logical end to the build-up of Wilhelm's tension throughout the novel. We have seen him gradually realising how he should live his future life; the outpouring of his grief is a necessary act to rid himself of the past. The last paragraph suggests a mystical movement towards inner peace:

The flowers and lights fused ecstatically in Wilhelm's blind, wet eyes; the heavy sea-like music came up to his ears. It poured into him where he had hidden himself in the centre of a crowd by the great and happy oblivion of tears. He heard it and sank deeper than sorrow, through torn sobs and cries towards the consummation of his heart's ultimate need. (pp.125-6)

Wilhelm's "ultimate need" is surely one of love and brotherhood, felt through the equalising force of death. These new emotions suggest that he now feels for others rather than just for himself.

To move from the stage of experiencing universal love to that of responding to individuals is the next step. We do not actually see Wilhelm achieve this, but we do not feel that he is going to come out of the funeral and renew his search for Tamkin. Instead we feel that he will write off his seven hundred dollars, and, more importantly, his past errors, beginning to face the truth rather than looking for an easy way out. With acceptance of life on its own terms, through being brought into contact with death and facing it, not struggling against it, it is implied that peace will follow for Wilhelm. It is significant that although he controls his tears on losing his money,

the preserving of face becomes unimportant when he is moved to let go of himself and cry for the fate of mankind. By acknowledging death, he acknowledges his own humanity, whereas his father has always avoided this. Chester Eisinger provides an enlightening comment on the novel's ending: "Since man has the capacity for love, he must exercise it. This is what it means to be a human being."<sup>3</sup> Participation (as opposed to Dr. Adler's selfishness) is the important approach to life. Mark Leaf also sees the ending as affirmative:

The sight of the dead man in an open coffin brings him to an emotional crisis, an involvement which utterly cancels both his earlier posture of rejection, and his later despairing isolation. . . . Tommy has experienced a reality which transcends his petty difficulties. His weeping is an expression of a deep sympathy with the human condition.<sup>4</sup>

The confrontation with death, of course, forces on Wilhelm a sense of the present. Ironically, what he had himself called a "day of reckoning" has had a much deeper effect on his life than he could have expected. J.C. Levenson's view that Wilhelm is in the end a loser, grieving only for himself, "Tommy Wilhelm dangles and finally drops",<sup>5</sup> seems invalid in the light of the description of Wilhelm's feelings in the final paragraph of the novel quoted, and of the points at which he has gained some insight. This

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3. Chester E. Eisinger, "Saul Bellow: Love and Identity", Accent, 18 (Summer 1958), p.202.

4. Mark Leaf, "The Novels of Saul Bellow", Kolokon, 2 (Spring 1967), p.19.

5. J.C. Levenson, "Bellow's Dangling Men", Critique, 3 (Summer 1960), p.8.

affirmation is above all reinforced by Wilhelm's understanding of the nature of pity and of love when he sees the dead man in his coffin at the funeral: "With great stifling sorrow, almost admiration, Wilhelm nodded and nodded." (p.124) At this moment there is no suggestion of self-pity. For the first time Wilhelm is moved to forget his troubles and to consider someone else. Whereas previously he has isolated himself, relating others only to his needs, he now, while crying, merges symbolically as well as actually into the crowd.

CHAPTER SIX

HENDERSON THE RAIN KING - A QUEST FOR REALITY

Eugene Henderson, in Bellow's fifth novel, continues the search of his predecessors for fulfilment, his quest giving rise to what is so far the most overt discussion of some of the problems expressed in the earlier novels. He finds modern society oppressive, and is an outsider in his own conventional Ivy League background; his temperamental nature has produced a breach between him and his family and friends. His quest is for self-knowledge and for a way to fulfil his indefinable desires, to which end he undertakes the journey to Africa, which represents to him the unknown as well as the past. He wants the stimulus of physical surroundings totally different from America. The predominance of nature in Africa, and its emptiness, create a timeless feeling. Henderson's journey indicates his need, or so he believes, to isolate himself for a while in order to find a direction which will enable him to live purposefully and happily in his home environment.

The change from the environment of the American city which is the usual background to Bellow's novels reminds the reader of the essentials of the quest. In addition (Augie March, for example, also travels), the particular choice of the relatively unchanged African tribal villages suggests an attempt to go outside the oppressiveness of the technologically-orientated American society, into the

past or perhaps into some timeless atmosphere. It also, possibly, implies that certain kinds of peace, ways of life, have been forgotten in contemporary Western society. In America in particular, modern developments have rapidly overwhelmed the individual, expanding man's knowledge and physical capabilities to a degree which makes the individual's control seem insignificant. Material ambition and the urge towards power and progress create a competitive, urgent atmosphere in which important qualities of life and the necessity for relaxation are easily ignored. Social pressures lead to tension and crime. In a very different environment, one's values can be examined and, perhaps, revised. The descriptions of the tribal life - that they are obviously the creation of Bellow's imagination does not matter - take the novel into a world of romance and fantasy. Henderson, too, is different from the other Bellow heroes; he is not Jewish, comes from a high social background, and is a millionaire. This seems to be a deliberate attempt to show that the same problems can exist just as strongly in a different class. Henderson has no material wants, which sharpens the impression of spiritual barrenness in his life. He is also better suited as the comic, eccentric and impulsive character Bellow wishes to create, since he is in a position to indulge his eccentricities.

Henderson the Rain King is a paradoxical novel in many ways; it is deeply serious and yet hilariously funny, and the plot is a fantasy but the issues come close to home

for all of us. Its success probably depends on the honesty and force with which these elements are mixed, and questions discussed; Bellow has chosen a highly imaginative framework and has controlled it so that we can believe in the 'quest', and in Henderson's teacher-figures, throughout the novel. It is a very colourful novel, unlike any other except The Adventures of Augie March, despite the depth of thought. Assuming the general principle that well-known works of literature should not be filmed, or at any rate not without a change of title, Henderson the Rain King is nevertheless a novel which one can almost see on screen while reading it, such is the accessibility and humanity of the subject-matter. Abstract concepts have been given a concrete form through a variety of events.

On the subject of comedy, it should be mentioned that Bellow has made this work even more richly comic than the earlier novels. The story lends itself to farce, such as the incident when Henderson blows up the Arnewi's water supply, or when Queen Willatale fails to understand the waterproof nature of the plastic raincoat which he gives her; when she tries it on, he licks the sleeve to demonstrate, and she licks him back, misinterpreting this as a form of greeting. The incongruity of Henderson among the Wariri is frequently described; he attends official ceremonies in his sun-helmet, jockey shorts and baggy green silk rain-king trousers. His

descriptions of his own thoughts are humorous; he tries to calm his inner voice which repeats "I want": "At times I would treat it like an ailing child whom you offer rhymes or candy. I would walk it, I would trot it. I would sing to it or read to it. No use."<sup>1</sup> This rather original mode of expression ensures that the comic is never far from the surface, even in the novel's most intense moments. The comedy gives the novel a brightness and readability, which does not, however, detract from the seriousness of its major themes.

Henderson's problem, in general, is one of dissatisfaction; in spite of his efforts in the fields of marriage, fatherhood and business he still feels unfulfilled, with "a ceaseless voice in my heart that said, I want, I want, I want, oh, I want". (p.15) His nature makes life difficult for him; he is aggressive and unable to fit into a social pattern: "Society is what beats me. Alone I can be pretty good, but let me go among people and there's the devil to pay." (p.49) He is an outsider in appearance as well as behaviour: "Six feet four inches tall. Two hundred and thirty pounds. An enormous head, rugged, with hair like Persian lambs' fur. Suspicious eyes, usually narrowed. Blustering ways. A great nose." (p.8) Like other Bellow heroes, he is a victim of constant introspection:

I hold a book up to my face and it takes  
only one good sentence to turn my brain  
into a volcano; I begin thinking of

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1. Saul Bellow, Henderson the Rain King, Penguin Books, London (1971), p.26. Subsequent references in this chapter to this work will be included in the text.

everything at once and a regular lava of thought pours down my sides. Lily claims I have too much mental energy. . . . Anyway, I am the inspirational, and not the systematic, type. (pp.227-8)

The early part of the novel, set in America, describes Henderson's two marriages (the first ended in divorce) and his hobbies, including the pig-breeding which alienates his neighbours and his wife Lily. He fails to communicate with either of his wives, because of his antagonism and (as will be made clearer later) the selfishness of his attitude that while he must attain self-fulfilment he does not have to consider others' needs. His ambition, at this late stage in life (he is in his fifties) is to go to medical school, but he lacks the conviction to take the step. The social pressures of this particular time are in part, at least outwardly, responsible for his anger and frustration, and he comments:

America is so big, and everybody is working, making, digging, bulldozing, trucking, loading, and so on, and I guess the sufferers suffer at the same rate. Everybody wanting to pull together. I tried every cure you can think of. Of course, 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. (p.27)

He also connects his feelings of displacement with his attitude to his society: "Nobody truly occupies a station in life any more. There are mostly people who feel that they occupy the place that belongs to another by rights. There are displaced persons everywhere." (p.35) Modern technology may, of course, also alter man's outlook in a positive fashion; Henderson points out later, in a letter



to Lily, that his is "'the first generation to see the clouds from both sides'", (p.261) noting that this must cause some change.

Like other Bellow heroes, Henderson feels his isolation from others very strongly, not only from those he knows, but from mankind in general. He feels this partly because of the problems of quantity and infinity (the 'limitlessness' described in other novels):

This planet has billions of passengers on it, and those were preceded by infinite billions and there are vaster billions to come, and none of these, no, not one, can I hope ever to understand. Never! (p.151)

After a stormy series of events, Henderson finally makes the break he so desires, and sets off with a friend, Charlie Albert, and his wife on the trip to Africa. As mentioned, he must seek his salvation through solitude and a complete change of environment, feeling that he is doomed to failure and impossible longings while he stays where he is. To this end Henderson decides, once in Africa, to leave his friends and set off alone with only an African guide, Romilayu, to explore further away from the beaten track. He feels the power and significance of the African countryside; its elemental nature acts as a restorative:

I got clean away from everything, and we came into a region like a floor surrounded by mountains. It was hot, clear, and arid and after several days we saw no human footprints. Nor were there many plants; for that matter there was not much of anything here; it was all simplified and splendid, and I felt I was entering the past - the real past, no history or junk like that. The prehuman past. And I believed that there was something between the stones and me. (p.46)

Much emphasis is placed on the power of the physical beauty of nature; later on, when Henderson wakes up among the Wariri and sees an exceptionally beautiful sunrise, he thinks: "Some powerful magnificence not human, in other words, seemed under me." (p.95) This appreciation, of course, is only the preliminary to a reconciliation with his own people and with society. Africa is an ideal place to learn and to 'convalesce', symbolic in that its tranquillity and the predominance of the natural are the antithesis of the Western technological world, and it represents a return to more natural values. However, it is only a temporary environment; the novel deals with how to lead a fulfilled existence within present-day society, with all its strains, since man is unable to renounce his 'progress' or to cease his research into the mysteries of his existence. (The technological aspect of society is considered in more depth in Mr. Sammler's Planet). Bellow does not suggest in Henderson the Rain King the possibility of an escape to the primitive; we know that Henderson must eventually return and face his homeland. He realises that he is only at an early stage in his reconciliation when, on first arriving at the Arnewi village, he sees a girl burst into tears - because of him, as he thinks - and wonders whether he is not fit to meet people as yet, and whether he should have remained alone in the desert.

Bellow is aware, however, that while his heroes are allegedly pursuing reality, there is a place in life for mystical and magical elements such as those to be found in

the descriptions of Africa and its customs. In an interview, Bellow, speaking of Whitman, describes a need which appears to echo his own aims in Henderson the Rain King:

. . . he was very clearly aware, as were other writers of the 19th century, that it was up to them to provide this sense of enchantment, and to preserve some sense - which is, I think, innate in every human being - of the strangeness of life, of the odd harmonies or inconsequent beauties of existence. So of course there's a kind of mysticism in it - what else? Why shouldn't there be?<sup>2</sup>

Henderson himself is attracted by this feeling of magic although his search is a practical one. Richard Chase, in his article "The Adventures of Saul Bellow", points this out: "Like most moderns he loves and pursues "reality" and yet he is just as strongly drawn to the mythic and the magical."<sup>3</sup>

Henderson's first encounter with people (other than Romilayu) after leaving his friends is with the tribe of the Arnewi, whose way of life provides him with some significant experiences and thoughts. He is already refreshed by his travels, and is open to any possible ways toward enlightenment. He is immediately impressed by his meeting with Queen Willatale and Mtalba, Prince Itelo's two aunts, who are known for their wisdom. He feels a power emanating from them, and is convinced particularly that Willatale has the key to the mystery or "wisdom of life" (p.77)

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2. From Jim Douglas Henry, "Mystic Trade", The Listener, 81 (22 May 1969), p.707.

3. Richard Chase, "The Adventures of Saul Bellow", Commentary, 27 (April 1959), p.328.

and can provide him with the liberation he seeks. Her inner calm seems to be one example of how to live. The most important message he receives from her is that of "Grun-tu-molani", or "Man want to live". (p.81) Henderson takes up this idea enthusiastically; he says of himself, much later, in an imaginary conversation with his friends at home:

'Listen, you guys, my great excess was I wanted to live. Maybe I did treat everything in the world as though it was a medicine - okay! What's the matter with you guys? Don't you understand anything? Don't you believe in regeneration? You think a fellow is just supposed to go down the drain?' (p.184)

"Man want to live" is an idea which incorporates the wish to make the most of life's opportunities, and to create a worthwhile existence despite the foreknowledge of death; also the appreciation of the unknown elements of life, which, looked at optimistically, produce curiosity, not despair. It also implies the search for reality, and the willingness to accept life as it is.

In his conviction that Willatale may hold the answer, Henderson falls into the trap of looking for an instant formula for success; circumstances force him to leave hastily, when he blows up the water tank, and he feels that he has not yet completed his discussions with her. Later on, among the Wariri, while reading the books Dahfu, the king, has given him, he finds them to be only unintelligible medical publications; and reflects: "It was just my luck to think I had found the conditions of life simplified so I could deal with them - finally!" (p.230) Most

of Bellow's heroes seek some manageable formula on which to base their lives, and Henderson's quest is in this sense foredoomed. His enlightenment will be, partly, in realizing this.

During his search for self-fulfilment Henderson feels the need for some kind of action, either to prove himself, or to provide a sense of purpose. He signals his arrival among the Arnewi by setting fire to a bush with his lighter as a treat for some children. On hearing of the plague of frogs in the water cistern, as a result of which the cattle are dying for lack of water, he immediately takes it upon himself to deal with the problem, since the Arnewi's superstitions prevent them from doing so. He feels a great desire to be of use to justify his presence. Later in the novel, he says to Dahfu: "'There is some kind of service motivation which keeps on after me.'" (p.177) This urge is in part an attempt to atone for his past, and continues during his stay among the Wariri. Discussing his pledge to lift the statue of the god Mummah, he says:

. . . it had regard only to the unfinished business of years - I want, I want, and Lily, and the grun-tu-molani and the little coloured kid brought home by my daughter from Danbury and the cat I had tried to destroy and the fate of Miss Lenox and the teeth and the fiddle and the frogs in the cistern and all the rest of it. (p.178)

Such an attitude exemplifies the strife in Henderson's approach to life in general; ceaseless effort often blurs his road to enlightenment. It is as though he thinks peace will not be valid unless it has been won with

difficulty. Mark Leaf notes on this point:

The resignation and joyful acceptance of the Arnewi - Bittahness - although attractive cannot offer Henderson the spiritual peace he is seeking. He feels the need to perform some act to demonstrate his involvement. He seems to want to earn Salvation, not merely to receive it through Grace.<sup>4</sup>

Henderson recalls that he was impressed by reading in a book of his father's the words "'The forgiveness of sins is perpetual and righteousness first is not required.'" (p.7) He is subsequently unable to find the quotation, but it serves as a kind of motto to Henderson the Rain King; he needs to accept that it is possible to make a fresh start without being hampered by his past (as does, in very different circumstances, Tommy Wilhelm in Seize the Day).

Henderson's desire to perform an act of atonement causes the disastrous destruction of the Arnewi's water supply when he bombs the cistern to kill the frogs in it, but too powerfully; this incident points to the basic wrongness of Henderson's approach. He has set himself above and apart from the people, with a certain pride, and sees himself as a saviour. He regards action as a means to end his spiritual problems instantly. Elsie Leach describes the incident as symbolising the failure of Western technology among a primitive society;<sup>5</sup> it is perhaps also the reliance on action, and the need to correct things

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4. Mark Leaf, "The Novels of Saul Bellow", Kolokon, 2 (Spring 1967), p.20.

5. Elsie Leach, "From Ritual to Romance Again: Henderson the Rain King", Western Humanities Review, 14 (Spring 1960), p.223.

outwardly, which fail. While appreciating that the Arnewi have ideas which they can teach him, Henderson thinks that he can immediately better the wisdom of the attitudes of a culture very different from his own. The Arnewi give us a glimpse of a society in which to counteract Nature's forces, good and bad, is not taken for granted; instead, there is a philosophy of acceptance of natural events. For instance, the Arnewi mourn the deaths of their cattle, but do not try to change the situation.

Having failed among the Arnewi to reconcile himself to a community or to prove himself by action, Henderson sets off with Romilayu in search of the tribe of the Wariri. After an unpleasant arrival - they are first ambushed, then find a corpse in their sleeping hut - Henderson is taken to see Dahfu, the king. Dahfu's role is to be that of Henderson's teacher, as well as a foil to his character; he is a highly original creation, who exemplifies the values both of primitive belief and of a close association with nature. He has been educated and has spent two years at medical school, so that his choice of the tribal life-style may be seen as a deliberate one. Henderson senses Dahfu's significance at their first meeting: "But there was something about this man that gave me the conviction that we could approach ultimates together." (p.146) Dahfu shows inner peace and an acceptance of his simple tribal life and its customs - even his inevitable destruction by the priests of the tribe when his many wives report him to be losing his virility - and of the belief held by the

tribe that the kings of the Wariri are descended from lions. The reader cannot perhaps take all Dahfu's attitudes at face value; Dahfu has, after all, been educated, in the Western sense, yet is nevertheless still able to adhere to his tribal customs. He should be seen, however, as representing the life of Being; Being indicates living as far as possible without stress or effort, experiencing the present moment and accepting the inevitable. Dahfu has achieved, notably, an acceptance of death which removes his fear of it. Henderson comments, on seeing Dahfu with the lioness, Atti, he has tamed: "He had such a relaxed way about him, and every moment of his earthly life the extra shadow of brilliance was with him - the sign of an intenser gift of being." (p.209) Dahfu points out to Henderson the mistake of his contrastingly desperate approach to life: "'everything about you, Henderson-Sungu, cries out, 'Salvation, Salvation! What shall I do? What must I do? At once! What will become of me?' And so on. That is bad.'" (p.204)

After their first meeting, Henderson would like to learn the truths he seeks from Dahfu. In the first event of his stay, he inadvertently becomes the rain-king of the Wariri by being the only man to succeed in lifting the statue of the god Mummah - still through his desire to perform a significant act. He wishes to discuss his quest with Dahfu, in order to learn more about Grun-tu-molani, but Dahfu tells him: "'Granted, grun-tu-molani is much, but it is not alone sufficient. Mr. Henderson, more is



required.'" (p.204) He has his own plans for Henderson's salvation, namely the meetings with the lioness, Atti. Henderson's reactions to these encounters will constitute his lesson.

The idea of Being versus Becoming is an important aspect of the differences between Henderson and Dahfu. Henderson understands this from the beginning, but recognises the difficulty of his attaining Being (one such point is when he feels compelled to move the statue). On first meeting Dahfu, he makes mentally the Being-Becoming comparison:

I might have added, as it entered my mind to do, that some people found satisfaction in being (Walt Whitman: 'Enough to merely be! Enough to breathe! Joy! Joy! All over joy!') Being. Others were taken up with becoming. Being people have all the breaks. Becoming people are very unlucky, always in a tizzy. The Becoming people are always having to make explanations or offer justifications to the Being people. While the Being people provoke these explanations. . . . And if I had really been capable of the alert consciousness which it required I would have confessed that Becoming was beginning to come out of my ears. Enough! Enough! Time to have become. Time to Be! Burst the spirit's sleep. (p.150)

Henderson's understanding of the nature of Being is important. He is not, however, able to attain it automatically; until Dahfu's death, Henderson challenges his way of life, especially the folly, as he sees it, of the hunt for the lion Gmilo, based as it is only on the tribal belief that the lion is Dahfu's father, and entailing grave risks to Dahfu's life. Henderson grieves bitterly for the king, and tells Romilayu that he met Dahfu too late in life to

be changed by him. His progress is nevertheless considerable, though he cannot, as he realises, wholly acquire the king's outlook. The question of different environments arises here; Henderson is essentially a Westerner, and knows he will return to his own culture of contemporary America, geared as it is to action and material ambition which preclude a deeper understanding of life. The precepts of Being, on the other hand, seem to belong more naturally to Dahfu's society, with its timelessness. Perhaps the remove to Africa also shows up the difficulty of attaining Being in modern society.

The common theme of man's fear of death, and his resulting attitudes and problems, is a major one in Henderson the Rain King. Max Schulz reports a comment by Bellow that what Henderson seeks is "a remedy to the anxiety over death."<sup>6</sup> Many incidents in his life have led Henderson to feel himself peculiarly involved with death - among others, seeing an octopus at the aquarium, Miss Lenox's death, finding the corpse in the hut, and seeing the two skulls kept by Dahfu for use in the rain-making ceremony. Man's life is lived in terms of a struggle against the inevitability of death; he may feel the need to occupy himself usefully, or to distinguish himself, in order to compensate for the approaching oblivion. The Western world is perhaps particularly geared to the ignoring of death, the placing of premiums on youth and strength, and

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6. Max Schulz, "Jewish Writing", Contemporary Literature, 2 (Winter 1970), p.128. He quotes from Nina Steers's interview with Bellow (Show, 1964).

the refusal to prepare itself by an attitude of acceptance, difficult though this may be. The attitude with which one can face death is linked with that in which one may come closer to nature through contact with animals. While man's very intelligence makes him fight his foreknowledge of death from an early age, he is unable to appreciate the idea of a perpetual cycle which ends with the naturalness of death in old age. Man's fears of the unknown, and the possibility of sudden and violent death, contribute to his refusal of this acceptance. Logic and instinct are, of course, at odds. When Henderson is among the Arnewi, Queen Willatale comments that the world is strange to a child, and he places his own interpretation on this remark:

The world may be strange to a child, but he does not fear it the way a man fears. He marvels at it. But the grown man mainly dreads it. And why? Because of death. So he arranges to have himself abducted like a child. So what happens will not be his fault. And who is this kidnapper - this gypsy? It is the strangeness of life - a thing that makes death more remote, as in childhood. (p.81)

Henderson tells Romilayu that his generation has "the biggest problem of all . . . to encounter death." (p.258) He says that it is the destiny of his generation of Americans to search for the wisdom of life, and that he came on his quest because "I couldn't agree to the death of my soul." (p.258) To counter the fear of death, some new insight or truth is needed. On his flight to Africa Henderson comments: "having dreamed at the clouds from both sides as no other generation of men has done, one should be able to accept his death very easily." (p.43)

Of course, some positive aspects are involved in man's fear of death and suffering; he is driven to come to terms with life, and in so doing his wisdom and spiritual capacity are increased, a point made by H.M. Harper. Dahfu has studied the problem of death, though his ideas, as mentioned, are not necessarily those with which everyone would agree. However, it is man's ability to think constructively which is relevant here. Harper writes: "The important fact is not that the mind is limited in perception or destroyed by death, but simply that it is able to reason."<sup>7</sup> By placing Henderson, unprotected, with the lioness, Dahfu emphasises the importance of understanding the fear of death. He explains that the lioness is unavoidable, and that Henderson is an "avoider": "'She will force the present moment on you'" (p.243) and also that she is an "experiencer". Dahfu remarks on Henderson's tension when with the lion; this tension indicates a tendency towards isolation of the self. He makes Henderson attempt to identify with the lion (by roaring or by simply imagining and feeling the state of being a beast) to make him overcome his instinctive attitude of detachment from the creature. But Henderson is almost physically paralysed by contact with the lion; Dahfu says of this reaction that "'When the 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.'" (p.245) He speaks

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7. H.M. Harper, Desperate Faith - a study of Bellow, Salinger, Mailer, Baldwin and Updike, The University of North Carolina Press (1967), p.46.

of the constructive aspect of fear as a moulding force. Mark Leaf has commented of Henderson that "he learns in action that only by submission to the terror of death can a man achieve a real understanding of living."<sup>8</sup> On his very first meeting with the lioness, Henderson feels the significance of it: "my face became . . . one huge mass of acceptance directed towards fate. Suffering." (p.208) The important point concerning the lion-training is that Bellow is not primarily seeking to answer logically the problem of fear of death; logic is no consolation to the average person. By bringing Henderson into contact with the lion, he is provoking a different emotional response, one in which death must be faced and accepted, which will alter Henderson's future outlook. (Sammler is another of Bellow's heroes whose personal facing of death alters his attitude towards it.) Such training symbolises a return to closeness with nature and, too, a way of living in the present moment. Other thoughts become secondary to the fear. This moment represents a temporary transfer from the state of Becoming to that of Being.

The significance of animals in general throughout the novel should be mentioned. Various ones appear - the cat abandoned by its owners which Henderson attempts to shoot, the pigs he breeds, the frogs, the lions, and finally the bear at the fairground which Henderson recalls at the very end of the novel. All these show aspects of man's interaction with nature. In some cases, such as those of the

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8. Mark Leaf, op.cit., p.20.

cat and the frogs, animals may be seen as potential enemies, and in others they are a substitute for human contact, as are Henderson's pigs. Dahfu's lion, and the bear, illustrate the emotion of disinterested love which a man is sometimes able to feel for an animal. Henderson asks why Dahfu should favour lions, and answers himself: "you don't know the meaning of true love if you think it can be deliberately selected. You just love, that's all. A natural force. Irresistible." (p.240) He worries lest the predominance of animals in his life suggests that he is unfit for human companionship. Dahfu's accord with nature explains his attraction towards lions; it is important to Henderson's progress that he should understand this communion. He decides after Dahfu's death to take the lion cub, which (according to tribal belief) represents him, back to America. Since Henderson is unable to stay in Africa, this is a gesture of affirmation of the truths he has learnt through Dahfu's teaching. Bellow suggests throughout the novel that modern civilisation is in opposition to nature. The idea of returning to nature in order that one may discover truths about existence is obviously an ideal, rather than a practical, solution; hence the return of the cub symbolises this ideal. To this point, the two worlds have not been tangibly linked. Leaving aside the evident fantasy of the novel, the question is really whether alteration within the mind is possible for a human being, without the need for a change of environment.

One question central to Henderson's search is connected

with the nature of reality. Does man seek reality, and can he, indeed, recognise it? Henderson is emphatic that he wants reality, but comes to realise that what he has really been seeking is unreality. This raises the problem of whether man can face up to reality, or whether such a vision is only for the brave and enlightened, the remainder existing in an enclosed world of their own private definition. Henderson's mind is certainly open to experience. In speaking to Romilayu of his aims in seeking a reality, of the need to reject the stereotyped structures which enclose modern living, he shows his desperate need for some new insight in his life:

'There is that poem about the nightingale singing that humankind cannot stand too much reality. But how much unreality can it stand? . . . So what if reality may be terrible? It's better than what we've got. . . . But every man feels from his soul that he has got to carry his life to a certain depth. Well, I have to go on because I haven't reached that depth yet.'  
(pp.99-100)

In other words, the message of "grun-tu-molani". Henderson's quest began because of the unsatisfactory nature of his life in America with Lily, and his conviction that something outside must be different - that voice saying "I want". His travel produced growing insight into the question of reality, and he began to reject his earlier definition of it, realising in the process that his 'reality' is different from Lily's. He and Dahfu discuss this problem when Henderson questions the value of the lion-tradition and the apparent wastage of Dahfu's remaining king. Dahfu tells him that one would like reality to

accord with a logical view, but must realise that it cannot:

'Men of most powerful appetite have always been the ones to doubt reality the most. Those who could not bear that hopes should turn to misery, and loves to hatreds, and deaths and silences, and so on. . . . this same temporary creature is a master of imagination. And right now this very valuable possession appears to make him die and not to live.' (p.217)

Given that reality is difficult to define, Henderson is nevertheless at last able to understand where he has previously erred: preconceived ideas are likely to lead to a biased viewpoint, whereas reality can be said to equal experience, that is, the attempt to understand each situation on its own merits. One also comes closer to reality through shared experience, and understanding others rather than trying to judge them from one's own standpoint (as Henderson mistakenly does with the Arnewi and the Wariri). In the letter to Lily, towards the end of his stay with the tribe, Henderson writes (or thinks he may have written): "'I had a voice that said, I want! I want? I? It should have told me she wants, he wants, they want. And moreover, it's love that makes reality reality. The opposite makes the opposite.'" (p.267) Henderson thus realises the futility of his earlier boasts of loving reality. When confronted with it in its most basic form, he is forced to think of the moment, for example in his meeting with the enraged lion during the hunt for Gmilo, when death is possible at any second. While seeking reality, Henderson has always discounted physical death, thinking of an 'eternal' life, but the above incident is one step in truly facing reality: that moment when he



confronts his actual death. He wonders whether "this was all mankind needed, to be conditioned into the image of a ferocious animal". (p.287)

Eventually, Henderson answers the question of his own voice "I want". "'What did it want? . . . It wanted reality. How much unreality could it stand?'" (p.297) While claiming to love life, to appreciate the best and the worst of it, he has previously been closing his mind to this very aspect of it, the inevitable end. Dahfu's role has been to help Henderson to see life as a complete entity, with a pattern, and to show him that transience does not necessarily imply a lack of meaning; living for the moment means that the joy of a worthwhile moment is not nullified by subsequent seemingly negative occurrences. Dahfu is happy to accept his own death, and even seeks the danger which may lead to it, which to Henderson seems at first insane. But by the end of the novel, he is able to admit that "Dahfu will never be seen again, and presently I will never be seen again". (p.311) Ihab Hassan sums up the implications of this aspect of the novel in a discussion of Bellow's fiction as a whole: "Above all, its aim is to convince us that reality or experience or life - call it what we will - is worth all the agonies of human existence without ever needing to be intelligible."<sup>9</sup>

There is a parallel in Henderson's considerations about truth to the meetings with the lions; he describes

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9. Ihab H. Hassan, "Saul Bellow: Five Faces of a Hero", Critique, 3 (Summer 1960), p.28.

how he was chopping wood, back in America, and was struck by a piece splintering off, which led him to think of the idea of truth. "'Truth comes with blows'". (p.66) Just as in the lion situation, a sudden physical reality seems to cut through thought and theory. Dahfu, however, thinks that Henderson's anecdote relates more to man's need for revenge. On the subject of truth (or reality), Bellow, in his article "The Sealed Treasure", makes the comment: "And Tolstoy says of human nature that it contains a need for truth which will never allow it to rest permanently in falsehood or unreality."<sup>10</sup> This strongly suggests Bellow's own theme in this novel.

The possibility of change, and man's need for it, is discussed at several points; Henderson, like other of Bellow's heroes, has to acquire a forward-looking view. The idea of life as perpetual motion is an important factor in Bellow's definition of optimism. Despair is a negative attitude, since nothing is permanent and the future cannot, of course, be foreseen. Recollecting a past of mistakes need not deny a man's potential for the future. Experience and the memory of it may be either good or bad, but no course is unalterable. Part of Henderson's enlightenment comes through his mistakes (for instance, blowing up the water-tank). Such mistakes, rather than impeding progress through life, can be turned to positive effect. One of Dahfu's messages, through the lion-training, is

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10. Saul Bellow, "The Sealed Treasure", in Alfred Kazin, ed., The Open Form, Harcourt, Brace and World (1961), p.7.

that change is possible; Henderson has already subconsciously realised this by embarking on his quest, and he now has to learn to free himself mentally from past mistakes. His new start at the conclusion of the novel, when he decides to go to medical school, indicates his relief from the burden of his past. In a wider context, change suggests that there is some hope for society. While talking of the problem of truly facing death, Henderson tells Romilayu that people are on the whole willing to embark on a process of self-help: "'Millions of Americans have gone forth since the war to redeem the present and discover the future.'" (p.258)

Henderson's career suggests the idea that life takes place in stages - physical and mental - and is a constant process of building on experience and looking to the future. The start of Henderson's journey home is marked by the fact that he has now learned from Dahfu's wisdom, and has therefore become independent of him, whereas at first, as with Willatale, he relied entirely on Dahfu for a formula to enable him to face his existence, although wondering at his methods of facing it. Henderson now feels a need for something beyond communication with animals; some new attitude with which to live in his own world together with Lily. He is resolved to put aside the past and to "set love on a true course." (p.268)

One final aspect of change is that time is of a healing nature; this reiterates the idea that one should not despair because of the 'now', but should anticipate that one's feelings will undergo change. When Dahfu dies, Henderson

grieves deeply, at first being inconsolable, but through his experiences realises what may be in itself a cliché, but which becomes, in Bellow's language, striking:

But maybe time was invented so that misery might have an end. So that it shouldn't last forever? There may be something in this. And bliss, just the opposite, is eternal? That is no time in bliss. All the clocks were thrown out of heaven. (p.293)

Linked with this theme of change is that of the value of imagination. Man's dreams and aspirations from centuries back, such as exploration of space, or flying (the example Dahfu gives), once only fantasies, have been seen to come true with technological advancement. Dahfu makes the point that all progress begins in the mind; the fact of the opportunities thus evident in life should provide grounds for optimism:

'Imagination is a force of nature. Is this not enough to make a person full of ecstasy? Imagination, imagination, imagination! It converts to actual. It sustains, it alters, it redeems! . . . What Homo sapiens imagines, he may slowly convert himself to.' (pp.253-4)

Thus Henderson's whole quest may be seen as an attempt to convert imagination - his hopes for his redemption - into reality.

At the end of his quest we must inevitably try to decide just how far results have come up to Henderson's expectations, and consider what he has learned, and how his experience has altered his outlook. One crucial point is that of the importance of accepting what life is, rather than striving against it. This is implicit in, for instance, the earlier Being versus Becoming discussions,

and may also be seen in the meetings with the lion. This theme, as discussed previously, was a major one for Bellow in The Adventures of Augie March. Acceptance of life on these terms is really a process of discrimination. Change may be possible to a great extent, but whereas Henderson has expended much energy in tackling mentally and physically all that has seemed to him unsatisfactory, a better course is to accept what cannot be altered (such as man's helplessness against death) and so, instead, change his outlook. During his journey home, when he is delirious, Henderson says to Romilayu, referring to the inevitable rhythm of the cycle of life: "'You've got to live at peace with it, because if it's going to worry you, you'll lose. You can't win against it. It keeps on and on and on.'" (p.307)

Although he makes this statement as an attempt at affirmation rather than as a positive conviction, and admits that he is still worried about his past, he does acknowledge the place of death in the life-cycle, though objecting to being reminded of the fact: "'But these dead should go. They make us think of them. That is their immortality. In us.'" (p.307)

The need to cease striving is a lesson which Henderson repeats to Lily in his letter; he says that Dahfu tells him: "'I should move from the states that I myself make into the states which are of themselves. Like if I stopped making such a noise all the time I might hear something nice.'" (p.265) He promises to give up the violin-playing, which he previously saw as a way to reach his dead mother

and father and to escape into another world beyond death. Freed from such impractical aspirations, he is at last able to concentrate on 'real' achievements - hence the decision to enter medical school (which he earlier lacked the self-assurance to make).

The importance of love is another of Henderson's final realisations. Among his earliest problems was that he was unable to fit into society, to get on with his wife, children and friends. By the conclusion of the novel, he has revised his feelings. Writing to Lily, he speaks of his emotions towards her, and describes them as love, for want of a better word. The naturalness of Dahfu's love for Atti is stressed. Love is described as a spontaneous and giving emotion; Dahfu has pointed out that it removes ego. Henderson's initial excessive self-preoccupation made it impossible for him to love. But he finally comes to feel love - first for Dahfu, then, on re-analysing his relationship with her, for Lily, and finally, on his journey home, when he befriends the orphan boy from Persia. His concern for the child makes him forget himself; this suggests that he will be able to make a new start in his relationships in America.

In his final reflections, Henderson recalls working in a fairground, when he was sixteen, with an old bear, Smolak, and describes the bond that existed between them. He now understands Dahfu's love for the lion and comments that this understanding was, after all, in him all along - the feeling of mutual influence between two creatures in

a similar condition:

Whatever gains I made were always due to love and nothing else. . . . I shut my eyes in his wretched, time-abused fur. He held me in his arms and gave me comfort. And the great thing is that he didn't blame me. He had seen too much of life, and somewhere in his huge head he had worked it out that for creatures there is nothing that ever runs unmingled. (p.316)

We see Henderson, at the last, appreciating contact with others - a very different attitude from the one he held when he first left America. He leaves the aeroplane for some fresh air at Newfoundland, with the child in his arms:

I held him close to my chest. He didn't seem to be afraid that I would fall with him. While to me he was like medicine applied, and the air, too; it also was a remedy. Plus the happiness that I expected at Idlewild from meeting Lily. And the lion. He was in it, too. (p.318)

Henderson is now a person of much greater inner calm. He has become aware of facets of his personality as well as capabilities to which he was previously blind. He is not a wholly transformed character (he still experiences suffering and anxiety), but he can now cope with such feelings; he is, he feels, 'cured'. We do not actually see Henderson back in America in a state of reconciliation; as in most other of Bellow's novels, the action stops at the point at which the hero changes his attitude. Hope for the future is only indicated.

Henderson's reactions to Africa can all along be related to his needs in America. He does not begin to think like Dahfu, but is, rather, able to extract the relevant lessons from his association with him. We feel no

objection to his decision to run away from the Wariri after Dahfu's death, but recognise the tribe and the king as being primarily instruments of his cure. Henderson is, after all, a Westerner, and is incapable of living out a primitive myth. He has no further use for this kind of life; ideal though it is up to a point, it has all along been preparing him for the real world. Henderson's scepticism about the traditions concerning the lions till late in the Wariri episode makes the changes which occur in him more believable. These are reached only after deliberation; an immediate conversion would have been too suspicious.

In following the ideas of acceptance and love already mentioned, the movement away from isolation has points in common with the endings of Bellow's other novels, in which life is seen as a shared destiny. David Galloway writes, discussing the Bellow hero, "By seeing himself as part of the human brotherhood, by seeing all men as one, he can be freed from his curse - the curse which is, finally, his selfhood."<sup>11</sup> To feel at peace with oneself is to feel at peace with and drawn towards other people.

In the ideas explored Henderson the Rain King is perhaps closer to Herzog than to any other novel; Herzog is possibly the deeper, while Henderson is the brilliant twin.

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11. David D. Galloway, The Absurd Hero in American Fiction: Updike, Styron, Bellow, Salinger, University of Texas Press (1966), p.238.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### HERZOG - A PRISONER OF PERCEPTION

Herzog is a return to the mainly introspective novel, one more so than any since Bellow's first novel, Dangling Man, whereas Henderson the Rain King was notable for its richness of event and overt comedy. Herzog is Bellow's best-known work, and though it is comparatively lacking in action, it is closely related to the novels of 'events', in which plot and action are prominent. It is, however, definitely a novel of 'ideas', the inner psychological response to events being of importance, rather than the events themselves. The thoughts flowing through Moses Herzog's mind provide the main focus for the unfolding of themes. Background and action are selected only in so far as they are relevant to Herzog's thinking; thus, for instance, we learn a lot about his childhood, but comparatively little about, say, his academic career.

Some of the differences from the previous novels stem from a change in the type of protagonist. While Herzog shares with earlier protagonists their intensity, the sense of 'apartness' from others which governs them in various ways, and many of the same concerns with fundamental problems, he differs primarily in that he can be described as an intellectual to a greater extent than can his predecessors. Joseph can grasp his problems but is only able to achieve peace of mind by recognising his limitations; Leventhal,

immersed in his particular situation, is unable to see anything in perspective; Augie is essentially a 'doer'; Wilhelm is the example of the average 'man in the street' (if one can risk that generalisation); and Henderson, while intelligent and ready to search for 'truth', is like Augie a doer and not a thinker by nature. However, Herzog is a self-confessed, overt thinker, an academic by profession, and, most importantly, has the belief that because he is an intellectual, he can, if he only studies enough and rationalises enough, solve his problems - and those of mankind - without reference to the real life taking place around him. The choice of such a character determines the novel's introspective elements, the discussions of philosophy - mainly in Herzog's letters - and the atmosphere of greater intensity.

Very simply, the main question that emerges from the novel is this: in what way should life be lived? Life is problematical, unpredictable, unjust, and it is not suggested that to live at peace and to feel that life is worthwhile is by any means easy. Herzog considers many of the problems which give rise to man's view of the world, and these are neither academic nor refined. His experiences in the first part of the novel illustrate a wrong approach, which only takes him farther from a peaceful existence, but he is finally seen turning his thoughts in a more constructive direction; he experiences self-realisation. Yet he is not a didactic figure but a believable human being, despite the remoteness, sometimes, of his intellectual way of thought. Just as is true of his reality-

instructors, Herzog sometimes makes valid comments on life, but is obviously at other times extreme, even neurotic, in his views. He is, like most people, a mixture of qualities - and the novel can be enjoyed for interest in the individual, Herzog, as well as in the universal implications behind his personal life. It is, incidentally, common in criticism of Herzog and Bellow's other novels to find the kind of black-and-white outlook that consists in tracing a path for the hero from wrong to right, assessing his 'progress' towards some optimistic outlook and making this a criterion for the success of the novel. For example, Ruth Raider sees no justification for optimism: "Herzog does nothing, resolves nothing."<sup>1</sup> Such an outlook misses the point of Bellow's writing; he never pretends that life is other than a snakes-and-ladders type of existence, but prefers to end his novels at the top of the ladder because of his own instinctive optimism, not because he wishes to imply any permanent answer for his hero. The only inference as far as progress is concerned is that man can, through experience of life, become better at coping with his problems; but there is no question of their elimination. Bellow makes his own position clear in his reply to a question about the progression from the early novels towards optimism in Henderson the Rain King, which is the remark quoted earlier that "As for a massive statement of affirmation, I have none to offer."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ruth Raider, "Saul Bellow", Cambridge Quarterly, 2 (Winter 1967), p.181.
  2. From David D. Galloway, "An Interview with Saul Bellow", Audit, 3 (Spring 1963), p.22. See Ch.1, p.16, note 9.

To say that Herzog is in the last analysis a psychological novel is not to say that Bellow has avoided social implications; on the contrary, he uses Jewish culture and attitudes as an effective background to Herzog's personal dilemma, and also places the problems in relation to society today. As Bellow himself has stated: "I don't have any sense of ethnic responsibility. That is not my primary obligation. My primary obligation is to my trade and not to any particular ethnic group."<sup>3</sup> The Jewish background is used as a symbol for alienation. In the same way that the Jew in America, even after a generation or two, may never feel that he quite belongs, Herzog feels a sense of separateness, a barrier between himself and others. This apart, the Jewish setting in Herzog is an integral and important part of the novel as an artistic whole; Herzog, given to abstractions and leading a rootless life, takes on an identity without which the description of his psychological state would be the less convincing. The Jewish scenes (for instance, the long passage describing Herzog's childhood life and his family) are among the most vivid in the novel; and yet they only lend a flavour to it, unlike the overwhelming significance of the Jewish culture in, for instance, the works of Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth. It is this balance which, while giving the novel the benefit of an authentically felt setting, extends its boundaries considerably.

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3. From Jim Douglas Henry, "Mystic Trade", The Listener, 81 (22 May 1969), p.706. See Ch.1, p.13, note 7.

Herzog's letters occupy much of the novel. He writes these compulsively, starting first one, then another: "endlessly, fanatically, to the newspapers, to people in public life, to friends and relatives and at last to the dead, his own obscure dead, and finally the famous dead."<sup>4</sup> He even writes to God, in one of his very last letters. Of course, they are never sent, nor are they intended to be; they are simply a releasing of his thoughts to whoever seems the most appropriate person. They are mute testaments to the fact that he is unable to find either a focus or an outlet for his thoughts. They show, too, the importance Herzog gives himself, believing that he has the answers to all the random problems he picks out to discuss; yet we know that his real academic work and teaching lie in shambles around him. For Herzog, writing is a substitute for contact with people, rather than a supplement to it. On the other hand, his living in the past through his letters and reminiscences shows some thoughts of his which he is not able to communicate because of their very personal nature; actually to reveal so many of his feelings and problems would be unacceptable. Thus his writing may act for Herzog as a therapy; it enables him to express what he cannot tell others, relieving him of his burden of thought to some extent, and causing him to analyse the past as he recalls it. On looking back, he can achieve some detachment - he writes to Sandor Himmelstein, his lawyer,

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4. Saul Bellow, Herzog, Penguin Books, London (1971), p.7. Subsequent references in this chapter to this work will be included in the text.

recalling his break-up with his second wife, Madeleine:

"For the life of me, I couldn't understand. I often thought I was going to have apoplexy, to burst. The more comfort you gave me, the closer I came to death's door"

and then remarks to himself: "It must have been funny how I grieved." (p.91) The contents of the letters range from everyday matters and personal recollections to philosophical discussion; there is social and political comment as well. Herzog often makes perceptive observations, but his loss of any sense of proportion causes his random pursuit of a hundred different trains of thought, without completing any of them; he wants to make himself the person responsible for assessing everyone.

All Herzog's profound thinking is of little worth if none of it can be communicated; theory alone is sterile. It is worth noting, however, that Herzog is not unaware of the danger of inaccessibility that philosophy holds; he challenges intellectual terminology: "Dear Doktor Professor Heidegger, I should like to know what you mean by the expression 'the fall into the quotidian'. When did this fall occur? Where were we standing when it happened?" (p.55)

In spite of the amount of academic reference in the novel, a rejection of learning for its own sake is expressed. While he contemplates, Herzog is aware of the false values of the sham academics. Referring to the apple-peddler father of Shapiro, Madeleine's scholarly friend, Herzog says: "There was more of the truth of life in those spotted, spoiled apples, and in old Shapiro, who smelled of the horse and of produce, than in all of these learned

references." (p.76) Of course, Bellow intends irony in some of these remarks of Herzog's, as Herzog often falls into the very trap of which he is sometimes aware, that of avoiding life in favour of theory. The quantity of his letters and reminiscences indicates how strongly his theoretical world has taken hold of him. On the journey to Vineyard Haven, for instance, he writes continuously, stopping only when forced to because the train enters a tunnel. While having dinner with Ramona, his current mistress, he mentally writes letters about random association.

The social comment in the novel does not detract from the inner nature of the questions under discussion. Certainly, there is a feeling of a social climate in which Herzog's difficulties are more likely to become prominent, but it is not a localised one. Much of this sense is expressed in Herzog's letters, in some of which he discusses the views of philosophers and the history of thought, thereby widening the context of his problems. Of course, his writings represent as much his own tendency to universalise his problems as a description of the disadvantages of modern society; Herzog makes profound statements one moment, and condemns himself for doing so the next. The pressures of modern society certainly devalue the quality of life, and there is a lack of consideration for the individual in such a mechanised age. But Bellow never suggests that there is no hope for the individual or that the only remedy lies in a collective attempt to change society. For someone like Herzog, this remedy can come only from within.

However, the social comment does provide a sense of the atmosphere of the times and show the background to Herzog's thinking so that this is accessible to anyone. Here again we can view him as a figure of universal proportions. Bellow has said of public reaction to Herzog: "it appeals to the unconscious sympathies of many people. I know from the mail I've received that the book described a common predicament."<sup>5</sup>

Herzog may be an academic and an intellectual, but these are not the factors which cut him off from his fellow-beings; he does so himself by his attitudes of distrust and suspicion. Indeed, he proves himself an ordinary mortal in that, for all his learning, he is unable to cope with the world any more adequately than his fellows - even less, in fact; theory fails. Herzog's fault is not his intellectuality, but his almost total reliance on it as a means of structuring his life. One important feature of his character is that he is more or less aware of his faults, though he is unable to rectify them. His outlook on life is not so much isolated from others', only more intense.

At the start of the novel Herzog is alone in his large, dilapidated country house after the breakdown of his second marriage, writing his endless imaginary letters which contain the thoughts he is compelled to express. His academic career has ceased while he goes through this period of assessment. The possibility of madness is

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5. From Gordon Lloyd Harper, "The Art of Fiction: Saul Bellow - An Interview", Paris Review, 36 (Winter 1966), p.60.



raised on the first page, but it should be obvious straight-away that his condition is not due to insanity, temporary or otherwise; he manifests some of man's everyday fears, but in an extreme form. Herzog's own view of madness is that it can be a form of escape, one which he might well wish to claim (but cannot) in order to absolve himself from responsibility for his own life, and thus receive help. He writes to his psychiatrist: "Dear Edvig, the fact is that madness also has been denied me." (p.17)

Herzog is isolated from his fellow-beings because he tries to work out a formula for living which will control every aspect of his life. He makes no allowances for human unpredictability, and so is hurt by the behaviour of others. He will not acknowledge that there is wrong in the world, but wants people to fit in with what he expects of them. His weakness emerges from his need for approval and love. He is intense, dramatic, impulsive - and ridiculously self-important, as he notes in a letter: "One way or another the no doubt mad idea entered my mind that my own actions had historic importance, and this (fantasy?) made it appear that people who harmed me were interfering with an important experiment." (p.112) He wants to be out of the ordinary, super-human, "a marvellous Herzog". (p.100) John J. Clayton has remarked aptly on these lines that "Bellow's heroes are moral masochists, cut off by despair and self-hatred from those they love, cut off from humanity by their need to go beyond human life - to be more than human."<sup>6</sup>

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6. John J. Clayton, Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, London (1968), p.97.

Herzog is a mixture of present happenings, flashbacks, and letters. Until the final pages, the novel's setting is Herzog's remembrance of the immediate past. While there are long passages where reflection may suddenly interrupt the action, these, although they may give an impression of random thought, do show the state of Herzog's mind; he chooses incongruous moments to wander off into philosophical abstractions, as if he cannot simply live and experience, and enjoy the moment, without a constant analysis of his situation. The flashbacks skilfully show the way in which Herzog's character has become what it is, how his preoccupation with his childhood and more recent past events affects the present.

The subject-matter of the novel would not hold together as it does without the skill of Bellow's treatment. Apart from the blending of social and psychological factors, others are important. One of these is the way in which a sense of comedy subtly lightens even the weightiest reflections. There are Herzog's own humorous turns of phrase: "The senior dead will be proud of me. ...I will join the Y.M.C.A. of the immortals." (p.159) There is also the comedy of situation, such as when Herzog predicts to himself in exact detail and correctly what the evening with Ramona will be like, and the irony of the difference between Herzog's best intentions and his actions: "Moses wanted to do what he could to improve the human condition, at last taking a sleeping pill, to preserve himself. But when he met his Philadelphia class in the morning, he could hardly see his lecture notes." (p.113) Bellow's power of

description, in creating atmosphere or evoking emotion, is another strong point. The vivid picture of the fish store which Herzog and Madeleine pass one morning, which makes Herzog think of his mother, who came from the Baltic provinces and loved fish, as he tells Madeleine, or the cab ride during which the oppressiveness of New York City is encapsulated, are examples of this power. Though the novel is ostensibly structured according to Herzog's stream of thoughts, authorial intervention is made unobtrusively; we can thus keep a sense of perspective with regard to Herzog's own expression of his character. "Nevertheless, there are moral realities, Herzog assured the entire world as he held his strap in the speeding car." (p.185) The use of "the entire world", and the reminder of Herzog's whereabouts, point to the ludicrousness of his intentions. The narrative alternates between the third and first person, the change being used sometimes to move from objectivity to a particular subjectivity when it is required.

Towards the end of the novel, Herzog is able to analyse his reasons for writing letters; he hopes thereby to achieve control over the situation he is in by putting it into words, by making everything concrete. He tells his friend Asphalter:

'I've been writing letters helter-skelter in all directions. More words. I go after reality with language. Perhaps I'd like to change it all into language, to force Madeleine and Gersbach to have a Conscience. I must be trying to keep tight the tensions without which human beings can no longer be called human. If they don't suffer, they've gotten away from me. And I've filled the world with letters to prevent their escape.

I want them in human form, and so I conjure up a whole environment and catch them in the middle. I put my whole heart into these constructions. But they are constructions.' (pp.279-80)

Apart from Herzog's self-therapy in writing letters, he gains experience, as do other Bellow protagonists, through contact with 'reality-instructors'. Basteshaw, Tamkin and Dahfu are examples. Dahfu is one who obviously offers good advice, while the other two sometimes seem to verge on lunacy - and their mental states are at least as disordered as those of the heroes themselves - so that at face value one is reluctant to see their statements as being more credible than those of their pupils. Their role, then, seems to be that of putting another perspective on life, thus forcing the heroes to think more practically. Because there is no obvious indication by the author of the moral worth of the reality-instructors (for such an indication would bring in the element of overt didacticism which Bellow dislikes), the reader is fortunately prevented from taking any statements at face value. The specific purpose of the reality-instructors in Herzog is most of all to provide 'reality' - the views of a person different in attitude to Herzog and perhaps more in touch with the outside world. Herzog's comment on Simkin, the lawyer (whom we are told is a "practical realist") (p.36) bears out this point: "He was a Reality-Instructor. Many such. I bring them out. Himmelstein is another, but cruel. It's the cruelty that gets me, not the realism." (p.36) He also explains in his own terms the less than ideal

characteristics of his instructors: "A very special sort of lunatic expects to inculcate his principles. Sandor Himmelstein, Valentine Gersbach, Madeleine P. Herzog, Moses himself. Reality instructors. They want to teach you - to punish you with - the lessons of the Real." (p.132) The point emerges that for Herzog, in his quest for justice and rationality, reality must sometimes be equated with cruelty. This, together with people's inconsiderate behaviour, is a fact he has to learn to accept. Therefore the very faults of his reality-instructors are what make them of value to him and provide him with the necessary contradictions to some of his idealistic beliefs. He witnesses Himmelstein smashing crockery in a rage and showing the most unpleasant side of his character, and is able to see through him, making a comparison with his own state of mind:

Why did I become involved with him at all? I must have wanted such absurd things to happen to me. I was so far gone in foolishness that even they, those Himmelsteins, knew more than I. And showed me the facts of life, and taught me the truth. (p.97)

If Herzog's problems are examined in detail, it can be seen that many of them spring from his lack of communication with people and from the inadvertent selfishness of his withdrawn attitude. His basic mistake is to believe that he can solve his problems (and those of the world) by logic. "Late in spring Herzog had been overcome by the need to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to clarify, to make amends." (p.8) He is aware of the futility of his attitude: "Was it a point of

honour to explain myself to everyone? But how could I explain? I myself didn't have a clue." (p.174) He talks of the impossible dream of a synthesis which would cover every eventuality, and explains the need for this as being a social phenomenon of the times. Man wishes for order and significance in life; his underlying fear is that existence may be chaotic. Nevertheless, he still hopes for a solution:

The dream of man's heart, however much we may distrust and resent it, is that life may complete itself in a significant pattern. Some incomprehensible way. Before death. Not irrationally but incomprehensibly fulfilled. (p.311)

The paradox of the hope and the reality is what must be faced, precisely what Herzog is trying to avoid facing. The complexity and inexplicability of life may be a saving quality. Man needs the mystery; if he accepts that he cannot control his destiny, he need not therefore despair, since the unknown may contain reasons for hope as well as fear. As Bellow himself says, "The mystery is too great."<sup>7</sup>

Herzog, letting life pass him by while he theorises, progresses from his negative state only when he learns through experience; however much he may study, his equilibrium is disturbed at a stroke by any upset in his personal life, as Simkin points out: "'Do you mean to say that those philosophers you've studied for so many years are all frustrated by one Valentine Gersbach?'" (p.222) (Gersbach is now Madeleine's lover; he and his wife Phoebe are former friends of Herzog's.) This attitude is further

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7. From Gordon Lloyd Harper, op.cit., p.67.

exemplified when Herzog happens to attend the court case in which a young couple are being tried for the murder of their child. Herzog's theorising is at its weakest when he assumes that there is justice, when it is non-existent. Understanding real life means acknowledging the existence of both evil and good. This scene is a turning-point, for it is here that Herzog comes to realise this for himself:

I fail to understand! thought Herzog, as this good man, jowls silently moving, got off the stand. I fail to ... but this is the difficulty with people who spend their lives in humane studies and therefore imagine once cruelty has been described in books it is ended. Of course he really knew better - understood that human beings would not live so as to be understood by the Herzogs. Why should they? (p.245)

Herzog also learns eventually that progress is not necessarily proportionate to the amount of effort expended; the self-knowledge and peace he would like to find is, paradoxically, further from him the more he tries. As with other Bellow protagonists, one of the most important lessons to be learned is simply to stop striving - and then, as Augie March says, "the truth comes as a gift".<sup>8</sup> Gradually, Herzog is brought to realise this, and relinquishes his efforts to control. He decides to give up his struggle with Madeleine, and his final gesture is to cease writing letters - something he anticipated earlier, but lacked the conviction to carry out:

But then he realized that he did not need to perform elaborate abstract intellectual work - work he had always thrown himself into as if it were the struggle for survival. But not thinking is not necessarily

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8. The Adventures of Augie March, p.592.

fatal. Did I really believe that I would die when thinking stopped? Now to fear such a thing - that's really crazy. (p.272)

As Bellow has said, "We have to dismiss a great number of thoughts if we are to have any creaturely or human life at all."<sup>9</sup> In giving up excessive rationalisation, Herzog affirms life.

By his analytical approach to human situations, Herzog sets himself apart from spontaneous communication. Isolation (a theme which figures strongly in all the novels) is inevitable in life, since a part of the self must always remain incommunicable because of the very existence of individual personalities. However, an acceptance of this isolation need not preclude a recognition that there is (or may be) brotherhood between men. The burden of the isolated self, "the agony of consciousness and separate being" (p.99) (a feeling frequently experienced by characters in modern literature) is hard for Herzog to accept. Some people, like Frankie Addams in Carson McCullers' The Member of the Wedding, would like to deny it, attempting to merge with the whole of mankind; others fill their lives with activity or routine habit in order to avoid facing this isolated self, as Joseph in Dangling Man eventually does. Others again, like Herzog, initially feel that because of this isolation they must go to the other extreme, making themselves self-sufficient to avoid the possibility of hurt or loss, thus endangering all communication. In trying to avoid involvement with Ramona, Herzog becomes

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9. From Gordon Lloyd Harper, op.cit., p.71.



acutely aware of the problem of the self: "I am Herzog.

I have to be that man. There is no one else to do it.

After smiling, he must return to his own Self and see the thing through." (p.73) He describes himself: "But I am

a prisoner of perception, a compulsory witness." (p.78)

After the night with Ramona, and the happy farewell outside her shop, he considers how his consciousness of isolation prevents him enjoying the relationship:

Here, on the street, as far as character and disposition permitted, he had a taste of the life he might have led if he had been simply a loving creature.

But as soon as he was alone in the rattling cab, he was again the inescapable Moses Elkanah Herzog. Oh, what a thing I am - what a thing! (p.213)

His dislike of favours and his need to distance himself erect barriers against any true relationship with others.

He is frightened of accepting anything from Ramona, because he "might have to pay with his freedom". (p.24) Accepting

is to him an obligation, rather than the receiving of a gesture of love which expects no reward. Also, he is

frightened of living in the present, trusting to his feelings. The need to be sure of the future prevents him

from committing himself, and curtails his freedom of action rather than increasing it. When having dinner with Ramona,

Herzog considers the possibility of marrying her: "This - this asylum was his for the asking, he believed. Then

why didn't he ask? Because today's asylum might be the dungeon of tomorrow." (p.191) Whether or not marriage to

Ramona would work for Herzog - a question still unanswered by the end of the novel - is really irrelevant, but the

point is made that in trying to control his life by means of a permanent independence Herzog denies both the present and the need to accept the possibility of change in the future. Afraid of making an irresolvable mistake, he avoids any real commitment.

As well as wanting independence, Herzog stresses the importance of the individual personality, despite the threats to it from twentieth-century society. Recalling his father's suffering during his life, he comments that suffering became a commonplace with the war: "We are on a more brutal standard now, a new terminal standard, indifferent to persons." (p.155) He makes the point that concern with the self is a primitive instinct. The progress of science and the increase in man's knowledge and power have dehumanised life and endangered privacy and one's personal control. Herzog sees a social threat in the false sense of community engendered by man's failure to remain an individual. This thought comes to him on a subway journey, which lends itself to such reflections:

Innumerable millions of passengers had polished the wood of the turnstile with their hips. From this arose a feeling of communion-brotherhood in one of its cheapest forms. This was serious, thought Herzog as he passed through. The more individuals are destroyed by processes such as I know, the worse their yearning for collectivity. Worse because they return to the mass agitated, made fervent by their failure. Not as brethren, but as degenerates. Experiencing a ranging consumption of potato love. (p.183)

The problem of modern society's effect on the individual is discussed in more depth in Mr. Sammler's Planet.

Herzog himself has acquired an exaggerated sense of this

need for individuality, with its implicit feeling for self-preservation - one reason he displays such great sensitivity to what seem dehumanising forces in society.

Moving on from the emphasis Herzog places on the self, we can see how this and his other precepts cause his relationships to crumble. Whereas communication implies the need for instinct and unselfishness, Herzog reasons things out (for instance when he analyses Ramona's motives, and his own, after receiving her invitation to dinner) and thinks mainly of what he may gain or lose from a relationship. To emphasise his egotism is not to say that he is without emotion or affection, rather that he has not learnt to look on the other person as a being with the same feelings as himself. He considers that "To look for fulfilment in another, in interpersonal relationships. was a feminine game. And the man who shops from woman to woman, though his heart aches with idealism, with the desire for pure love, has entered the female realm." (pp.195-6) Herzog here uses the word "feminine" in a derogatory sense, implying a designing activity beneath men's dignity.

In his love for his family and children, he shows a great excess of emotion, but one which is often based on nostalgia or selfishness. He constantly looks back to his childhood; little events trigger off a series of recollections. We learn of his memory that "Herzog persecuted everyone with it. It was like a terrible engine." (p.138) This arises from the incident described in Herzog's letter to his old friend Nachman, in which he asks Nachman why he

had avoided him on the street, and reflects: "But I, with my memory - all the dead and the mad are in my custody, and I am the nemesis of the would-be-forgotten. I bind others to my feelings, and oppress them." (p.140) Herzog makes intermittent contact with members of his family, but keeps his reserve. He does want to see them, but not until he has proved his self-sufficiency. He is wary of his brother Will's offers of help after his car accident, and even of his invitation to dinner. He fails to understand the need to receive as well to give, equating this with loss of individuality and self-respect, just as he does with Ramona's gestures. Toward the end of the novel, he makes the telling comment: "'I'd open my heart to you, Will, if I could find the knob.'" (p.339) Paradoxically, it is perhaps the intensity of his emotional feelings that makes communication difficult; he cannot behave spontaneously. His feelings overwhelm him, though he avoids attachment on the surface. As H.M. Harper has commented, discussing Herzog's analytical, forced approach to life:

Moses Elkanah Herzog is the first of Bellow's heroes to earn his living as an intellectual. One of his problems, in fact, is that his response to life is an intellectual rather than a more natural, instinctive one. His relations with everyone are glossed with a running psychological and philosophical commentary. His sexual relations with his mistress must be thoroughly analyzed; her bed is also the analyst's couch, and the two functions are concurrent. Even with his little daughter June, Herzog is always aware of the implications to her of his every word and gesture. He can't be natural.<sup>10</sup>

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10. H.M. Harper, Desperate Faith - a study of Bellow, Salinger, Mailer, Baldwin and Updike, The University of North Carolina Press (1967), p.51.

Herzog's love for his children illustrates the difference between his preconceived ideas and the reality. Where Junie is concerned, he is very conscious of his 'rights', of wanting her to love him, and tries to be a model father. He feels inadequate when seeing his son Marco, wishing he had something to offer him, and thinks that he must be near one or other of his children to help them. About the ill-fated outing with Junie, we are told that Herzog "held her hand as they mounted the aquarium staircase, feeling himself to be the father whose strength and calm judgment she could trust." (p.286) The irony of this statement emerges with the events subsequent to the car accident, and part of Herzog's enlightenment is to realise the falseness of his role-playing, possessiveness and wish for revenge on Madeleine and Gersbach, and his lack of any real consideration. "He decided that this foolishness must stop, or things would go even worse. Running to Chicago to protect his daughter, he almost killed her. Coming to offset the influence of Gersbach, and to give her the benefit of his own self - man and father, et cetera - what did he do but bang into a pole." (p.292)

The general immaturity in his love extends itself to Herzog's relationships with women. We are told of a succession of foreign mistresses - Wanda, Zinka, Sono - who look up to him and flatter him, and whom he remembers mainly by outward details: their appearance or clothes, the smells of Sono's flat. There is a lack of depth in

these relationships, and it may be that there is a sub-conscious reasoning in Herzog's choice of foreigners for mistresses, in that he may feel easier with a natural barrier of language and culture - he has the excuse to keep his mental distance. While he obviously enjoys some aspects of these relationships, Herzog nevertheless fails to relate to, or trust, women entirely, but sees them as different beings with different motives. At times he is even oppressed by them. When he notices an unknown woman on a railway platform, Herzog comments about her eyes: "But they were bitch eyes, that was certain. They expressed a sort of female arrogance which had an immediate sexual power over him". (p.40)

Herzog's relationship with Ramona shows most clearly his dilemma in wanting the comfort of such a situation on the one hand, and complete control over his life on the other. He shows himself unwilling to trust to events and Ramona's natural good sense, due to his fear of being drawn into marriage by reasons of obligation. Ramona is the most fully-drawn and important of Herzog's mistresses. She remains, unlike the others, an important figure in his life. In this case there is no language barrier, and Ramona, if not equalling Herzog in academic learnedness, is of more than sufficient intelligence (to say nothing of her common sense - a characteristic which Herzog lacks) to be a companion to him as well as a mistress. Ramona's stylised eroticism, her almost-too-perfect entertaining, provide a contrast to Herzog's learnedness and vagueness,

and serve to balance the impression given by him that work is important, but pleasure not at all; Herzog cannot accept that pleasure can be an end in itself. It is Ramona who tries to awaken in Herzog an appreciation of good food and fashionable clothes in order to show him that, though trivial to him, they have a place in one's life as well as intellectual pursuits. She wants to teach him to "renew the spirit through the flesh". (p.192) The affair brings out conflicting feelings in Herzog because he is able to see (as he was not previously) the best possible side of a relationship with a woman, while retaining his mistrust: "here he was trying to hold on to Ramona as he ran from her." (p.72)

As far as the failure of Herzog's marriages is concerned, the picture we are given is obviously that of his own viewpoint, but he admits to having caused the breakdown of his marriage to Daisy, his first wife, by his "irregularity and turbulence of spirit" (p.133) and by his disproportionate concentration on his work. In Madeleine's case, Herzog's recollections are more emotional. Even allowing, though, for his necessarily biased viewpoint, her actions reveal her to be as neurotic and complex as he is, but in different ways; one does not want to make the judgment as to where the blame lies for the breakdown of their marriage. The difference is that Madeleine, despite her problems, is able to conduct her life more successfully on a worldly and social level (possibly aided by her venting her stresses on Herzog), whereas his problems cause him to withdraw

from the world. In the eyes of others, Herzog therefore appears the culprit. Through their disagreements, the sterility of a relationship between two self-interested people is shown; there is a conflict between life-styles and interests which destroys the marriage, because neither partner will meet the other halfway. Yet both believe themselves in the right.

Herzog's mental struggles begin with the shock of this second breakdown of a marriage. The unreal attitude he adopts towards life replaces any further attempt to make a fresh start; he is unable to face facts. Herzog also makes the mistake of asking for fairness, just what Madeleine has shown him to be impossible, and in this his expectations are doomed, which prolongs his unsatisfactory state of mind. During Madeleine's outburst against his academic preoccupations, he "granted that he was in the wrong. But all he asked, it seemed to him, was a bit of co-operation in his effort, benefiting everyone, to work towards a meaningful life." (p.129) Following his separation from Madeleine, revenge on Madeleine and Gersbach becomes an obsession with Herzog; he can even contemplate killing them. As so often happens, he realises his errors of attitude, but is unable to control them:

But what about justice? - Justice! Look who wants justice! Most of mankind has lived and died without - totally without it. People by the billions and for ages sweated, gypped, enslaved, suffocated, bled to death, buried with no more justice than cattle. But Moses E. Herzog, at the top of his lungs, bellowing with pain and anger, has to have justice. It's his quid pro quo, in return for all he has suppressed, his right as an Innocent Party. (p.227)



Herzog's judgment is so clouded by the situation that he can on the one hand condemn the child-murderers he hears in the court case, failing to see how they could so act, and on the other consider killing Madeleine and Gersbach (with the subsequent suffering this would cause the child he professes to love) as being a justifiable act - though we anticipate that he will not, of course, be able to carry it through.

A more basic reason for Herzog's plight than his immediate situation is a deep-rooted fear of death. As with Henderson, this fear is central to his suffering. The fear of death, and the refusal to face it, are shown to have a wider significance also in influencing the current mood of society. If not to quite such an extent as Henderson, Herzog has a similar preoccupation with death. He reflects on the death of his father, showing his horror at the physical aspects of death as well as its other implications; this awareness cannot be cut out of one's consciousness:

And then he died, and that vivid blood of his turned to soil, in all the shrunken passages of his body. And then the body too - ah, God! wastes away; and leaves its bones, and even the bones at last wear away and crumble to dust in that shallow place of deposit. And thus humanized, this planet in its galaxy of stars and worlds goes from void to void, infinitesimal, aching with its unrelated significance. (pp.249-50)

Man's helplessness against death is a broader example of the injustice against which Herzog rebels. Much of his thought tends towards the views of philosophers on death. He reflects that in modern society people are

unable to accept either their own forthcoming death or the deaths of those they love. They may therefore concentrate on success in life, selfishness and competitiveness resulting. In this age the nihilistic viewpoint is often prominent: "This generation thinks - and this is its thought of thoughts - that nothing faithful, vulnerable, fragile can be durable or have any true power. Death waits for these things as a cement floor waits for a dropping light bulb. . . . the one true God is Death." (p.297) This theme anticipates Mr. Sammler's Planet, where society is seen by Sammler as living a fashionable and trivial existence, placing no value on anything permanent. Herzog's personal approach to his fear, "his childish disorder, that infantile terror of death that had bent and buckled his life into these curious shapes" (p.273) is to avoid thinking of death as far as possible, cultivating instead a false emotionalism, for instance towards his children, to fill the gaps in his life; he relates his fear of losing Junie to his fear of death and separation from others. He resists Himmelstein's mention of death when they are discussing his legal position, but awareness of his fear lies just beneath the surface. When Herzog notices the change in appearance of his friend Libbie as she moves towards middle age, he immediately relates it to the inexorable approach of death. In his morbidity, he exhibits the characteristic, not of wanting to forget the dead, but of regarding them as still alive, as in his letter-writing:

He realized he was writing to the dead.  
To bring the shades of great philosophers

up to date. But then why shouldn't he write the dead? He lived with them as much as with the living - perhaps more; and besides, his letters to the living were increasingly mental, and anyway, to the unconscious, what was death? Dreams did not recognize it. (p.180)

Man resents the lack of choice forced on him by death which seems to him to negate all opportunities to choose in other spheres. He can only anticipate its certainty by suicide. Lack of knowledge about an after-life is as much a part of the fear as the physical actuality of death. Apart from either facing or ignoring the void, there is also the possibility that one may find comfort in religion. Herzog puts forward another optimistic alternative, "the acknowledging that we owe a human life to this waking spell of existence, regardless of the void. (After all, we have no positive knowledge of that void)." (p.321) To come to terms with death through logic is a hard task, given man's emotional instincts. But there can be hope if one is able to accept the premise that to live on these terms is better than not to live at all, and that, since death is the one fate common to everyone, man is part of a pattern of humanity, albeit a transitory one, and not an isolated sufferer. As Herzog says: "I really believe that brotherhood is what makes a man human. . . . The real and essential question is one of our employment by other human beings and their employment by us." (p.280)

From the discussion of death emerges the need to live a life based on the concrete moments of one's existence. Herzog's remoteness is contrasted rather bluntly with, for

example, Himmelstein's superficial approach to life.

Herzog must face the fact that he will get hurt; it is not possible to be selective about life's events. "Moses refused to know evil. But he could not refuse to experience it. And therefore others were appointed to do it to him, and then to be accused (by him) of wickedness." (p.252)

Ironically, Herzog professes to be searching for reality in his contemplation of life; but his 'reality' is in his head, and he comes to understand the difference only after his accident, when he is submitted to the humiliation of a police search: "Is this, by chance, the reality you have been looking for, Herzog, in your earnest Herzog way? Down in the ranks with other people - ordinary life? By yourself you can't determine which reality is real?" (p.294)

The ultimate reality of death has to be faced; Himmelstein tries to force Herzog into anticipation of it with a coarseness typical of him, and Asphalter tells him of a psychology exercise in facing death (which brings to mind the lessons Henderson is given by Dahfu), which consists in imagining being dead and in examining one's true feelings towards others. Herzog condemns Asphalter's ideas, making the point that brotherhood is what really matters. Asphalter's death-exercise is in itself unreal, whereas Dahfu's was based on the experiencing of an actual and instinctive fear through confronting a lion. It seems that perhaps the conscious search for reality is likely to take one further from it; a simple appreciation of experience is best.

The fear of death, and the possibility of future unhappiness due to the impermanence of any one state of things, may result for some in the inability to enjoy life at any time. The nihilism behind this view, that happiness is to be suspected because it may not be permanent, and that life is only as good as its worst aspects, is apparent. Herzog recalls his instinctive rejection of happiness during his affair with Sono:

To tell the truth, I never had it so good, he wrote. But I lacked the strength of character to bear such joy. That was hardly a joke. When a man's breast feels like a cage from which all the dark birds have flown - he is free, he is right. And he longs to have his vultures back again. He wants his customary struggles, his nameless, empty works, his anger, his afflictions and his sins. (p.177)

When Herzog, at the conclusion of the novel, begins again to enjoy life in a simple manner, this is not really caused by anything other than an instinctive optimism and wish for happiness which arise in him when he has rejected some of his misguided attitudes. In one interview, regarding Herzog, Bellow discusses his theory that denial of life is wrong because of the mystery of the uncertain future. He says: "I think a good deal of Herzog can be explained simply by the implicit assumption that existence, quite apart from any of our judgments, has value, that existence is worth-ful."<sup>11</sup> He admits that his arguments are not necessarily based on anything but instinct:

I seem to have asked in my books, How can one resist the controls of this vast society

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11. From Gordon Lloyd Harper, op.cit., pp.67-8.

without turning into a nihilist, avoiding the absurdity of empty rebellion. I have asked, Are there other, more goodnatured forms of resistance and free choice? And I suppose that, like most Americans, I have involuntarily favored the more comforting or melioristic side of the question.<sup>12</sup>

Bellow's optimism is seen in Herzog's genuinely tranquil state of mind at the end. One remark of Bellow's particularly applies: "we have good cause to fear the truth, but I'm not at all ready to stop hoping."<sup>13</sup> By allowing hope and trust to take the place of calculation and rationalisation, Herzog is able to appreciate what it is to experience the moment and to enjoy communicating with his fellow-beings. Like Henderson, he comes to understand the meaning of wanting to live - he is at last a 'be-er' and not a 'becomer'. As Denis Donoghue puts it: "The turning-point comes when he gives up the abuse and the struggle to convert experience into mind; and simply waits."<sup>14</sup>

Paradoxically, it is because Herzog has realised that he cannot have the security he has been seeking that he no longer wants it. At the beginning of the novel, he would have liked the excuse of madness to justify others' help; at the end he wants to prove his sanity. He is freed from anxiety and from the desire for safety, accepting instead that his is not a specially deserving case. He experiences to his surprise a feeling of joy at his freedom from Madeleine, instead of craving fair treatment

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12. Ibid., p.72.

13. Ibid., p.73.

14. Denis Donoghue, The Ordinary Universe, Faber and Faber, London (1968), p.200.

from her. A useful comparison is with Alan Watts's idea of "the law of reversed effort". Watts writes that "insecurity is the result of trying to be secure, and that, contrariwise, salvation and sanity consist in the most radical recognition that we have no way of saving ourselves", and he also discusses the problem of awareness of the self: "As soon as it becomes clear that "I" cannot possibly escape from the reality of the present, since "I" is nothing other than what I know now, this inner turmoil must stop."<sup>15</sup> This serves as a good description of Herzog's change in feeling.

Though religion is frequently mentioned as a possible means of self-redemption, Bellow's final aim is to treat Herzog's crisis outside any religious framework. Religion is seen as another form of stability and protection, especially against death, but may not be the answer for everyone. Madeleine defends her conversion on the grounds that she no longer fears death: "'But now I'm willing to go on living, and to bring children into the world, provided that I have something to tell them when they ask me about death and the grave." (p.123) Herzog rejects the idea of the religious profiting spiritually from suffering, since not everyone would have the strength this takes: "But this is a special exercise. More commonly suffering breaks people, crushes them and is simply unilluminating." (p.324) He resents the hypocrisy sometimes found in

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15. Alan W. Watts, The Wisdom of Insecurity, Vintage Books, New York (1951), p.9.

religious people (exemplified by Madeleine and Gersbach). Though there is no cut-and-dried argument for or against the need for religion, Herzog's progress is made on a non-religious basis: "I am willing without further exercise in pain to open my heart. And this needs no doctrine or theology of suffering." (p.324) The hope seen by Bellow consists more in a vision of a common humanity, a faith in human nature and in the possibility of peace within life itself.

All through the novel, we have seen Herzog, the rational thinker, putting forward ideas to cope with life, while being unable to control his personal emotional response to events which he sees as unjust and unique to himself. It is only when he is able to reconcile these two sides of himself and see suffering as a common fate, not one from which he should be exempt because of his reasoning, that he is able to see his problems in perspective. He initially isolates himself in thought, denying any brotherhood, and this makes his life - the condition of man and his own personal condition - seem an overwhelming burden. It is therefore logical and inevitable that Herzog, during his final recuperation, should show the awareness of brotherhood which he does. In contrast to the selfish, emotional feelings he has shown towards his children, he now experiences the pleasure of a more genuine love. He comments on his previous need to explain life, which he realises has detached him from reality: "I mean to share with other human beings as far as possible and not destroy my



remaining years in the same way. Herzog felt a deep, dizzy eagerness to begin." (p.329) In one of his very last letters, to his dead mother, he says: "I want to send you, and others, the most loving wish I have in my heart." (p.334)

As in Bellow's other novels, the ending is not so much a definite change in the hero's life as an expression of hope for the future. The questions of what will happen regarding Herzog's relationship with Ramona, whom he has invited to dinner, or his house or work, are left deliberately vague. It is the approach, the inner direction taken by Herzog, which matters. His new, outgoing feeling brings him peace for the moment. In his garden at Ludeyville, he is able, like Henderson, to appreciate the beauty of nature, almost in a mystical way. Herzog's most positive step is to stop writing letters; from this we may infer that perhaps, in future, his communications will be received by others instead of remaining in his head.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MR. SAMMLER'S PLANET - THE AFFIRMATION OF LIFE ON EARTH

Mr. Sammler's Planet shows a superficial change from the direction of Bellow's previous novels, and may seem initially ambiguous in its implications. A more urgent awareness of the world's problems, social and metaphysical, pervades the novel, and this is reflected by a lessening of emphasis on the alienation of the hero. In the previous novels we have seen the protagonists at odds for various reasons with society, their families and close associates. Sammler, though retaining many of the characteristics we have come to expect, is not apparently so much in need of a change of outlook as his predecessors, and the pressures of society may seem so bad as to remove responsibility from the individual. Sammler is considered a source of wisdom by those around him. However, on closer examination, he is by no means portrayed as perfect, and though social problems are oppressive, they are never seen as overwhelming. Though a greater weight of blame may lie with society than previously, Sammler is still a hero who has to come to terms with man's condition through a personal development in awareness, and this becomes increasingly more evident despite the initial impression of ambiguity. Sammler is certainly, however, a voice for the optimistic viewpoint, and offers the possibility of a philosophy to cope with the pressures of contemporary life. In

this sense the resulting affirmation is very like, and indeed goes further than, that in the previous novels.

The central discussion of the novel concerns what valid moral outlook man can adopt in order to face his world; the other alternatives - suicide in the face of despair, or escape (symbolised by moon-travel, the implication being that no further hope is possible on earth) - are considered and rejected. The novel revolves around Sammler's thoughts and his interaction with his relatives (mostly somewhat eccentric) over a period of a few days, and is especially concerned with his meeting with Dr. Govinda Lal, the Indian advocate of moon-travel. Events are structured to illustrate social problems or some facet of Sammler's character - his talk on Britain in the Thirties at Columbia University, the incidents involving the negro pickpocket, Sammler's killing of the soldier. The criticism has been made, for instance by David Galloway, that the novel is too much of a moral treatise and that the reader may well be too aware of a manipulation of events and characters by Bellow. However, the very complex and realistic portrayal of Sammler prevents him from becoming tedious or from being merely a spokesman. The events are certainly carefully ordered, with a series of interspersed flashbacks and reminiscences, but the wealth of detail convinces us of the realism of the description of society. Criticisms of the structure of the novel and of Sammler's attitude, such as Galloway's, imply a preconceived idea of the purpose of Bellow's novels and the form they should

take. The novel is successful partially because of the order Bellow imposes on what may initially seem a rather chaotic organisation. If his underlying motives and wish to state his case gain our sympathy, does it matter that the design of the novel does not appear as unselfconscious as, say, that of The Adventures of Augie March? In Augie March the events are episodic, a chronological account of Augie's life, appearing loosely structured, whereas in Mr. Sammler's Planet a very short period of time is covered and the purpose of the various events and characters is more evident than in the earlier novel. Sammler's own tendency towards reflection makes the style of the novel seem more deliberate. However, the feeling of overwhelming concern about the human condition is what gives the novel its readability. Nor is it without the usual share of humour; such instances as the flooding by Wallace of the Gruner house in his search for illegal abortion money, at the height of Sammler's and Lal's philosophical discussion, or the crash-landing of his aeroplane while pursuing his aerial photography scheme, lighten the seriousness of the content and remind one of the farcical elements of life.

Sammler's history features prominently; he is a Polish Jew in his seventies, who miraculously escaped a mass burial, in which his wife was killed, during Nazi oppression, though losing the sight of one eye. He has seen many atrocities (he visited the Six-Day War as a journalist) and has himself killed a soldier. At one stage of his life he lived in Bloomsbury in H.G. Wells's circle,

and retains a taste for the peace and order of the English cultural tradition. When the story opens Sammler is living in New York with his widowed niece, Margotte, with the financial help of his nephew Dr. Elya Gruner, who is fatally ill in hospital. Sammler is given to inquiry and philosophising. He leads a detached existence, feeling that he has already survived the worst the world has to offer, "forced by life, by fate, by what you like, to be disinterested, to think to the best of his ability on universal lines".<sup>1</sup> He finds the need for personal attachments less important as a result of his experiences: "But for himself, at his time of life and because he had come back from the other world, there were no rapid connections. His own first growth of affections had been consumed." (p.180)

There is no overt suggestion that Sammler is in need of 'reform'; though eccentric, he is nevertheless an element of calm in a turbulent world, surviving crises while others are thrown into despair. He is noticeably of an older generation than previous heroes, and shows his disapproval of the young, who represent for him the evils of uncontrolled sexuality, rudeness and lack of pride in personal appearance. He sees all this as a contrast to his own ideals of dignity and courtesy, as when he lectures the group of student radicals at Columbia only to be shouted down and condemned for his age and impotence. He sees himself as embodying values from a period of order

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1. Saul Bellow, Mr. Sammler's Planet, Penguin Books, London (1971), p.154. Subsequent references in this chapter to this work will be included in the text.

that is past; the lack of these values in the present day is one of the main reasons for his sadness and detachment: "Youth? Together with the idea of sexual potency? All this confused sex-excrement-militancy, explosiveness, abusiveness, tooth-showing, Barbary ape howling." (p.37)

His formal manner of speaking and his seriousness contrast his life-style with the free-and-easy ones of Wallace and Angela Gruner, Elya's son and daughter, and Feffer, a university student who used to read to Sammler, and who arranges the talk on the Thirties. They see him as a stable figure to be respected and consulted (it is interesting to note the contrast in this respect to Herzog, who seems only an eccentric to others). Sammler reflects about himself: "He, personally, was a symbol. His friends and his family had made him a judge and a priest." (p.75)

He feels drawn to some kind of task in life, and wants to provide answers and "short views". Feffer says to him: "'I know that you are trying to condense what you know, your life experience. Into a Testament.'" (p.92)

Though Sammler denies having made this statement, it rightly indicates one aspect of his approach to life - his searching for significance in every event, subsequently drawing a conclusion. He is apt to universalise a particular situation and ignore the individuals concerned.

What emerges as important is that his peculiar experiences do not make him a prophet or a judge; he finds that he is not, after all, different from others. Fundamental human feelings, open to everyone's experience, are what count.

Sammler is just a man searching for validity in life, and is as liable to mistakes as anyone. He exhibits at times a dangerous complacency in his views towards his society.

Bellow's attitude to society is more complex than in previous novels. There is more immediate gloom, and the question seems at first to be not how life is worth living, but whether it is worth living. A feeling of oppression and of imminent doom pervades even the private life, manifested for Sammler in the filth, traffic, vandalism, smashed telephone kiosks, and violence in the city, and particularly in his encounters with the pickpocket he sees on the bus, who follows Sammler and exposes himself. What seems to Sammler the degradation of modern youth indicates to him a lessening of the quality and intrinsic value of life, as does their emphasis on sex; he sees promiscuity as a harmful search for the casual, denying the possibility of any lasting, meaningful relationship, and perhaps mirroring the uncertainty of life. New York appears to Sammler a concentration of the evils of modern life; he says, for instance, to Angela: "'Perhaps if we were in India or Finland we might not be in quite the same mood. New York makes one think about the collapse of civilization, about Sodom and Gomorrah, the end of the world.'" (p.244) The advance of technology is responsible for an increased fear and feeling of helplessness on the part of mankind. Man is overpowered by his own knowledge and inventiveness, but cannot now reject the existence of his discoveries. "How could the ignorant non-specialist be strong with

strength adequate to confront these technical miracles which made him a sort of uncomprehending Congo savage?"

(p.145) The fear of death recurs more strongly with the knowledge that man has the means to destroy his race, and is therefore at the mercy of his own - fallible - self-control.

An atmosphere of collective madness pervades the twentieth century; madness and sanity are difficult to distinguish, and the atmosphere of the times brings out latent madness. Lal says that "'having power destroys the sanity of the powerful. It allows their irrationalities to leave the sphere of dreams and come into the real world.'" (p.175) The unsettling influence of power and money is a generally visible phenomenon. Madness signifies the shedding of responsibility, as though man has taken on more than he can bear; Sammler reflects: "And in the meantime there was the excuse of madness. A whole nation, all of civilized society, perhaps, seeking the blameless state of madness." (p.73) Elsewhere he thinks: "Madness is the attempted liberty of people who feel themselves overwhelmed by giant forces of organized control." (p.118) Madness is a form of escapism. It is also implied that in a world so difficult to cope with, insanity may, paradoxically, be sanity, since no rational view of man's present condition is possible. The nuclear threat is perhaps the most significant of the evils he has to face; the possibility of mass-scale destruction requires a new moral outlook. Sammler observes how the problem of killing is rationalised:



"Man is a killer. Man has a moral nature. The anomaly can be resolved by insanity only, by insane dreams in which delusions of consciousness are maintained by organization, in states of mad perdition clinging to forms of business administration." (p.158) Legalising man's anti-social instincts in the guise of warfare in order to remove the moral implications is another sign of the growing perversion of the times. In all the mentions of madness no one clear definition is made. Another interpretation of madness could be an awareness in which a way of living is evolved especially in order to combat pressures and to create some significance in life; that of Wallace, for instance, who starts numerous projects with feverish enthusiasm only to leave them abandoned, or of Eisen, the ex-husband of Sammler's daughter Shula, who makes metal medallions because "'I couldn't die. I couldn't shut my eyes - not before I did something like a human being, something important, beautiful.'" (p.137)

The feeling that there are collective problems in society, rather than an individual's only, results in part from the much greater use than hitherto of descriptions of actual events such as the Six-Day War, which place the novel in a specific time to a greater degree than, say, the fictitious setting of Henderson's quest, or the Chicago of Augie March. The description of corpses in the desert is the more horrifying because we realise that it relates to actual, recent events: "The odour was like damp cardboard. The clothes of the dead, greenish-brown sweaters,

tunics, shirts were strained by the swelling, the gases, the fluids. Swollen gigantic arms, legs, roasted in the sun. The dogs ate human roast." (p.201)

The approach taken by Lal to society is that because knowledge attained cannot be discarded, or the process of discovery halted, the only answer to the problem of claustrophobia caused by one's awareness of one's dependence on technology - or 'civilisation' - is an escape via this very advancement - in other words, to the moon. Lal advocates the idea in his document, but Sammler disagrees. Their meeting and discussion, after Shula has stolen Lal's document, provides the central point of the novel. The problem is really a moral one - whether the world can be accepted as it is or whether it has degenerated far enough to merit only rejection. The technological possibility itself of moon travel creates a new dimension of thought; freedom to escape the earth gives man a sense of reprieve, and distracts him from the actuality of his death. The earth seems accordingly more restrictive:

. . . this earth was a grave: our life was lent to it by its elements and had to be returned: a time came when the simple elements seemed to long for release from the complicated forms of life, when every element of every cell said, 'Enough!' The planet was our mother and our burial ground. No wonder the human spirit wished to leave. (p.146)

Lal goes so far as to say that because the opportunity to leave exists, man will find earth correspondingly more of a prison if he does not take it; human nature is to explore: "Not to go where one can go may be stunting." (p.174)

Sammler sums up his innate objection to Lal's scheme after

reading his document: "This is not the way to get out of spatial-temporal prison. Distant is still finite. Finite is still feeling through the veil, examining the naked inner reality with a gloved hand." (p.44) Sammler instinctively bypasses modern knowledge and practical solutions, recognising a problem in man's unrest which can be solved only from within. He also discusses with Lal his former friendship with, and the works of, H.G. Wells. He previously found him "'a mass of intelligent views'", (p.26) but Wells's final rejection of the value of life (due to the Second World War) is why Sammler implicitly lost interest in his biographical project: "poor Wells, the natural teacher, the sex emancipator, the explainer, the humane blessing of mankind, could in the end only blast and curse everyone." (p.25) Sammler's rejection of Wells points to his innate optimism even in the face of apparently insoluble social problems.

This relates to another important point; man's avowed need for explanation, and its paradoxical futility. The key to facing life is seen as being not in the rational, but in an acceptance of the irrational. Sammler shows his attitude in the first paragraph of the novel; ironically, he is as much an intellectual as those whom he criticises, and risks falling into the same trap:

Intellectual man had become an explaining creature. . . . 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. (p.5)

Man cannot, of course, explain his actions, because there is more to choice than logical alternatives; the very diversity that eludes an ordered pattern, though, must determine the quality of life. The unknowable elements in life cause Sammler's final rejection of Lal's views; life cannot logically be dismissed, as the moon-colonists would argue it could. Sammler sees knowledge as having become almost a religion, and man's pursuit of it a futile attempt to control and rationalise his own destiny. Man cannot face the thought of an irrational fate, and refuses to accept limits on his expectations. "For what it amounted to was limitless demand - insatiability, refusal of the doomed creature (death being sure and final) to go away from this earth unsatisfied." (p.29) This instinct gives rise to man's more fanatical pursuits, in the name of civilisation and progress. Sammler eventually realises his own tendency towards making the explanations he has condemned, and rejects once and for all the "poverty of soul" (p.225) implicit in the negative view reached by the 'explainers'.

The questioning of certain aspects of the human condition is more overt than in previous novels, with a wider relation than simply to the protagonist's state of mind; the feeling, at least initially, is that he is less to blame for his fears. The unease created by society releases deep-seated complexes and fears: "humankind, drunk with terror". (p.145) Sammler says to Lal: "'there are times, states, in which we lie under and feel the awful volume of cumulative consciousness, we feel the weight of

the world.'" (p.182) Man feels he has been created without being allowed to know the reason, but only with the knowledge that death is the certain end. All his newly-developed powers cannot combat his intrinsic helplessness. Sammler describes how during his wartime experiences in Poland the essence of being appeared at its worst:

You have been summoned to be. Summoned out of matter. Therefore here you are. And though the vast overall design may be of the deepest interest, whether originating in a God or in an indeterminate source which should have a different name, you yourself, a finite instance, are obliged to wait, painfully, anxiously, heart-achingly, in this yellow despair. (p.74)

He points out that the very process of evolution is terrifying in its incomprehensibility. Individual man's own end is foreseeable, but his race will inevitably change. The insignificance of the self is realised in the light of the collective forces unleashed by man's development and scientific progress.

Death is once again a central theme of the novel; Elya's approaching death and Sammler's escape from the grave provide a measure of personal experience. Sammler is able to assess the practical effects of the knowledge of death, and is more dispassionate than the other protagonists with their vague fears of the unknown. Henderson perhaps comes to understand the physical actuality of death through his body's responses to the confrontation with the lioness - the fear is removed by experience - while Sammler is more aware of the mental implications. The fact that Sammler has been close to death causes him to analyse

others' behaviour in this light. He sees emphasis on the cult of youth as being a rejection of the reminder of death which old age is: "No one made sober decent terms with death." (p.8) Wallace points out that to have parents still living maintains the distance of death. Perhaps in rejecting the old - as the students do Sammler at his lecture - the young are asserting their (temporary) invulnerability; fear of age as the representative of death is inherent in their attitude. Eccentricity and the desire to distinguish oneself, Sammler says, are also forms of escape from death. While not acknowledging it openly, people nevertheless seek ways of avoiding its implications. There is also the suggestion that worldly achievement in some way cheats physical death, which is an old Jewish belief.

Thinking of Shula, Sammler reflects how the fear of death can alter the capacity to live: "Perhaps the inward, the intimate, the dear life - the thing that is oneself from earliest days - when it first learns of death is often crazed." (p.157) He points out how knowledge of death can, even subconsciously, affect the whole way life is lived; in other words, it is impossible to imagine life without the threat of death, since one has this knowledge as soon as one is capable of formulating thought. One is the more helpless for not knowing when death will come. Even if one faces its inevitability in the long term, there is still the possibility of sudden death, or the imminence of death through illness (as in Elya's case). Only the

exceptional can live without trying to avoid the thought of death, and through facing it manage to concentrate on essentials and true values rather than material or other distractions. Sammler admits the difficulty of logic: "That was all very well, until death turned its full gaze on the individual. Then all such ideas were nothing." (p.208)

These views of death are those put forward in earlier novels, but what is interesting here also is Bellow's treatment of Sammler's own views on death. Sammler has experienced many aspects of it: he has escaped from the mass grave, but with the knowledge of his wife's death there; he has killed a soldier himself to ensure his own survival, taking pleasure in it; he has seen the killing and the abandoned corpses during his visit to the Middle East War; and finally, he has faced the fact that his close friend and relative Elya Gruner is shortly to die. Because of his experiences, Sammler considers not only his views on death to be different from others', but also his attitude to life; he believes that he is in some way cut off and singled out, and is not capable of involvement in human relationships to the extent that others are. His escape from death against all odds is perhaps a symbolic assertion of the value of life; he has resisted death, instead of passively accepting it. Living among the realities of New York, his detachment is challenged: "Mr. Sammler had once been on far more easy terms with death. He had lost ground, regressed." (p.85) Sammler wonders if there is

some significance in his being spared, such as a task assigned to him. He reflects that Shula and he are altered by their having been 'marked' for death.

Sammler muses often about death and about his killing of the soldier, recognising in the action emotions of joy as well as lack of pity. He sees his ecstasy at the killing as indicative of man's love of power, "the idea that one could recover, or establish, one's identity by killing, becoming equal thus to any, equal to the greatest." (p.117) Taken another way, the value of worldly privilege disappears with death; the power to kill is common to all. By killing an individual, and also through the possibility of the mass destruction of mankind, man can feel he is cheating death -- he has no power to stop it, but can choose to bring forward the natural course of events. The moral implications of Sammler's shooting the soldier, who begged for his life because of his children, are left vague; Sammler retains his own life, but destroys another's, and furthermore considers what he has done afterwards without obvious remorse. The instinct for survival seems to have overtaken the instinct for brotherhood. The difference between man's natural instincts and the ideal ones emerges here. As Leventhal notes in The Victim: "Would we have to be told 'Love!' if we loved as we breathed?"<sup>2</sup> In the descriptions of the horrors of the Six-Day War a society is reflected which is losing its capacity for love, turning instead to the pursuit of power, all the more ominous because of the

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2. The Victim, p.70. See Ch.3, p.46.



terrible nature of twentieth century discoveries. Sammler and Wallace have a significant conversation on the subject; Sammler describes the scene in War and Peace where Pierre Bezukov is spared death from the firing squad because he manages to exchange a look with his executioner. "'Tolstoy says you don't kill another human being with whom you have exchanged such a look.'" (p.151) He is unable to accept this as a general principle: "'When men of genius think about humankind, they are almost forced to believe in this form of psychic unity. I wish it were so.'" (p.151) He does see a certain possibility in the idea, but, as often (and realistically), he is doubtful:

'It's based on the belief that there is the same truth in the heart of every human being, or a splash of God's own spirit, and that this is the richest thing we share in common. And up to a point I would agree. But though it's not an arbitrary idea, I wouldn't count on it.' (p.151)

If such a sense of union removes the desire to kill, and life is to be shared rather than thrown away, then there is an implicit affirmation of the value of life and of contact. Though such moments of communion, on a small level, may not seem significant in the face of all the negative aspects of life, there must be nevertheless a case for hoping that such communication may become more widespread, and that an individual rapport may become a collective one. Moments of sympathy with humanity as a whole are often described in Bellow's novels, and it is at these moments of awareness of others that his heroes seem to find most reason for living, through an intuitive joy,

inexplicable but hard to deny. In an unsettled society, to cultivate love for one's fellow-beings and break down barriers to communication is even more important as an act of faith in the meaning of life; the satisfaction of communion with others is seen in Bellow's works as being able to transcend the negative-seeming elements of living. Sammler acknowledges the value of the individual in fighting against death; by sparing the soldier, he might have affirmed humanity.

The problem of the identity of the individual is peculiarly strong in the twentieth century, when technology seems to supersede individual effort. Sammler points out to Lal that the working masses have only in the last two centuries become aware of themselves as individuals with the choice of expression, but now people are unable to find fulfilment and cope with what he describes as "'the bad joke of the self which we all feel.'" (p.186) Because of the need to assert the personality, an obsession with the self, carried to an absurd extreme, may result. Sammler feels that lack of power, the burden of the self, are leading to a kind of play-acting, that is, the assumption of an acceptable, desirable personality, which is in the end destructive, and that "'the pain of heart it makes many people feel is incalculable, that most forms of personal existence seem to be discredited, and that there is a peculiar longing for non-being.'" (p.188) This longing for non-being results from man's lack of satisfaction or control both on the outer and the inner levels, the

uncertainty of the present time bringing out man's innate insecurity. As mentioned, a new dimension is introduced into life by the fact that mankind has discovered the means to exterminate itself - and while the individual has no say, a kind of collective death-wish may be the result; Sammler points out that "'very mediocre people have the power to end life altogether.'" (p.176) But while Lal would reject hope on earth, seeing a future only on the moon, for the elite who could travel there, Sammler resists such negativism. Lal says "'I believe you intimate that there is an implicit morality in the will-to-live'" (p.176) contradicting Sammler's view that no-one would deny humanity by destroying it; instinct will prevent it. Sammler, in spite of his especial awareness of the disorder of the century, still believes in this life instinct in man, an echo of Henderson's "Grun-tu-molani": "'But also he has something in him which he feels it important to continue. . . . The spirit knows that its growth is the real aim of existence.'" (p.189)

Sammler's optimism should not be seen as a detached ideal. Bellow stresses the need for acceptance of reality, and brings Sammler into contact with it, notably in the encounters with the pickpocket, who serves to illustrate the disorder of society; beautifully dressed, he operates unhindered, and the police are uninterested when Sammler reports him. In some ways Sammler's continuing interest in him shows the measure of his growing re-involvement in life. At first he consciously wishes to see the

pickpocket again, then accepts his power, after he corners Sammler and exposes himself. Sammler thereafter avoids travelling on the bus, coming to terms with the need to accept the social realities of New York. When Feffer questions him about the pickpocket, he tells him: "I may have thought that I had no more ordinary human curiosity left, but I was surprisingly wrong." (p.97) He acknowledges man's fascination with horror and its power to heighten experience. Following his rejection by the students to whom he lectures, Sammler is, as with the pickpocket, "obliged to events for a difference, an intensification of vision." (p.37) Both incidents bring home to him the twentieth-century preoccupation with sex, as do Feffer's and Wallace's interest in the pickpocket's exposing himself, and Walter Bruch's (Margotte's cousin) and Angela's confiding of their sexual behaviour to him. Such preoccupations seem to Sammler a distraction from reality, of which he wishes to remain conscious - the motive for his travelling to the Middle East War: "he had renewed his familiarity with a certain sort of fact." (p.199) He finds reality in the rotting bodies of corpses, and perhaps a reminder of the immediacy of death, which was wearing off for him. He wants to face reality, and find hope in it, in contrast to the deprived New Yorkers he sees from Elya's Rolls Royce, who avoid it:

The conviction transmitted by this crowd seemed to be that reality was a terrible thing, and that the final truth about mankind was overwhelming and crushing. This vulgar, cowardly conclusion, rejected by Sammler with all his heart, was the

implicit local orthodoxy, the populace itself being metaphysical and living out this interpretation of reality and this view of truth. (pp.224-5)

Sammler realises that he only senses this feeling in others and may be mistaken; but the point is that he himself has experienced considerable horror and still affirms life. There is the suggestion that only by facing up to the horror can it be coped with, and if what one feels is only an instinct to preserve life and the soul, with no specific grounds for hope, this is nevertheless a happier state than that of avoiding the truth in favour of distractions.

Sammler's final encounter with the pickpocket, when he asks Eisen to intercede to help Feffer, who was attempting to photograph the negro and is involved in a fight with him, again leads to self-revelation; he feels himself a participant in life once again, though still alone and in a state of uncertainty. His worry at his helplessness means that he is not able to maintain his detachment from the sufferers, the defeatists and the pleasure-seekers. He finally feels a basic sympathy with and understanding of the pickpocket he has previously feared, and attempts to save him from being hurt by Eisen. The reality, then, that Sammler has had to come to terms with is that of his own involvement with humanity - even its more alien members.

Sammler's dealings with his family and with Lal also illustrate his growth in awareness. The first impression given of Sammler is of a sane confidant and provider of strength in a family of irresponsible eccentrics. Sammler himself, while loving and sympathising with them to some

degree, judges and regrets their actions. His niece, Margotte, bores him with her intellectual pretensions, and his daughter Shula's peculiarities, her wigs, strange clothes, habit of scavenging, her irritating devotion to Sammler's all but abandoned Wells project, and above all her stealing of Lal's manuscript for his benefit, make him wish he had produced a better member of society. He regards severely Angela's promiscuity and Wallace's far-fetched schemes, and their general self-indulgence. They illustrate for him the modern rootlessness and the desire for quick returns. Wallace tells Sammler that "'Roots are not modern. That's a peasant conception, soil and roots.'" (p.197) Eisen, Sammler's son-in-law, and Feffer are almost caricatured in the traits they portray. These are all Sammler's "reality-instructors", representing the facets of life in which he feels unable to participate; as Sammler points out, they all react in their life-styles against the same feeling of insecurity. It is also possible that they represent a desire to communicate through gaining attention. They provide a lesson for Sammler in human behaviour. Until late in the novel, he notices only their bad characteristics (we might ask what good ones exist, unnoticed by Sammler; it is mentioned, for instance, that Feffer devotes time to handicapped children) without attempting to understand them as persons and respond with warmth. It is only at the end that Sammler recognises his essential connection with them, despite the apparent polarity, and becomes more human and humble. "And was he

himself a perfect example of sanity? He was certainly not. They were his people - he was their Sammler. They shared the same fundamentals." (p.213) He finally realizes the futility of trying to preach to Angela, and comes to understand that Shula has a deliberate purpose in her eccentricity. Trying to come to terms with the world, Sammler has, ironically, hitherto avoided those closest to him.

As well as the family, Lal (brought into the story somewhat deliberately and dramatically) provides the means for Sammler to sort out and air his views. Lal rejects life on earth, so Sammler is forced to champion it. Lal's argument is scientific, but Sammler finds human instinct too powerful to be dominated by science. More importantly, Lal is an individual with whom Sammler feels some affinity, and who is a spur to his self-awareness. He arouses feelings dormant in Sammler: "Strangest of all in the eighth decade of one's life, however, was a spontaneous feeling of friendship." (p.180) Sammler feels a great joy at their meeting, and Lal inspires communication: "A strange thing happened. He felt that he was about to speak his full mind. Aloud! That was the most striking part of it. Not the usual self-communing of an aged and peculiar person. He was about to say what he thought, and viva voce." (p.181) Lal is intelligent and practical, and puts forward a coherent argument. His race, he says, makes him more aware of the problem of overcrowding; what more logical than to use one's technological knowledge to

escape? Sammler, for reasons as abstract as Lal's are specific, is unable to agree, and sees that peace can come only from the mind, not through physical movement. "'Perhaps the best is to have some order within oneself. Better than what many call love. Perhaps it is love.'" (p.183)

The idea of love also suggests the need to be outgoing and to recognise others as being in the same predicament. Lal speaks of his wish to distance himself, to overcome his former emotionally dependent nature, while Sammler, previously detached, is, if perhaps not deliberately, moving in the opposite direction.

The other character of great importance to Sammler, and of influence in his life, is the one of his relatives whom he really respects, his nephew Elya Gruner, who rescued and now supports both Sammler and Shula. At the start of the novel he is in hospital with what proves to be a fatal complication; Sammler visits him twice, then finds, to his sadness, when his next visit has been delayed by the recovery of Lal's manuscript, that Elya has died. Sammler sees Elya as a generous, upright figure (in spite of the dubious origins of his wealth and his Mafia connections). On his first visit Sammler is impressed by observing that although Elya must know of his imminent death, his behaviour is brave nevertheless, and his approach to death calm and rational. Elya despairs of his children, but enjoys reminiscing about the past, discussing old relatives with Sammler. He represents for Sammler those enduring qualities - kindness, dependability, thoughtful-



ness, generosity - the lack of which in modern society, he thinks, accounts for its unsettled state: "In short, if the earth deserves to be abandoned, if we are now to be driven streaming into other worlds, it is not because of the likes of you, Sammler would have said." (p.70)

Elya obviously has his faults, as Sammler is aware, but there is no sense of hypocrisy to detract from the emotional truth of the final scene. Looking at him after his death, Sammler states his belief in the ideals of human behaviour:

At his best this man was much kinder than at my very best I have ever been or could ever be. He was aware that he must meet, and he did meet - through all the confusion and degraded clowning of this life through which we are speeding - he did meet the terms of his contract. The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows. As I know mine. As all know. For that is the truth of it - that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know. (pp.251-2)

Sammler implies by these words almost a moral duty to lead a meaningful life - the 'terms of one's contract'. Responsibility to others, which Elya has shown, is part of it, as are dignity and kindness. In Elya's death Sammler finds that truth for which he has been searching. He has all along been convinced of a 'truth' outside technology which would deny the current superficiality, though one may have to accept it without 'proof':

Trying to live with a civil heart. With disinterested charity. With a sense of the mystic potency of humankind. With an inclination to believe in archetypes of goodness. A desire for virtue was no accident. (p.110)

Sammler's moment of truth is his realisation of the extent

of the loss caused to him by Elya's death; he acknowledges the strength of human relationships.

Again, the ideas of brotherhood and unity give sufficient hope to justify the effort towards a worthwhile existence. Sammler reflects on the fact that Elya is at his most accessible as he approaches death; true communication has superseded any barriers. Although overt compassion and hope have become unfashionable, Sammler still feels that there is a need to express some sort of affinity, specifically between himself and Elya: "'However actual I may seem to you and you to me, we are not as actual as all that. We will die. Nevertheless there is a bond. There is a bond.'" (p.209) Sammler thus finds himself caring about life and other people to a greater degree than he had thought possible.

As stated earlier, the change in Sammler is an aspect which has been overlooked by some critics, such as Alison Lurie and Benjamin de Mott, who see him just as a didactic mouthpiece for Bellow's ideas. However, apart from the indications of change, there is much that is smoothly ironic in Bellow's treatment of him, for instance in Sammler's views on the young (although this is primarily a condemnation of extremism), or in his thoughts on the inevitability of imitation:

One could not be the thing itself - Reality.  
One must be satisfied with the symbols.  
Make it the object of imitation to reach  
and release the high qualities. Make peace  
therefore with intermediacy and representation. But choose higher representations.  
Otherwise the individual must be the failure  
he now sees and knows himself to be. Mr. Sammler, sorry for all, and sore at heart. (p.120)

The last sentence of the above points out Sammler's tendency, like Herzog's, to philosophise for the good of the world. Bellow has, simply, chosen as his hero an idiosyncratic old man, who, while stabler than many preceding heroes, is as subject to prejudices and mistakes; there are many instances to show that author and character are not altogether in agreement. There are various turning-points in Sammler's feelings, as when he speaks to Lal of his hardness after surviving brutality, but as a thing of the past, or when, discussing the state of modern New York with Angela, and remembering his previous feeling that he had a superior understanding of death, he says "'But I was flat, dead wrong. Anybody may feel the truth.'" (p.244) He becomes humble through his failure to persuade Angela to reconcile herself to her father: "He was out of it. A tall, dry, not agreeable old man, giving himself airs. Who in hell was he?" (p.246)

Moments of self-recognition such as these should convince us that Bellow does not see Sammler as an infallible guide to existence. He is an ordinary being, perhaps more thoughtful for his unusual experiences, but one who suffers and feels as do his associates. Even at the end, affirming humanity, he expresses doubt as well as hope:

There is still such a thing as a man - or there was. There are still human qualities. Our weak species fought its fear, our crazy species fought its criminality. We are an animal of genius.

This was a thing he often thought. At the moment it was only a formula. He did not thoroughly feel it. (p.245)

Sammler instinctively wishes to assert the idea of a

collective consciousness, a feeling of wanting to use rather than abuse life. Arbitrarily placed on and then removed from earth, man has the choice of despair at his helplessness, or recognition that his problem is common to all and that an opportunity for discovery exists which should not be hampered by the need to find a reason for existence. Lived positively and with regard for others, life will become worthwhile in any case, as shown by the Elya Gruners (and not the Angelas and Wallaces, who risk losing all values). Sammler says: "there were times when Love seemed life's great architect." (p.140) "Architect" implies creativity and order, and the keynotes to understanding Sammler's hopes are the ideas of love and communication.

The soul's 'natural knowledge', mentioned at the beginning of the novel, is seen as an enduring factor not to be destroyed by surface despair or overwhelming situations. In an age when conventions of warmth and communication are pushed aside, this instinct is, in the last resort, what will preserve man. Eisen and Shula, in their peculiar manner, want to assert the meaning of their life by accomplishing something important. This knowledge of the need of the spirit not only to preserve itself but to grow, affirmed by Sammler to Lal and echoed in his speech at Elya's deathbed, is stressed in a recent article by Bellow himself concerning the technological age. He adapts the words of the Russian writer V.V. Rozanov to his own theme, and perhaps they serve as an appropriate

close and parallel to the feelings of hope in Mr. Sammler's Planet:

"A million years passed before my soul was let out into the technological world. That world was filled with ultra-intelligent machines, but the soul after all was a soul, and it had waited a million years for its turn and did not intend to be cheated of its birthright by a lot of mere gimmicks. It had come from the far reaches of the universe, and it was interested but not overawed by these inventions."<sup>3</sup>

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3. Saul Bellow, "Machines and Storybooks", Harper's Magazine, 249 (August 1974), p.59.

## CHAPTER NINE

### THE SHORT STORIES AND PLAYS

While critical work on Bellow's novels is abundant, very little has on the whole been said, even in full-length studies, about his short stories, two-act play The Last Analysis, and other short writings. While it is obvious that his greatest depth of vision is to be found in the novels, the numerous shorter works deserve some separate consideration. They are noteworthy not only for how they complement his novels but in their own right as examples of the genres. Bellow's short stories in particular show his command of a formal technique quite different from that of the novel.

Of the many short pieces published by Bellow, some are excerpts from then forthcoming novels. These are mainly from The Adventures of Augie March, since its episodic nature made it the most suitable of Bellow's novels for publishing in this way. The earlier sections of novels naturally differ from their counterparts in the finished works; however, it is not within the scope of this study to analyse the changes made. In addition there are the short stories proper, and Bellow has written a number of monologues as well.

These monologues, because of the nature of their form, may leave one with the impression of narrator-characters who are sketchily depicted of necessity, and who reveal

an awareness of ideas which is somewhat isolated from any specific context. One should not overweight the pieces with extended criticism; here some of the more interesting points only will be mentioned. "Address by Gooley MacDowell to the Hasbeens Club of Chicago" (1951) is a satire on the 'thinker' who analyses life in abstract terms. The narrator, his subject being that of his own reputation, digresses, and makes personal a whole series of ideas. He summarises these in a recognition of the limitations of thought: "Except I see there are feelings of being that go beyond and beyond all I ever knew of thought."<sup>1</sup> "A Sermon by Dr. Pep", (1949) again a caricature of a rambling eccentric, likewise introduces some of the topics which are closely explored in the novels, such as the fear of death and the dangers of over-civilisation. "Two Morning Monologues" (1941) are more fully-developed pieces; the first, depicting the thoughts of a boy unable to find a job, bears a close relation to Dangling Man in its exposition of the problems of a life without routine. In the second a gambler reflects on his chosen way of life; the ideas of the limits to man's control and the workings of chance in life, just as in gambling, anticipate the theme of Seize the Day, in which Wilhelm similarly reflects on the hazards of chance. One of the lessons Wilhelm has to learn is that the element of chance in life need not detract from the dignity of living. He makes the gamble

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1. Saul Bellow, "Address by Gooley MacDowell to the Hasbeens Club of Chicago", Hudson Review, 4 (Summer 1951), p.227.

on the stock market - and loses - and this symbolises his fear of choosing in everyday life in case of making a mistake. But the reality of chance has to be faced, and choice cannot be avoided; activity is better than passivity, and wrong decisions better than indecision.

All these pieces are sketches, which observe situations but do not work through them to any conclusion. The short stories proper, on the other hand, are complete miniature pictures; plots are definite, characters are rounded and social detail abundant. Most follow a single theme, and are perhaps more immediately accessible than Bellow's full-length works. The intensity of the novels is of course missing, since the brevity of the stories could not sustain it, but they gain by their charm and relaxed mood.

"Looking for Mr. Green" (1951) is an excellent example of Bellow's skill as a writer of short stories. It concerns the task of a man whose new job, during the Depression, is to deliver relief cheques to the black district of Chicago. George Grebe is conscientious and thoughtful, and determined to deliver a particular cheque to an elusive Mr. Green. This search provides a simple but satisfying plot; however, the issues raised by the task are anything but simple. The delivery of the cheques, on the surface an ordinary enough task, becomes for Grebe a discovery of some of the facts of human existence. He progresses from an idealised view of life, where everything goes according to plan, to a more realistic one.



On one level, Grebe learns of the difference between his life and that of the inhabitants of the Negro district he visits. Raynor, his supervisor at the relief office, points out the disparity between the academic training Grebe has received and the kind of attitude one needs in order to cope with life in this very different environment. The poverty, distrust and acceptance of crime there are brought home to Grebe in his encounters with the inhabitants, whose mentality, Bellow suggests, is an immediate result of their surroundings. Grebe is an outsider, new to their experiences. Such a simple task as the delivery of a cheque becomes a psychological one; in carrying it out he has to penetrate the united opposition of the negroes to strangers. Social realism is much in evidence in the story; the description of Staika, the impoverished mother of six, who airs her grievances by doing her ironing with electricity from the municipal current in the relief offices, brings home both the unrest and the seemingly insoluble problems of the slums. This is as funny and poignant an incident as any to be found in Bellow's works. Because of the desperate condition of many of the people Grebe meets, their primary aims have become those of money and material comfort - as exemplified by the old man, Winston Field, who thinks that the negroes' problems would be solved if only a system of creating negro millionaires by subscription could be initiated. The world of the story is very much one of the haves and have-nots. Grebe, relatively unsuccessful ("his luck had

not been good"),<sup>2</sup> dependent for his job on others' help, comes to witness lives far worse than his, and realises the inherent ugliness of life as well as the former comfort of his own. We are reminded of the discussions in The Victim on the apparent arbitrariness which governs people's welfare, as well as the question of responsibility - the less fortunate are often all too conveniently dismissed from the mind. None of these ideas are stated overtly in the story; indeed, its skill lies in the implications beneath the surface of objectivity, and in Grebe's gradual enlightenment. Characters such as Raynor, Staika and Winston Field are briefly described but roundly characterised, and offset the naive quality in Grebe.

Grebe at last accepts the actual impossibility of his task, in so far as it represents to him his wish to impose order on a disordered world - to complete his job neatly by delivering all the cheques personally. However, he realises, when the drunk, naked negress opens the door marked 'Green', that he is as close to Green as he is going to get, and that to take the cheque away because he cannot get Green's signature would be to deny the spirit of the task. He makes some contact, breaking through the barrier of the tightly-knit community, by gaining the information as to where Green lives, but has finally to accept that he cannot reach him - just as Herzog realises

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2. Saul Bellow, "Looking for Mr. Green", in Mosby's Memoirs and Other Stories, Penguin Books, London (1971), p.84. Subsequent references in this chapter to short stories collected in this work will be included in the text.

eventually that people will not live in order to be understood by him. Grebe learns that everyone will not comply with his wishes, and that things will not happen according to his preconceived plans; Herzog likewise faces the existence of irrationality and injustice when he listens to the case of the child murder. Both Grebe's and Herzog's theorising about life leaves the actualities out of account. Chester Eisinger writes, recalling phrases in the story itself, in a comparison of it with The Adventures of Augie March, that "Reality becomes that which people agree to accept as real, although there may be a larger reality which does not depend on consent. Where life presents its impenetrable surfaces, the only way to survive is to accept the reality by consent and eschew absolute reality."<sup>3</sup>

Grebe's elation at the end of the story is not so much because he has delivered the cheque, or has partially succeeded in his task, as because he has at least convinced himself of the existence of Green. Bellow has allowed him to retain his faith in human identity and individuality (the reason for having a name) to this extent; Grebe accepts this compromise, as illustrated when he rejects the invitation of the negress to look for Green himself, realising that he is making a fool of himself, and that Green is probably drunk and naked as well. David Demarest, in a very perceptive article, sees the ending as self-deception on Grebe's part, since he has not found

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3. Chester E. Eisinger, "Saul Bellow: Love and Identity", Accent, 18 (Summer 1958), p.200.

Green, but goes on to say that Grebe's idealism must be admired. However, Grebe does make the decision to compromise, partly accepting what Demarest describes as "the disparity between the ordered symbols of society and the anonymity of the slum".<sup>4</sup> As Paul Levine has pointed out, the conclusion of the story represents an acceptance by Grebe of his limitations. He says, speaking of Feiler in "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" as well as of Grebe, that "The hero begins as outsider and in the course of the story becomes reconciled to his own human limitations. . . . He becomes reconciled to what is no more and no less than human."<sup>5</sup>

"The Gonzaga Manuscripts" (1954) again uses the quest motif and the theme of the idealistic innocent who is continually thwarted by circumstances. Clarence Feiler, the protagonist, is also on alien territory - this time Spain. He is searching for some lost poems by a poet with whom he is almost fanatically impressed. The search for the poems again represents an attempt to impose order; Feiler believes that they exist, and that therefore it must be possible to find them. We are reminded of the wish of many of Bellow's heroes to find an 'instant solution' to life: for instance, Wilhelm, who hopes that Tamkin can give him some advice which will change his life, and Henderson, who is similarly ready to rely on the book

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4. David P. Demarest, Jr., "The Theme of Discontinuity in Saul Bellow's Fiction: "Looking for Mr. Green" and "A Father-to-Be", Studies in Short Fiction, 6 (1969), p.178.

5. Paul Levine, "Saul Bellow: The Affirmation of the Philosophical Fool", Perspective, 10 (Winter 1959), p.174.

Dahfu gives him for a simple, compact answer to his problems. Feiler believes that Gonzaga has the clue as to how to live which he would like to find: "I felt . . . that I was in touch with a poet who would show me how to go on and what attitude to take towards life." (p.108) He says also that "Gonzaga made me understand how we lose everything by trying to become everything" (p.109) (Bellows's often-repeated precept that effort is self-defeating). Ironically, Feiler falls into just this trap in his compulsion to obtain every scrap of Gonzaga's work. Instead of simply appreciating the value of what he has received through Gonzaga's poems, he tries to create a formula for life by means of obtaining everything written by the poet. As was Grebe's, Feiler's search is doomed. He discovers the whereabouts of the poems but also their inaccessibility; they are buried in the grave of the countess to whom they were written. He is frustrated in his search by encountering people to whom his purpose seems of little importance, and who are much more concerned with the financial side of life. They cannot believe that Feiler's travels are only in quest of some obscure poems. A touch of humour is added by what seems to Feiler to be the constant American-baiting indulged in by all he meets. He is made out to be responsible for his country's policies, particularly with regard to the atom bomb. He is very much the misunderstood, slightly humorous outsider. On the other hand, we feel a definite sympathy for the idealism of his aims, in contrast to the shallowness and materialism

of the people he meets. We sympathise likewise with Herzog rather than Himmelstein or Gersbach, despite their greater practicality.

Apart from the truths put forward by Feiler's lack of success, an interesting side discussion in this story is about the role of art and the artist. Talking to Miss Ungar, the black-marketeer in pesetas, Feiler describes the feeling of the uncertainty of the times which he thinks partially determines the role of literature:

'But you see God doesn't rule over men as he used to, and for a long time people haven't been able to feel that life was firmly attached at both ends, so that they could stand confidently in the middle. That kind of faith is missing, and for many years poets have tried to supply a substitute.' (p.117)

Feiler says that the artist's role should not be a didactic one, that he should not try to fix values. "'No one man can furnish them.'" (p.117) Reminding us of the error fallen into by Herzog and other Bellow protagonists, he continues: "'There are people who feel that they are responsible for everything. Gonzaga is free from this, and that's why I love him.'" (p.118) Gonzaga's approach seems straightforwardly to represent what Bellow feels the artist should be. Feiler quotes Gonzaga's words: "'Many feel they must say it all, whereas all has been said, unsaid, resaid so many times that we are bound to feel futile unless we understand that we are merely adding our voices.'" (p.118) He stresses that Gonzaga did not try to be any more than a human being. These descriptions suggest that the artist should not be in any way

set apart from life, but right in its midst. Feiler himself, while praising the poet's humility, makes the ironic mistake of elevating him beyond human status - and is the more frustrated as a result by the final inaccessibility of the poems which he is seeking. Although at the end of the story Feiler remains defeated and angry, the incident depicting the idiocy of the man in the hotel, who complains of the English, lightens the effect of Feiler's fury and gives a sense of proportion to the situation, reminding us of its comic element.

Rogin, the protagonist of "A Father-to-Be", (1955) is appalled by the inevitability of the life cycle, and his own lack of individual choice within it. In the evening in which the story takes place, Rogin is on his way to visit his demanding fiancée, whose request to him to do some shopping on the way, and general extravagance, irritate Rogin to the point where he considers a serious confrontation. This relatively trivial incident leads him into a series of reflections on his helplessness, the power of money and the powerlessness of man. He realises that the pressure he feels is a common one, and this makes him happy, rather than depressing him, implicitly because through the pressure he has come to feel a sense of union with others; he is now more ready to accept the unchangeable. This mood, however, does not last; while on the subway, he contemplates his fellow-passengers, and again becomes dejected. The use of a subway scene, which also occurs in the novels, is given some explanation here:

"Thoughts very often grow fertile in the subway". (p.142)

The opportunity to study closely a whole spectrum of people with whom one is unconnected is one reason for this; conversations and people are described by Bellow with a quantity of realistic detail. The drunkard who believes a miracle drug can cure him burlesques Bellow's more notable seekers of easy answers. Another of the passengers, well-dressed and dull, reminds Rogin of his fiancée Joan, and, seeing in the man a vision of his future son, he rebels against the inexorability of the life process and its apparent lack of satisfaction:

Man's personal aims were nothing, illusion. The life force occupied each of us in turn in its progress towards its own fulfilment, using us for its own ends like mere dinosaurs or bees, exploiting love heartlessly, making us engage in the social process, labour, struggle for money, and submit to the law of pressure, the universal law of lawyers, superimposition! (p.145)

This negative view of existence is provoked by Rogin's personal situation. Like Augie, he resents social ties and in particular any commitment to a relationship. He grows to object to things he has no power to control, such as the nature of Joan's personality. Augie, as we have seen, is content to pursue a number of relationships superficially - for instance, with Lucy, Sophie and Thea - provided he is able to avoid commitment at the last. He believes that involvement in a relationship cannot be synonymous with independence. Bellow tries to show that a relationship of this kind requires some commitment to be fulfilling, and yet need not take away inner indepen-



dence and integrity, and that sharing is more rewarding than an artificial detachment. Augie finally realises this in deciding to marry Stella, as does Rogin where Joan is concerned. At the end of the story, when Joan shampoos Rogin's hair, he is calmed into a state of acceptance, and becomes again appreciative instead of resentful of her. Like George Grebe, he learns the wisdom of accepting the unchangeable; it is not the apparent futility of life or the social processes which matter, but one's attitude to these - as indicated by Rogin's discovery of happiness at man's shared fate. He finally becomes more understanding and loving because of this change in attitude. The emphasis here is on the power of love to remove pressure, as Chester Eisinger has remarked.<sup>6</sup> Rogin's moment of acceptance is described thus in the story: "it was the warm fluid of his own secret loving spirit overflowing into the sink green and foaming, and the words he had rehearsed he forgot, and his anger at his son-to-be disappeared altogether". (p.147) Love becomes again a positive force in Rogin's life.

These three stories, then (which were republished in the collection Seize the Day), are mainly about the acceptance of one's limitations and the movement from an idealised to a practical view of life; each of the protagonists begins by wanting something he cannot have. Clarence Feiler alone seems to achieve no kind of peace; taking his defeat hard.

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6. Chester E. Eisinger, op.cit., p.202.

Three later stories were republished with these in the collection Mosby's Memoirs and Other Stories: "Leaving the Yellow House" (1957), "The Old System" (1967) and the title story, "Mosby's Memoirs" (1968). The first of these is a superb character-study, its theme being the reluctance of humans to drop their illusions and face reality. Hattie Waggoner is an old lady who lives alone with few neighbours in a desert house by a lake. Her memories are of better times - an educated upbringing and marriage into a good family - but since her divorce and the approach of old age she has become gradually more enfeebled and isolated. The yellow house, which was left to her by her friend India, provides her last claim to dignity and independence. An accident through driving after too much drink, and her resulting illness, gradually unfold to her the true nature of her position. At first she blames her accident on a sneeze, reluctant to admit to drinking; she persuades herself that she does not rely on her neighbours' help, and that she is in fact necessary to their lives. Gradually, the illusions are destroyed, partly through the practicality of Helen and Jerry Rolfe and the Paces, Hattie's neighbours at the lake, who try to convince her of her need to live with a relative and to persuade her to sell her house.

Hattie's unease (despite her natural optimism) stems from the break-up of a life which is in large part invention; she wants to be a brash Westerner, which she is not, and to be accepted as the equal of her rich neighbours;

she is condescending to their poorer employees. She asks Darly, the cowboy, for help after her accident, and then accuses him of drunkenness when he trips her up with the tow chain, because of her pride and the wish to assert herself by hurting someone else. When she is forced to consider her past life and present position, she is overcome by fear: "To lie awake and think such thoughts was the worst thing in the world." (p.15) To admit to her errors - such as keeping a vicious dog despite the warnings of her neighbours and then having to kill him - is the hardest thing for Hattie. To strip her life of pretence (which has become more important to her than reality) would destroy her self-respect. Her capacity for practical action seems numbed. Tied to the yellow house, she is unable to make any move towards the disposal of it, and makes no attempt to find a more suitable home for herself, though she talks of doing so.

Together with Hattie's avoidance of self-recognition goes a fear of death; she superstitiously avoids using India's death bedding. "Then she thought that there was a beginning, and a middle. She shrank from the last term. She began once more - a beginning. After that, there was the early middle, then middle middle, late middle middle, quite late middle. In fact the middle is all I know. The rest is just a rumour." (p.43) Avoidance of reality has led to her isolation from others, even to the point that when she finally tries to write her will, she cannot give away the house: "'I do not find it in my heart to care

for anyone as I would wish." (p.42) She can now assert herself only by means of her property, which has taken the place of people for her; she leaves the house to herself in her will. Thus Hattie continues her procrastination, promising to think again tomorrow; presumably, however, she will go on deluding herself until her death.

Hattie is a most believable character: optimistic, not over-intelligent, totally selfish but nevertheless likeable, perhaps because of the ordinariness of her traits, especially that of self-deception. We can compare Tommy Wilhelm's recollections; he distorts his past, exaggerating the extent of his education and minimising his worst mistakes, partly to impress and partly to avoid the truth himself. He idealises the past, remembering only the best, which he again exaggerates in contrast to his unsatisfactory present. Hattie similarly boasts to impress, and ignores unpleasant realities. The story is a perceptive illustration of the psychological tricks man can play on himself. Only at the end does Hattie recognise some of her imperfections, such as her pride and snobbishness; however, she is unable to change. We feel she subconsciously knows that she will die in the house because of her inability to move.

Dr. Braun and Willis Mosby, the protagonists of "The Old System" and "Mosby's Memoirs", both go back over their lives in personal reminiscences, and explore the significance of certain events. Braun recalls his childhood and the development of emotions in his family

relationships, especially as regards his cousins Isaac and Tina. The story has a strongly Jewish setting. Braun first reflects on present-day society: "Mankind was in a confusing, uncomfortable, disagreeable stage in the evolution of its consciousness." (p.46) The feuds of his relatives are remembered against the background of material ambition and personal uncertainty. The other Brauns, especially Tina, the fat sister, have been estranged from Isaac since he became wealthy through a business deal in which they could have participated, but refused to. Tina holds out against Isaac's attempts at a reconciliation, even to the extent of refusing him access to her deathbed unless he gives her twenty thousand dollars. Braun contemplates this absurd drama, which he sees as detracting from the value of life, and reflects on the irony that death removes man's power to organise life on his terms. The emotions of the Jews over the death of a family member appear on the one hand an outpouring of useless feeling over the inevitable, but on the other hand a necessary release of tension about the incomprehensible:

And these tears! When you wept them from the heart you felt you justified something, understood something. But what did you understand? Again, nothing! It was only an intimation of understanding. A promise that mankind might - might, mind you - eventually, through its gift which might - might again! - be a divine gift, comprehend why it lived. Why life, why death. (pp.80-81)

The story concludes with Braun looking at the stars, "These things cast outward by a great begetting spasm billions of years ago." (p.81) The absurdity and

uselessness of the Brauns' attempts to control their lives, insignificant in the context of the universe, is implied. The resolutions of both Seize the Day and Mr. Sammler's Planet are recalled by the idea of man's ignorance, coupled with a sense of hope because of his realisation of a collective fate. In both these resolutions the heroes experience an instinctive appreciation of the mystery and the wonder of life, which transcend and dwarf human effort. The fact that Tina is finally reconciled to Isaac implies that with death approaching, ties of brotherhood and love are instinctively strengthened. Death may even be a positive event in providing this revelation (as Wilhelm and Sammler both come to feel).

Willis Mosby is in Mexico, writing his memoirs with a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation. His reminiscences are deliberately selected by him to create a certain impression; he analyses their possible effect, and decides that humour needs to be introduced into the memoirs in order to suit his image of himself. The attitude of the thinker is satirised in grandiose terms such as: "He would not cease from mental strife." (p.152) In turn, Ruskin, the American poet, is criticised by Mosby himself for his continuous philosophical theorising, which seems to Mosby to bear no relation to life; we are reminded of Herzog's challenge to Heidegger in one of his letters.<sup>7</sup> The theme of the story revolves mainly around the isolation of the thinker and his existential problem: "A most

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7. See Ch.7, p.141.

peculiar, ingenious, hungry, aspiring, and heartbroken animal, who, by calling himself Man, thinks he can escape being what he really is." (p.153) Mosby, by trying to define his life through his memoirs, detaches himself both from reality and from his fellow-men: "Stone-hearted Mosby, making fun of flesh and blood, of these little humanities with their short inventories of bad and good." (p.159) We are told of a fantasy he has of living after death: "His doom was to live life to the end as Mosby. In the fantasy, he considered this his purgatory." (p.171) However organised his life, he cannot escape from the burdens of his own self and his insecurity. He makes fun of others, unconsciously judging them; he does this, for example, with Lustgarten, an old acquaintance, a former Marxist and black-marketeer. Having included Lustgarten in his memoirs as a comic figure, Mosby realises that his vision of himself is a contrived one. The ending, when he visits a tomb at the ruins of Mitla with a party, is symbolic of the state of his life. By trying to tie up its loose ends in writing, he has denied spontaneity and the future. His claustrophobia in the tomb, which forces him out into the air, represents his realisation that he must escape his static existence and become aware of inevitable change and of the real existences of others. By trying to define himself, he has become 'stone'. The precision necessary for the building of the tomb, described by the guide, is analogous to Mosby's aim in writing, the wish to create order.

Each of these six stories, then, deals with some aspect of aloneness and detachment - deliberate or otherwise - from people and reality, and shows the protagonist either being reconciled to involvement in real life (rejecting his idealistic formulae) or suffering as a result of his isolation.

Bellow's uncollected short stories are not on the whole so notable. "The Mexican General" (1942) deals with human hypocrisies as seen in the character of a public figure, the General, but contains nothing striking compared to other works. "Dora" (1949) consists of the thoughts of a middle-aged spinster, whose life centres round her work as a dressmaker; she has no attachments and lives vicariously, surveying the activities of her rich clients, until Mr. Regler, who lives in the same boarding-house as Dora, has a stroke, and his anonymity - the police can trace no relatives or friends - leads her to reflect on the importance of the individual element in and the differences between people: "But if you don't care about the differences one thing might as well be another."<sup>8</sup> Because of this realisation, she changes her routine, untypically dressing in her best clothes and spending time on her hair and make-up, in order to visit Mr. Regler daily at the hospital, despite expecting him to die. The event of his illness draws her out of a set pattern of life, as she consciously affirms the importance

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8. Saul Bellow, "Dora", Harper's Bazaar, 83 (November 1949), p.199.



of contact with one's fellow-beings, rejecting her previous detachment. Perhaps she sees in Mr. Regler's fate a vision of what her future might have been.

"A Trip to Galena" (1950), an excerpt from an unfinished novel, The Crab and the Butterfly, features a conversation between Scampi and Weyl, fellow-inmates of a hospital. Weyl is in some respects a forerunner of Augie March; he describes his scorn at his sister's attempts to marry into a 'respectable' family, and how he disgraced her when visiting them. This reminds us of Augie's contempt for the Magnuses' materialistic way of life, even while he is courting Lucy Magnus at the instigation of his beother Simon, who sees security and advantage in a connection with such a family. Augie finally provokes Lucy - and her family - into rejecting him, by breaking his New Year's Eve date with her in order to help Mimi, not even his girl friend, after her abortion, thus disappointing Simon's hopes. He demonstrates his contempt and wish to be free, subconsciously intending to cause the break. Like Augie, Weyl despises the mediocre, and his search is similarly for a 'worthwhile fate', though he rejects his fellows along the way. More generally, the theme of the story is the nature of man; the contrast between the ideal and the actual, and the perversity and dislike that can exist in human relationships. The tone is one of optimism; Weyl recommends "'attachment to life despite the worst it has shown us'".<sup>9</sup> The story sounds out many of

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9. Saul Bellow, "The Trip to Galena", Partisan Review, 17 (November-December 1950), p.789.

Bellow's ideas, but lacks the finish of the collected stories, and is obviously an extract rather than a complete unit.

Bellow's dramatic writings do not show such a talent for this genre as his short stories do for theirs. Two are of significance - his full-length play The Last Analysis (1965), and a one-act play "The Wrecker" (1954), which was republished in Seize the Day. Deliberate, exaggerated comedy is used in both in order to emphasise the profundity of the subject-matter. The need for dramatic interest provides the opportunity for farcical comedy similar to that which appears in many of Bellow's other works. Compared with these, there is sometimes a crudeness in the obvious way in which ideas are put across in the plays. The lack of performances of The Last Analysis could be an indication of its limitations as a stage play.

"The Wrecker" has thematic links with some of the short stories. The husband is the outsider, who resents his social commitments and expresses his feelings in the destructive act of wrecking his condemned home. He refuses the money he has been offered to move out before the official date set for his leaving and allow in the demolition workers. He alienates his wife and mother-in-law in order to have the satisfaction of making his gesture and asserting himself, perhaps wanting to take control of his fate symbolically. He arouses in the reader an ambiguous reaction of irritation mixed with sympathy; his rejection of material values is preferable

to his mother-in-law's enslavement by them. The city employee's obsession with legality is similarly made to seem absurd. Both these latter characters are, of course, primarily comic caricatures. The husband's explanation of his act as an attempt to rid himself of the past reminds us of Tamkin's advice to Wilhelm to "seize the day" and to practise "here-and-now" exercises to cut out the future and the past. The idea of living in the present is an important one in Bellow's work, though Tamkin's and the husband's expositions of it appear superficially ridiculous. The husband sees his action as a gesture of freedom and one of greater than personal significance, while the wife, totally absorbed in the state of their marriage, takes it as a personal comment on their life together and talks only in terms of their relationship. In the end, thinking he has been injured by a falling chandelier, she is ready to join in her husband's activities if this will preserve their marriage. She, too, is caricatured, with her love of ornaments and obsessive pride in her home. The husband, seeing his wife join in the demolition, finally doubts the validity of his actions - perhaps through realising how he looks to others - and changes attitudes with his wife. An uneasy reconciliation is thus implied. The play is chiefly memorable for its surface comedy and sharp character sketches.

The Last Analysis, as overtly comical, has very much deeper implications. Bummidge, a former comedian, plans a televised self-analysis, his object being to discover

some reality, some deeper meaning of life, unhindered by daily distractions. In his enthusiasm for his idea, he is convinced he has something important to convey: "I must reach everyone. Everything. Heart, reason, comic spirit. I have something tremendous to say. I want to persuade them. Move them. Stun them."<sup>10</sup> He reminds us here of Herzog; one of the symptoms of Herzog's alienation is that it causes him to exaggerate the importance of his own thoughts, believing that he has a message of significance to the world. However, Herzog is unable to express himself to others even on a simple level, his thoughts becoming random and having an outlet only in his unread letters. Bummidge's relatives and associates first try to deter him from his project by ridicule, then to capitalise on his success, thus showing their limited, materialistic aims, and Bummidge has our final sympathy. One pertinent appeal of his, when he is pretending to be alternately patient and analyst, is: "Oh, Doctor, why can't I live without hope, like everybody else?" (p.26) This question indicates the burden which his aspirations can be, but perhaps by implication the limits of the level at which his contemporaries live, hence his desire to find some more worthwhile reason for living, despite the painfulness of this need to search. Bummidge decides to analyse his life by employing Freudian psychology (which is satirised by his exaggeration of it) to find the

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10. Saul Bellow, The Last Analysis, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London (1966), p.15. Subsequent references to this work will be included in the text.

'truth', re-enacting various significant events in his past which involve his family and associates. The action of the play culminates in the television broadcast in which all the characters take on roles, some acting the parts of themselves. Bummidge finally re-enacts his birth, which leads, as he had hoped, to rebirth. Bellow, in a note to the published version of the play, states his intention in writing the play in order to preclude the various misinterpretations of it he dislikes. Though the play should not have to rely on such intervention, Bellow's stated theme, "the mind's comical struggle for survival in an environment of Ideas", (p.vii) certainly comes across as a central one, akin to much of his writing. "Comical" is a key word in considering the play; quite apart from the comic exaggeration in Bummidge's analysis, references to the comedy of the human condition are frequent (whereas in the novels this is shown more, on the whole, by implication).

Bummidge's disease is "Humanitis. An emotional disorder of our relation to the human condition." (p.77) He is unable to cope with his mental reactions to the uncertainty of life and the foreknowledge of death. The burden of his emotions is portrayed when he recalls the past. He mocks the vogue for analysis: "My unconscious is trying to tell me something." (p.17). His stomach rumbling becomes "free association". (p.46) After re-enacting a beating from his father (we think of the visual incongruity of Bummidge's caning himself), he says: "I

split up into fragments. There were two, four, an army, and the real Bummidge gets lost. I couldn't keep track. My self got lost. But where is the me that is me?" (p.41) His acting is in fact taking him farther from his real personality, and we recall Bellow's other protagonists who discover that truth cannot be pinned down by a conscious search; theory detracts from reality, whereas experience is reality. Bummidge's pursuits distance him from experience and people just as do those of the husband in "The Wrecker". The element of pretence is present throughout the play, in contrast to the avowed need for truth. Bummidge's plea to be able to discover his real self cuts through the surface comedy because of the seriousness of its undertones. Bellow, however, is not so much condemning introspection as showing that Bummidge, by trying to compartmentalise his emotions in the way he does, attempts to gain an impossible control over himself and over life. Bellow suggests throughout his works that there are some areas of existence which defy analysis.

Bummidge's problems are familiar ones to the reader of Bellow. One chief worry is isolation as a result of awareness of the existential crisis: "This psyche of mine is an outlaw. Can this be the normal human state? Is this what we are meant to be? Oh, my character! . . . I feel like a museum of all the perversity, sickness, and ugliness of mankind." (pp.73-4) Bummidge pinpoints death as the cause of man's sickness: "But we are what we are owing to our morbidity." (p.74) This consciousness of

death intrudes on life. He rejects false, emotional love towards the human race - or 'potato love' - as a mere palliative. In his self-imposed exaltation, he has no positive relationships - not that his associates are shown as being particularly worthy of attention. His wife, mistress and most of his friends in show-business are unsympathetically portrayed, sometimes even caricatured. Bummidge remarks on man's compulsion to suffer - a theme prominent in the novels - and he reacts comically as a method of escape. After the ludicrous incident in which he makes a messenger choke him during the television programme, he points out that, under repression, suffering can become pleasure. The play continually works on different levels: absurd surface comedy is translated into pompous psychological conclusions by Bummidge, with serious, thought-provoking undertones. In connection with this incident, Bummidge makes the point that "There is no other creature that aims to change itself, or discover another kind of life." (p.85) Man rejects himself and the facts of his existence, and tries to forget the realities in a search for superficial mental control, engaging in the process in the sort of struggle which so often denies the Bellow hero any peace. Bummidge's self-conscious analytical approach is, of course, just another form of this same effort towards change and order.

After the success of Bummidge's programme, the unpleasant, materialistic values of the other characters, who are mainly self-seeking, emerge, alienating him still

further (he retains our sympathy, however) in his condition of 'rebirth'. C.W.E. Bigsby has noted that Bummidge stands out for his "moral sensitivity",<sup>11</sup> and implies the distinction between life and society, where pursuit of life is a search for true values and society is escapist and materially-orientated. Tony Tanner, in a general discussion on the import of Bellow's work, also makes this distinction, which can be aptly applied to The Last Analysis:

Society may move towards its death with false concepts of progress and prosperity - but somewhere, somehow, the human spirit will start to disengage itself, to protest, to assert its need for true values, for real freedom, for genuine reality.<sup>12</sup>

Bummidge's 'rebirth' can be seen as a realisation of true values - he tears up the cheques he has been offered, rejecting materialism and its exponents among his associates. They are dragged away in a net, and he is free from their pressures.

At the last, with Imogen and Bertram, whom he can trust, Bummidge plans to set up "The Bummidge Institute of Nonsense" (p.118) to help others in the same way as himself. He seems to have gone beyond the need to analyse for himself alone, in a spontaneous cessation of effort, and now wishes to pass on his experience to others. Comedy is the key to facing life; Bellow suggests that since we cannot find explanations for, or answers to, the

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11. C.W.E. Bigsby, Confrontation and Commitment, MacGibbon and Kee, London (1967), p.96.

12. Tony Tanner, Saul Bellow, Oliver and Boyd, London (1965), p.5.



absurdity of the human condition, we should not ignore it as do the materialists, or make over-profound attempts to understand it as do the psychologists at times, but laugh at it. This is the message which Bummidge (still playing the saviour) wants to spread through the earth, to all the "bleak and sadistic countries". (p.118) The idea of sharing the difficulty of facing the human condition is brought in as a positive aim. Bummidge gains our approval in his efforts to communicate his views about the universal burden, which the others only deny, thus cutting themselves off from life. As Irving Malin has observed, the fact that Bummidge plans to continue with his idea of comic salvation suggests that there is no end to the search for reality - it is a continuous process.<sup>13</sup> Bummidge accepts this, and leaves no note of desperation in his endeavours, but rather one of hope. Though we have no illusions about his final ecstasy as being in any way permanent, the important point is that his pre-occupation (like those of Henderson or Herzog) has switched from one with himself to one with humanity.

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13. Irving Malin, "Bummy's Analysis", in Earl Rovit, ed., Saul Bellow, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey (1975), p.121.

## CHAPTER TEN

### CONCLUSION

The note of optimism sounds through even the grim-  
mest realities in Bellow's work, and this optimism, which  
every protagonist incorporates at the last in his personal  
philosophy, is based on a faith in the mind's innate  
sense of meaning in life. This sense is a fundamental  
knowledge which, according to Bellow, finally supersedes  
personal feelings of oppression or even the most rational  
arguments against a positive existence. To despair is  
to close one's mind to this knowledge. Bellow argues  
that if one can only cease struggling and trust in the  
future, peace and hope - if only to some degree - will  
replace anxiety. This knowledge is also what gives man  
his will to survive - Sammler, escaping from the mass  
grave, does his utmost to resist death, even to the extent  
of taking another's life. Since the sense of positive-  
ness is an ageless, universal feeling, not dependent on  
such conditions as religion or outward reasons for happi-  
ness, the value of communication is implicit; people are  
linked by the basic wish to live, and should acknowledge  
this fact. Sammler would like to believe in the 'psychic  
unity' described by Tolstoy, which he discusses with  
Wallace, but he is doubtful of its veracity. To suggest  
that recognition of and harmony with one's fellow-beings  
automatically follows insight is to idealise existence.

However, it is the wish for unity which is important. While an approach to life which passes over trivial distractions and focusses on the essentials is open to all, there are those who deny life's possibilities by concentrating on living only for what offers immediate comfort, thus drastically limiting their sphere of communication. An example is Augie's brother Simon, who craves material security and status, seeking this in an opportunistic marriage and rigidly-ordered life. But despite some people's efforts to deny it, everyone ultimately shares the same insecurity.

Bellow's heroes are in the state of confusion and isolation in which we find them at the start of the novels simply because of their refusal to compromise or concentrate on the worldly. They all share a sense of moral goodness, together with a deep curiosity, which endears them, rather than their 'saner' associates, to us. They refuse to compromise, falling instead into the error of wanting to pursue life without limits and to experience everything it has to offer. The mood of acceptance and peace which represents a lull in their misguided search (albeit one with the best motives) usually comes to them in conjunction with a sense of community, which is engendered either by a feeling of universal harmony, or by a specific relationship. The hero's search for personal fulfilment, so often an egotistical one which leaves others out of account, is finally transformed to an appreciation of his fellow-beings and a recognition of

their own right to fulfilment. Seeing oneself in relation to others instead of as a separate entity is one of the most important changes for each of Bellow's heroes; to experience life only on the basis of one's own thoughts and problems denies the fundamental involvement with humanity which Bellow stresses. As a social being, man must become aware of the importance of his relationship with others to his outlook on life as a whole, and should cultivate a sense of communion as one step towards overcoming his isolation. The fulfilment in love or friendship is a natural, effortless result if one acknowledges one's membership of a community, rather than struggling through life alone.

Looking at the endings of each novel in turn, there is evidence on a practical level that the heroes are no longer cutting themselves off from the world until such time as they have solved their dilemmas (which each initially hoped to do by theoretical means alone), but have accepted contact with their fellows as a necessary part of their self-discovery. Joseph, in Dangling Man, decides to go into the army - in itself a society in miniature - admitting: "I had not done well alone. I doubted whether anyone could. To be pushed upon oneself put the very facts of simple existence in doubt."<sup>1</sup> The enormous responsibility of attempting to live in a void with nothing between him and the barest facts of existence has overwhelmed him. The idea of strength arising through

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1. Dangling Man, p.159.

mutual responsibility can be inferred as a converse of this. Leventhal, in The Victim, returns to a balanced approach to life, and his marriage continues happily, though in some ways he never comes to terms with the extent of his need for involvement; he is let off the hook, as it were, when he meets Allbee, now self-sufficient, at the theatre some years later. Allbee, accompanying an actress, is looking fairly prosperous, and tells Leventhal that he has a job in radio. Leventhal, significantly, is still curious about the effects of fate on people's lives, and asks Allbee: "'what's your idea of who runs things?'"<sup>2</sup> Augie marries Stella, thus giving up his earlier insistence on independence, and is ready to share his life even though he has no illusions about the perfection of the marriage. His love for Stella makes what would once have seemed a limitation on his ambitions now acceptable. Most importantly, he realises that it need not affect his 'fate good enough', which his previous artificial way of life detracted from, rather than assisted. The instinctive hope of the animal ridens is his final emotion, and this feeling is in spite of circumstances. Wilhelm, in Seize the Day, experiences a sense of release and happiness upon witnessing the unknown man's funeral, in the sudden (if not unique) realisation that his fate is a universal one. Henderson feels reconciled to his wife; genuine emotion replaces the alienation he felt to begin with. He befriends the small orphan boy

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2. The Victim, p.238.

on the flight home. Herzog, taking the initiative in a social gesture, invites Ramona to dinner. Sammler realises at Elya Gruner's death the important place which he has had in his life, and speaks of the terms of life which, if man chooses to look, are already within his consciousness.

The descriptions of reconciliation in these endings and elsewhere are left vague. What exactly is meant by Augie's axial lines, Wilhelm's heart's ultimate need, or Sammler's inmost knowledge of the terms of life? It does not do to try to analyse these descriptions too closely, since Bellow is not trying to show a conscious realisation which can be analysed in detail, but rather a sudden illumination once the mind has become receptive enough. In each case it is based on personal instinct and is probably intentionally indescribable in any but personal terms.

Notwithstanding the similarities in pattern among the novels, there are marked differences of style. Dangling Man lies within the limits imposed on it by the device of the journal. The structure of The Victim is an ordered pattern which develops the conflict between Leventhal and Allbee. The Adventures of Augie March uses first-person narrative for the epic-length reminiscences. Bellow says of writing the novel: "I was feeling the excitement of discovery. I had just increased my freedom, and like any emancipated plebeian I abused it at once."<sup>3</sup> The richness of character and of the

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3. From Gordon Lloyd Harper, "The Art of Fiction": Saul Bellow - An Interview", Paris Review, 36 (Winter 1966), p.55.

description, particularly of Chicago in the Depression, makes the novel less noticeably a study of the hero's mental traits, and emphasises Bellow's enormous sense of imagination and realism. Seize the Day is a return to the short novel in which theme predominates over action. Henderson the Rain King exhibits a broader scope for Bellow's imagination; his fictitious Africa, and the tribes he describes, are among his greatest triumphs. Herzog is introspective by contrast; Herzog's letters are crammed with abstractions. A sense of reality, however, is again prominent; Bellow gently reminds us of it whenever Herzog loses hold of it. Mr. Sammler's Planet is the one novel in which the oppressiveness of the social conditions makes it seem at first a condemnation of certain contemporary trends in society rather than an exploration of mental dilemmas; events seem designed to illustrate these trends. However, the balance soon shifts in favour of the personal and universal dilemma rather than the purely social. The diversity of styles in the novels avoids any risk of stereotyping. The heroes themselves vary greatly, too, from the sociable Augie to the bungling Wilhelm to the abstracted intellectual Herzog.

The comedy of life prevails in the works despite the immensely important final implications. The serious and the comic are often seen as one and the same; man's struggle to find a formula for his existence becomes absurd. This is shown in, for example, the incident in which Wallace bursts the water pipes while looking for

the Mafia abortion money, and interrupts Sammler's flow of learned discussion. Both are trying, on their different levels, to give value to existence; Wallace seeks material values and Sammler spiritual ones. Throughout his works Bellow argues the case for the lighter side of life, which he considers most directly in his play The Last Analysis.

On the whole, ideas predominate over action in Bellow's novels. Undoubtedly the psychological novel, a description which loosely fits Bellow's work, is becoming more frequent in modern writing; emphasis on the external story has been lessened. The chronologically-ordered plot with action predominant is no longer a prerequisite of the successful novel. One of Bellow's own definitions seems to fit his aims as to form: "A work of fiction consists of a series of moments during which we are willingly engrossed in the experiences of others."<sup>4</sup> In the case of Bellow's work we are engrossed, despite the lack of action in some novels, by the great diversity of character, setting and underlying thought. As well as the protagonists themselves, a number of lesser characters are notable landmarks of present day literature: Dr. Tamkin, Dahfu, Queen Willatale, Wallace Gruner and Dr. Lal, to name but a few. The Adventures of Augie March and Herzog in particular are rich with both living and remembered relatives, as well as the memorable Jewish

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4. Saul Bellow, "The Sealed Treasure", in Alfred Kazin, ed., The Open Form, Harcourt, Brace and World (1961), p.8.



family scenes.

Two critical questions are frequently raised which are perhaps inevitable in the case of novels written mainly around the thoughts of one individual. One is that of the extent to which the novels can be taken as autobiography, the other that of the prominence of the author's own viewpoint. Bellow has condemned the kind of speculation involved in the former, and shown its irrelevance, in his reply to a question about whether Herzog is autobiographical:

If you're asking me if I owned a house in the country and whether my wife kicked me out, etc., I don't know that that sort of personal thing is really relevant. I mean, it's a curiosity about reality which is impure, let's put it that way. Let's both be bigger than that.<sup>5</sup>

Criticism of works of art should be just that, and not of the incidental knowledge one has of their author; comparisons between the two are often too freely made, especially often in Bellow's case as he is a living author.

With regard to the prominence of the author's viewpoint, one can see from the unity of the structure how Bellow avoids any anomaly. He is necessarily sympathetic to his heroes, who of course express thoughts which lie close to his own ideas. But the 'reality-instructors', and other characters, also express Bellow's favourite themes, and some of them - Dr. Tamkin or Sandor Himmelstein, for example - can hardly be said in general to

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5. From Sanford Pinsker, "Saul Bellow in the Classroom", College English, 34 (1973), p.979.

represent Bellow's way of thinking.<sup>6</sup> There is ample evidence of his distancing himself by means of irony. In the chapter on Mr. Sammler's Planet I have tried to show why Sammler, who is most often of all the heroes cast as Bellow's spokesman, is not simply a mouthpiece, an elderly representative of Bellow. Though Bellow does not entirely condemn the didactic element in art (he believes that "the moral function cannot be divorced from art"),<sup>7</sup> he states that the novel of ideas "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 axe-grinding."<sup>8</sup> Bellow, then, is conscious first of all of his artistic purpose; certainly, the numerous discussions which take place in the novels illustrate many instances of opposing viewpoints; for example, those between Joseph and the Spirit of Alternatives, Augie and Basteshaw, Wilhelm and Tamkin, Henderson and Dahfu, and Sammler and Lal. The view we might expect Bellow to have is not necessarily that of the hero. He is simply

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6. The difference should be noted that to consider Bellow's ideas, publicly expressed by him in interviews and articles, as opposed to his biographical details, is quite valid in studying his work - but it should also be stressed that the novels stand on their own without needing interpretation. Bellow's own comments are quoted in this study to reinforce a point.

7. Saul Bellow, "The Writer as Moralist", Atlantic Monthly, 211 (March 1963), p.62.

8. Saul Bellow, "Where Do We Go From Here: The Future of Fiction", in A.L. Bader, ed., To the Young Writer, University of Michigan Press (1965), p.146.

putting forward alternatives from which his characters, and the reader as well, can choose.

The question arises as to the direction which Bellow will take in future works. While speculation is not productive - one must wait for the evidence - it will be interesting to see whether his more marked awareness of social problems in Mr. Sammler's Planet will increase, and whether, if so, novels reaching towards a final optimism will still be convincing. On the basis of the points already made, I would suggest that his work will continue to place itself above the restrictions of the social. The implicit, shared knowledge so fundamental to Bellow is something which is by definition outside the more banal of social restrictions. Tony Tanner has put well the distinction of a spiritual life which is outside, and greater than, that of society. Referring to Bellow's affinity with the great Russian writers, he says:

Now, this sense of the abiding human spirit as an essence in its own right which can take issue with a whole society, a whole state of affairs, we may fairly call Russian. . . . society . . . is seldom felt to be the ultimate condition and container of man. So often there is the sense of extreme human needs, compulsions, forces which can dissolve, dismiss or transcend the social limits of life. There the human spirit is a tremendous palpable reality capable of scattering and distancing any claims that the material world is the ultimate reality.<sup>9</sup>

This was written prior to Mr. Sammler's Planet, but Bellow continues in that novel to put the case for the strength

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9. Tony Tanner, Saul Bellow, Oliver and Boyd, London (1965), p.5.

of the human spirit despite greatly increased social pressures. The quotation also bears relation to the reasons for the universal quality of Bellow's work.

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Bellow's inner conviction can be perceived throughout the novels; he refuses to compromise, to give way to the pessimistic or nihilistic mood of some modern thought, or to the apparently overwhelming odds against a peaceful or meaningful existence in the present day. His outlook shows moral courage in continuing to portray a hope which can only be based on the abstract, opposed as it is by such concrete negatives. But his reasoning and affirmation of faith are consistent, those of someone whose views are sincerely felt. His faith in human nature is one transcendent of social or material considerations, and offers a perpetual reason for hope in a time of an almost universal questioning of the value of existence.

To conclude with another statement of Bellow's, regarding his purpose in writing: "But this caring or believing or love alone matters. All the rest, obsolescence, historical views, manners, agreed views of the universe, is simply nonsense and trash. . . . If we do care, if we believe in the existence of others, then what we write is necessary."<sup>10</sup> It is not enough for Bellow

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10. Saul Bellow, "Distractions of a Fiction Writer", in Granville Hicks, ed., The Living Novel: A Symposium, The Macmillan Co., New York (1957), p.20.

to experience a vision of a meaning in life; he must communicate it, pass on his belief in the hopefulness of life to others. And this is what his works are about - the recognition that other human beings are in a similar predicament to one's own, and the need, the moral duty, to communicate in order that one may overcome this predicament.

And goodness is achieved not in a vacuum, but in the company of other men, attended by love.<sup>11</sup>

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11. Dangling Man, p.75.

## APPENDIX

### HUMBOLDT'S GIFT

One specific glimpse into the future of Bellow's work is given by his recently-published novel, Humboldt's Gift. There is a new departure in structure; the role of the hero is diffused into two characters, Von Humboldt Fleisher, a poet, who has died prior to the story, and Charles Citrine, a magazine editor and playwright, Humboldt's former friend. Humboldt and Citrine are the first of Bellow's major characters who are actually creative artists. Citrine's recollections of his early association with Humboldt, then successful, are based on the Greenwich Village literary life of the Forties, and various parallels can be drawn with events and characters in the novel. Though Bellow has universalised Humboldt's significance as the misunderstood American poet, it is worth noting that his characterisation of him is recognisably based on the poet and critic Delmore Schwartz, who similarly rose to fame on the reputation of his first book, yet eventually died withdrawn and isolated.

Citrine, like Joseph or Augie or Henderson, is a first-person narrator, but here for the first time Bellow is using this device for a dual rather than a single purpose; Citrine's self-awareness is defined by his increasing understanding of Humboldt. He recalls

Humboldt both involuntarily during his everyday activities and deliberately as the subject of meditation. In most respects Humboldt is a recognisable Bellow hero. He expresses a confusing mass of ideas and opinions, is over-anxious, suffers from social alienation, beats up his wife Kathleen, feels he is being persecuted because he is a Jew, and is solitary and semi-mad; he is altogether an outrageous character. Citrine, on the other hand, appears at first sane and unexceptional, though he too has the problems typical of Bellow's heroes. He experiences some degree of self-knowledge through meditating on Humboldt - he recalls and regrets having avoided him on seeing him in the street, dirty and destitute, shortly before his death. He appears arrogant, like Herzog, in his job as editor: "I was always thinking of statements that must be made and truths of which the world must be reminded."<sup>1</sup> He suffers from the detachment of the intellectual, and remembers: "When I was young I believed that being an intellectual assured me of a higher life. In this Humboldt and I were exactly alike." (p.186) Citrine says that he has since modified this view. There is a difference between the pairing of Citrine and Humboldt and the more usual combination of hero and reality-instructor in the length and closeness of their association. Perhaps the decision to have two major characters suggests that Bellow is trying to show specifically

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1. Saul Bellow, Humboldt's Gift, The Alison Press, Secker & Warburg, London (1975), p.108. Subsequent references to this work will be included in the text.

people's indispensability to, and influence upon, each other.

The major theme of death, ever-present in Bellow's work, is prominent in this novel, with interesting new approaches to the subject. Citrine, who frequently reflects on death, talks of his loyalty to the dead, of wanting to carry on for them, and instead finding that he adds their strength to his, and absorbs their characteristics: "I found myself becoming absurd in the manner of Von Humboldt Fleisher." (p.107) (The word 'absurd' here is surely an intentional reminder of its literary significance.) Citrine's life continues to be influenced by Humboldt even after his death. The idea of his wanting to carry on for the dead once again suggests the instinct to preserve life and challenge death. The life-cycle is also brought to mind by the power of the dead to live on in others' lives (which is a fundamental Jewish idea). Citrine tells Renata, his mistress, that "'the dead are alive in us if we choose to keep them alive'". (p.311) The finality of death is challenged, and the immortality of the soul asserted, in one of the most forceful passages on the subject in Bellow's work. Citrine reflects:

I do not believe my birth began my first existence. Nor Humboldt's. Nor anyone's. On esthetic grounds, if on no others, I cannot accept the view of death taken by most of us, and taken by me during most of my life - on esthetic grounds therefore I am obliged to deny that so extraordinary a thing as a human soul can be wiped out forever. No, the dead are about us, shut out by our metaphysical denial of them. As we lie nightly in our hemispheres asleep by the billions, our dead approach us. Our



ideas should be their nourishment. We are their grainfields. But we are barren and starve them. (p.141)

Previously, Citrine has spoken of his "endless sensibility" (p.116) to death, and his statement may be seen as an attempt to come to terms with it rather than continue to avoid the reality. It is also an extension of Henderson's statement about the dead: "'They make us think of them. That is their immortality. In us.'"<sup>2</sup> (Henderson, in making the remark, suggests the need to live at peace with the life-cycle instead of worrying about it.)

Citrine's fear of death is, in part, because he is "afraid to go back empty-handed", (p.198) afraid, like Augie, to miss any of the possibilities of life. The idea of immortality is a new emphasis in Bellow's outlook on death. Despite the physical finality of death, Citrine wants to attempt communication with the dead on the basis of the continuation of the existence of the soul after death, in which he instinctively believes: "The postulate was that there was a core of the eternal in every human being." (pp.438-9) He spends two months in Madrid reading to the dead in order to draw near to them. This method of facing death seems to help him:

But to assume, however queerly, the immortality of the soul, to be free from the weight of death that everybody carries upon the heart presents, like the relief from an obsession (the money obsession or the sexual obsession), a terrific opportunity. (p.442)

Citrine refers earlier to the metaphysical changes he is

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2. Henderson the Rain King, p.307. See Ch.6, p.132.

undergoing:

Under the recent influence of Steiner I seldom thought of death in the horrendous old way. I wasn't experiencing the suffocating grave or dreading an eternity of boredom, nowadays. Instead I often felt unusually light and swift-paced, as if I were on a weightless bicycle and sprinting through the star world. Occasionally I saw myself with exhilarating objectivity, literally as an object among objects in the physical universe. One day that object would cease to move and when the body collapsed the soul would simply remove itself. (pp.220-1)

Many of Citrine's ideas are openly based on those of Rudolf Steiner, whose works are responsible for these conscious changes in his attitude to death. As can be seen in the above passage, he loses in such moments of exhilaration what is usually one of the Bellow protagonist's chief fears concerning death, that of its physical actuality. Here, the fear of physical decay, which so affects Herzog, for instance, is transcended, the body becoming superfluous to the progress and significance of the soul. Citrine's reaction is partly one of those moments of faith where a sense of meaning in life transcends forthcoming death or worldly anxieties, partly relief at an intellectual solution offered him, which, as we see when he attends Humboldt's second funeral, is not entirely able to dispel the emotional horror at the practical aspects of death - the coffin and the grave. But these moments of calm acceptance of death are part of a valid exploration in an intellectual way of the implications of death, though not necessarily removing the fears of it when one is confronted with it in reality. Citrine,

like so many previous Bellow protagonists, needs to relate his theories to experience instead of compartmentalising the two - with regard to other aspects of life as well as death.

In Citrine's self-analysis on the subject of his views on death, he feels: "Perhaps the fact that I had learned to stand apart from my own frailties and the absurdities of my character might mean that I was a little dead myself. This detachment was a sobering kind of experience." (p.439) He thus awakens to his intellectual withdrawal from reality, which shows, as in the case of Herzog, the risks of the analytical approach to life. The novel's final scene is the re-burial of Humboldt, inevitably reminding one of the funeral scene at the end of Seize the Day. Citrine describes his emotional fear: "And death, death, death, death, like so many stabs, like murder - the belly, the back, the breast and heart. This was a moment I could scarcely bear." (p.485) The closing mention of crocuses breaking through old autumn leaves is, however, an obvious symbol for regeneration - the possibility of renewal and continuity through the life-cycle, and thus of hope. Humboldt's re-burial may, conversely, suggest his rebirth through his art; just as Citrine tries to communicate with the dead, the dead can communicate with the living, immortalised in this way.

Humboldt never quite gained the security in his life which he would have liked. He believed that "'money is freedom'" (p.159) and was thus limited even in the pursuit

of his poetic role. Citrine recalls that "He threw himself into weakness and became a hero of wretchedness. He consented to the monopoly of power and interest held by money, politics, law, rationality, technology because he couldn't find the next thing, the new thing, the necessary thing for poets to do." (p.155) Humboldt's obsession with his wife's activities reminds us, though more fanatical, of Herzog's with Madeleine and Gersbach. He used Citrine and others to gain his own ends, in particular a chair of poetry at Princeton. He exhibited an increasing paranoia; he clashed with the police, and was taken forcibly to Bellevue, a mental home. Like other Bellow heroes, it seems that he suffered through struggling to control his existence, instead shutting out instinct and peace. He died without reaching any state of harmony with the world. His reconciliation with humanity can only be reached second-hand through the self-knowledge he inspires in Citrine. He was once a good poet, but, as Citrine says, made life hard for himself. He held a view of a previous ideal existence, "the perennial human feeling that there was an original world, a home-world, which was lost." (p.24) It is suggested that modern society was a partial cause of Humboldt's alienation - as we would expect. Citrine talks of the overpowering reality of present-day America, and the corresponding "weakness of the spiritual powers": "But a poet can't perform a hysterectomy or send a vehicle out of the solar system. Miracle and power no longer belong

to him. So poets are loved, but loved because they just can't make it here." (p.118) Humboldt, then, was unable to come to terms with the society which made his life difficult, or to transcend it. The potential was there, but he failed - though because of recognisable inner characteristics rather than simply because of society's awkward pressures.

Citrine, forced into a position of opposition towards Humboldt during his life, nevertheless remembers his greatness and inspiration as well as his weaknesses, and laments the distortions in life and in human relationships: "One thought, How sad, about all this human nonsense, which keeps us from the large truth. But perhaps I can get through it once and for all by doing what I am doing now." (p.147) The "large truth" presumably refers to Bellow's idea of implicit knowledge, and what Citrine is doing is trying to reach it through his art - in other words, to succeed where Humboldt has failed. This recalls a statement by Bellow on the value of art in our particular age: "I feel that art has something to do with the achievement of stillness in the midst of chaos. . . . an arrest of attention in the midst of distraction."<sup>3</sup> At a later date, he remarks of the writer in modern-day society: "His influence is limited. The power has shifted to the great public. The emphasis falls on collective experience and

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3. From Gordon Lloyd Harper, "The Art of Fiction: Saul Bellow - An Interview", Paris Review, 36 (Winter 1966), pp.65-6.

not upon individual vision."<sup>4</sup> By pinpointing the artist's dilemma in this new novel (interviewed recently, he said: "'As a whole, it's a statement about the position of the American artist'")<sup>5</sup> it seems that Bellow wishes to give some attention to re-asserting his faith in art's place and power in society. Citrine reflects on the role of the magazine The Ark which he and Pierre Thaxter, an intellectual friend, hope to start: "Everything possible must be done to restore the credit and authority of art, the seriousness of thought, the integrity of culture, the dignity of style." (p.249)

Humboldt makes a comment in the scenario he leaves to Citrine which describes what can be taken as his own fate as an artist:

To the high types of Martyrdom the twentieth century has added the farcical martyr. This, you see, is the artist. By wishing to play a great role in the fate of mankind he becomes a bum and a joke. A double punishment is inflicted on him as the would-be representative of meaning and beauty. When the artist-agonist has learned to be sunk and shipwrecked, to embrace defeat and assert nothing, to subdue his will and accept his assignment to the hell of modern truth perhaps his Orphic powers will be restored, the stones will dance again when he plays. Then heaven and earth will be reunited. After long divorce. With what joy on both sides, Charlie! What joy! (pp.345-6)

The problem of social misunderstanding of the artist in

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4. Saul Bellow, "The Perils of Pleasing the Public", The Observer (8 December 1968), p.19.
  5. From David Pryce-Jones, "One Man and his Minyan", The Daily Telegraph Magazine (3 October 1975), p.30.

this particular age, however, is eventually transcended in Humboldt's Gift. Citrine interprets an apparently crazy poem sent him some years previously by Humboldt: "The imagination must not pine away - that was Humboldt's message. It must assert again that art manifests the inner powers of nature." (p.112) The role of the artist is portrayed as one essentially on the inner level which should not be subject to the whims of taste or the pressures of society, and implicitly brings satisfaction to the artist. Talking to Renata about Humboldt, Citrine explains the artist's true nature:

'Where are the poets' power and interest? They originate in dream states. These come because the poet is what he is in himself, because a voice sounds in his soul which has a power equal to the power of societies, states, and regimes. You don't make yourself interesting through madness, eccentricity, or anything of the sort but because you have the power to cancel the world's distraction, activity, noise, and become fit to hear the essence of things.' (p.312)

This statement summarises and emphasises the priorities of art as seen in the novel.

This novel has many similarities with earlier ones, for instance in the host of colourful secondary characters, who include Rinaldo Cantabile, Renata, Citrine's mistress, who is reminiscent of Ramona, Denise, his grasping ex-wife, who can be compared in some respects to Madeleine, and George Swiebel, his sympathetic friend since school-days, as well as many delightful comic sketches - Renata's scheming mother, Louie the ex-junkie son of Citrine's childhood-sweetheart Naomi Lutz, and

Polly Palomino, Cantabile's glamorous redheaded girlfriend.

Cantabile is an important character, one of Bellow's greatest comic creations; he is a would-be gangster who has never quite made it because of a family disgrace in the underworld. We are first introduced to him when he menaces Citrine to obtain a poker debt; after this beginning a truce arises between the two. Cantabile is the opposite of the intellectual Citrine in many respects, though he admires his learning (he wants Citrine to help his wife with her Ph.D. thesis on the subject of Von Humboldt Fleisher). He is a mixture of worldliness and naivety; he harasses Citrine with outrageous suggestions on how to manage his life, for instance offering (though we suspect not seriously) to kill Denise, who is constantly suing Citrine for larger and larger sums of money. He is instrumental in getting Citrine to challenge the plagiarists of Citrine's and Humboldt's old script for the hit film Caldofreddo - with, of course, a financial reward for himself involved. Citrine is irritated by and paradoxically drawn to him at the same time, and analyses this feeling:

A man who had been for years closely shut up and sifting his inmost self with painful iteration, deciding that the human future depended on his spiritual explorations, frustrated utterly in all his efforts to reach an understanding with those representatives of modern intellect whom he had tried to reach, deciding instead to follow the threads of spirit he had found within himself to see where they might lead, found a peculiar stimulus in a fellow like this Cantabile fellow. (p.254)

Throughout the novel Cantabile functions as Citrine's



chief reality-instructor. Citrine reflects: "was he trying in his own way to bring me out, to carry me into the world, a world from which I had the illusion that I was withdrawing?" and concludes: "Pale and crazy, with his mink mustache, he seemed to have a spiritual office to perform. He had appeared in order to move me from dead center. Because I came from Chicago no normal and sensible person could do anything of this sort for me. I couldn't be myself with normal sensible people." (pp.287-88) Cantabile is, outwardly, a foil for Citrine: the man of action rather than thought, of material interests rather than spiritual, living for the present rather than relating it to a wider sphere. Citrine is initially hostile to him on various occasions, but cannot resist his persuasions; Cantabile's determination leads on the more passive Citrine. He forces Citrine to be a participant in life, in the realities of Chicago, as when he involves him in a Mafia-type blackmail of a fraudulent investor. Thaxter, visiting Citrine at the time, remarks to him: "'You always complain that you're isolated, then I come to Chicago and find you bang in the middle of things.'" (p.268) Most of all, Cantabile illustrates for Citrine the one-sidedness, the rarified nature of a totally artistic and intellectual view of life; he shows him the almost opposite outlook of a large proportion of the American population, acting as a go-between.

Social reality is another of the novel's strong points; Chicago life is clearly evoked with detailed

descriptions. Citrine recalls the evening of the poker game:

We sat with whisky, poker chips, and cigars in this South Chicago kitchen penetrated by the dark breathing of the steel mills and refineries, under webs of power lines. I often note odd natural survivals in this heavy-industry district. Carp and catfish still live in the benzine-smelling ponds. Black women angle for them with dough-bait. Woodchucks and rabbits are seen not far from the dumps. Red-winged blackbirds with their shoulder tabs fly like uniformed ushers over the cat-tails. Certain flowers persist. (p.63)

Crooked lawyers, traffic jams, belligerent police all help to make up the setting. However, the city is described more lightheartedly than is New York in the sombre picture given by Mr. Sammler, as befits a novel whose emphasis is mainly comic, despite the underlying depth of theme. The novel is placed firmly in the Seventies with mentions of contemporary events ranging from the showing of the film Deep Throat to the kidnapping of Patty Hearst.

The influence of social pressures on the quality of life is another theme repeated from previous works.

Citrine tells Thaxter:

'Under pressure of public crisis the private sphere is being surrendered. . . . Mankind must recover its imaginative powers, recover living thought and real being, no longer accept these insults to the soul, and do it soon.' (p.250)

Understanding of life, perhaps the capacity to experience it on a straightforward level, is affected by the twentieth-century penchant for analysis and the mass spread of fashionable theories. Citrine implicitly rejects the reliance on thought to solve dilemmas; in an apt example

of this he describes to Thaxter a recent trip with his two daughters to see beavers in Colorado:

'All around the lake the Forestry Service posted natural-history placards about the beaver's life cycle. The beavers didn't know a damn thing about this. They just went on chewing and swimming and being beavers. But we human beavers are all shook up by descriptions of ourselves. It affects us to hear what we hear. From Kinsey or Masters or Eriksen. We read about identity crisis, alienation, etcetera, and it all affects us.' (p.268)

One aspect of life given especial prominence for the first time is that of boredom, which Citrine relates closely to death, the "eternities of nonexistence", (p.202) the threat of which is countered by the concept of immortality. The psychological pain of boredom, the disappointment in the actual compared to expectation, the relation of boredom to history and literature are all ideas which are to be discussed in Citrine's proposed master essay, "Boredom". He stresses the previous neglect of the subject and the need to confront the problem deliberately. In a recent television interview Bellow spoke of why he has drawn attention to boredom in Humboldt's Gift:

I think it's about time the subject of boredom was thoroughly investigated. Everyone suffers from it. No sociologist that I know has ever dealt with it, very few psychologists. . . . But it is a form of spiritual suffering theologians knew about in the Middle Ages. It seems to have dropped from sight as a subject, and I think it's time it was revived. Besides, it's next door to the problem of death, which Humboldt's Gift is about.<sup>6</sup>

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6. From Melvyn Bragg, "Off the couch by Christmas", The Listener, 96 (20 November 1975), p.676. From an interview in "Second House", BBC 2 (15 November 1975).

Boredom is seen as the living equivalent of death, a passive state denying the possibility of progress or change in awareness, in which negative aspects of life come to the fore. The person suffering from boredom may become introspective and more aware of the burden of his own self, seeing existence only as a meaningless state. The idea of boredom reminds one of Sartre's Nausea, in which Roquentin's life becomes at times a pointless monotony; he is isolated and unable to see any pattern in existence. Events such as eating meals are mere exercises to occupy the time. He says to the Autodidact: "'I was just thinking . . . that here we are, all of us, eating and drinking to preserve our precious existence, and that there's nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing.'"<sup>7</sup> This is boredom carried to its extreme form. The uselessness of ordering one's life seems more apparent than the possibility of discovering meaning in life through action. A link can be seen with those of Bellow's heroes who, through over-anxiety, despair, or, particularly in the case of Joseph, isolation from routine, lose their receptivity to people, to instinctive happiness and to the positive aspects of life.

Bellow speaks in a recent article of the particular danger in the twentieth century of falling into this kind of attitude; scientific knowledge and the emphasis on explanation are responsible:

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7. Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea, Penguin Books, London (1965), p.162.

But things have become dreary and human-kind tired of itself because the collective fictions of alleged knowledge are used up. We now bore ourselves by what we think we know. . . . I am inclined to argue that the tedious rationality of our educated heads is a great breeder of boredom and of other miseries.<sup>8</sup>

This unimaginative approach to life is also seen by Bellow as being responsible for the current lack of power in the artist's role, as mentioned earlier.

Citrine sees his own "lack of a personal connection" (p.202) and "the self-conscious ego" (p.203) as being to blame for boredom in his case. These reasons can be related to the much-mentioned dilemma of the balance to be kept between awareness of oneself as an individual and the possible resulting detachment from others and from society. Cantabile tells Citrine: "'You're an isolationist, that's what you really are. You don't want to know what other people are into.'" (p.256) Renata, writing to Citrine after her marriage, also criticises his lack of understanding of others. Citrine suffers, like Henderson, from being "asleep in spirit", (p.293) as he realises. Talking to Naomi Lutz on the subject of sloth, he says that "'as I was lying stretched out in America, determined to resist its material interests and hoping for redemption by art, I fell into a deep snooze that lasted for years and decades.'" (p.306) In this detachment Citrine is very like earlier Bellow heroes. He

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8. Saul Bellow, "A World Too Much with Us", Critical Inquiry, 2 (Autumn 1975), p.6.

talks at one point of having experienced a "light", which "was now a real element in me, like the breath of life itself". (p.177) The involuntary joy he describes reminds us of Augie's joy in finding his 'axial lines'. This experience, with Citrine early in his life, but later lost, "given up for the sake of maturity or realism (practicality, self-preservation, the fight for survival)" is now "edging back". (p.178) Worldly distraction and struggle are challenged by the awakening to inner peace.

The amount of action in the novel has been increased since Herzog and Mr. Sammler's Planet, and there is a stronger sense of everyday event and reality than in some of Bellow's works. The action is taken abroad for the first time since Henderson the Rain King, offering a greater variety of setting and of comic possibility. (For instance, Citrine, left with Renata's son from her previous marriage in a Madrid pensión, has to pretend to be a widower in order to satisfy Spanish curiosity and morality.)

The novel stresses the comic more than any of Bellow's previous ones, not forgetting the comic set-pieces of Henderson; there is in Humboldt's Gift more of a sense of the comedy of everyday life. In accord with this, Citrine's view of life is more comically absurd than the desperate ones of Wilhelm or Herzog; we never fear for his future in the same way that we do for theirs, although this is not to say that he does not suffer from their anxieties or is incapable of, say, Herzog's profundity.

On the contrary, he is just as much a 'thinker', even including meditation in his routine. The comic element lies partly in the misfortunes Citrine brings upon himself by his tendency to introspection, and in his air of detachment from the world; his predicament becomes a joke. Events are juxtaposed incongruously with his consciousness. One notable scene is that in which Cantabile, in order to punish him for his non-payment of the poker debt, forces Citrine to enter a toilet with him to prevent his escape (Citrine reflects: "In a situation like this I can always switch out and think about the human condition over-all"), (p.83) and then takes him to the Playboy Club, where he is made to pay the money in front of a gossip columnist who later reports the scene in his newspaper. Cantabile continues the day in similar style until he feels that Citrine has been sufficiently punished. In another incident, Citrine has an urge to visit the house where he was born; he wants to see the actual room of his birth, and gaining no reply, peers in through a window, only to see an old woman in underpants, and be threatened by her irate husband as a Peeping Tom. Citrine finds explanation difficult: "I could not say, "I am standing on this crate among these lilacs trying to solve the riddle of man, and not to see your stout wife in her panties."" (p.90)

In Citrine's love-life, the comic outcome of his unwillingness to commit himself to Renata by marriage is that she disappears to marry a millionaire undertaker, Flonzaley, accepting the stigma of his trade rather than

Citrine's indecision and preoccupation with the intellectual and universal. Vividly comic characters, as well as Humboldt himself, and Cantabile, predominate in the novel (without giving rise to the bitterness with which Sammler describes the eccentrics in his life). Humboldt is a humorous character in some of the excesses of his behaviour, and there is also a dry comedy in his letter to Citrine with the legacy of the movie treatment. Humboldt remembers the previous treatment they worked on (which becomes the plagiarised hit Caldofreddo):

'I always thought it would make a classic. I handed it to a fellow named Otto Klinsky in the RCA building. He promised to get it to Sir Laurence Olivier's hairdresser's cousin who was the sister of a scrubwoman at Time and Life who was the mother of the beautician who did Mrs. Klinsky's hair. Somewhere in these channels our script got lost.' (p.342)

This passage typifies the comic misadventure which abounds in Humboldt's life. The story of Caldofreddo is itself a comic parody of the conquest of the North Pole. Bellow stressed the comic emphasis of Humboldt's Gift in the television interview about the novel, in which he summed it up as "a presumptuous book which attempts to make a comedy of death."<sup>9</sup>

In this necessarily selective analysis I have attempted to show a continuity of theme from Bellow's earlier works, as well as the new departures. The overall effect of Humboldt's Gift is one of a vision of life transcendent of the smaller considerations; Citrine's coming to terms

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9. From Melvyn Bragg, loc.cit.



with life is based on the premise that "the soul belongs to a greater, an all-embracing life outside" and on seeing his existence in proportion as "merely the present existence, one in a series". (p.332)

Bellow acknowledges his interest in this novel in the ideas of Rudolf Steiner:

'Some of the visions I found in Steiner are rather disturbing . . . of the spirit actually seeing the body itself from another point of vantage. It puts back into life a kind of magic we've been persuaded to drop. We give a perfectly ignorant account of the external world, which becomes drier and smaller all the time. Why be ignorant and dehydrated as well? When Steiner tells me I have a soul and a spirit, I say, yes, I always knew that.'<sup>10</sup>

Despite this admitted influence, Bellow's ideas in Hum-  
boldt's Gift are akin to those based on the instinctive love of life described in earlier novels. Citrine, Thaxter and Renata argue about the possibility of art's being able to express this feeling, and Citrine challenges the view that scientific discovery and modern society can destroy the imagination. What emerges is the value of, as Citrine puts it, "'the love, the hungering for the external world, the swelling excitement over beauty for which there are no acceptable terms of knowledge.'" (p.364)

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10. From David Pryce-Jones, loc.cit.

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I have attempted to make this bibliography as comprehensive as possible, with two exceptions. I have not listed those excerpts from Bellow's novels published separately, except in the case of Humboldt's Gift. I have also omitted a number of very short or unobtainable reviews. Those reviews included are listed together with other articles. For the sake of comprehensiveness, I have included some books and articles which promised to contain worthwhile material but which it was not possible to obtain in England. I am especially indebted to the bibliographies of Bellow compiled by David D. Galloway, Keith M. Opdahl, and Harold W. Schneider, which were of greatest help to me in compiling my own.

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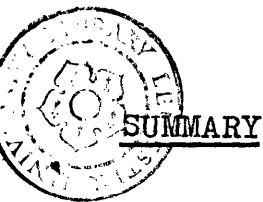
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This thesis aims to discuss Bellow's works mainly in a psychological context. The basic premise is that, despite a person's individual situation and the more universal problems facing him, there is the possibility of an approach to life which can transcend such problems, which rests on man's natural optimism. Each novel is discussed in turn, showing how the protagonists have, for various reasons, become unable to cope with everyday life. This is partly due to their idealism, which, carried too far, causes dissatisfaction with their world and prevents them from compromising that idealism. Their inquiring nature drives them to seek 'answers' to problems through explanation and theory, thus cutting themselves off from experience. A change in their attitude, and a reconciliation with the world, comes about through a cessation of effort subsequent to a realisation of its futility - possibly precipitated by a particular event. They are once more able to communicate with people, breaking the barrier of their alienation, and find satisfaction in this contact. Their redemption is in the realisation that man shares the common fate of existence and death, and that this connection, asserted between individuals, can provide a worthwhile basis for living and for affirming the value of existence. Another factor which may indicate a more positive existence is the instinctive optimism of the soul, which refuses to succumb to merely temporal pressures or to see life only in nihilistic terms. Bellow

believes that this optimism can emerge in anyone's life if only one allows it to, and that this, rather than the struggle for rationality, will bring peace.

The short stories and plays are also considered in this context. The conclusion of the argument is followed by an appendix which discusses Bellow's latest novel, Humboldt's Gift.