

SAUL BELLOW'S INTELLECTUAL HERO –HERZOG & HIS ENGROSSMENT WITH EMOTIONAL UPHEAVAL

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Abstract

Bellow's novels are not stories whose lives have been chalked out, and the chapters simply coloured in: they are a process of discovering, revelations which are incomplete for the author as well, until the last page is reached. In *Herzog* Bellow returned to a mode of fiction that was predominantly, though not exclusively, realistic, a mode that could "accommodate the full tumult, the zaniness and crazed quality, of modern experience" (1971: 14). Herzog, a student of history, is frozen to the bone by his yearning for a myth of redemption, penance, and permanence. Herzog desperately tries to maintain an innocence in the face of his career's and civilization's wreckage, and that innocence finally succeeds because it manages to establish itself in a field of irony, of self-doubt and moral decision based upon self-doubt, which is the distinctive language of American fiction after Bellow.

Key words: revelations, realistic, zaniness, yearning, redemption, moral decision.

Bellow is regarded as one of the most celebrated authors of the 20th century and American literature's most resourceful writer for all times. He has come to his prominence slowly through a careful building up of a body of work, an oeuvre displaying greater insight, range of power, with each new novel. Since his appearance on the literary scene in the mid-forties, Saul Bellow, recipient of the 1976 Nobel Prize for literature, has left his mark on the international literary world. His writings, which combine prophetic wisdom with human comedy, have always elicited extreme response: reverence or condemnation. He is one the few contemporary authors who has been able to sustain the interest and dominate the field of academic and scholarly inquiry for over four decades. His fiction typically addresses the meaning of human existence in an increasingly impersonal and mechanistic world. Writing in a humorous, anecdotal style, Bellow often depicts introspective individuals sorting out a conflict between the Old world and the New world values while coping with personal anxieties and aspirations. Saul bellow has been a most persevering chronicler of America's restless search for

a definable self, articulating more common needs and ills of American society at large. Each of his novels feels the pulse of its decade, exposing the social and intellectual issues at hand. None of his works allow for easy identification or rejection. As a consequence, none have gone uncontended—the controversies they address beckon our response.

Each of Bellow's novels reads like an autobiography. Each autobiography is of a different life. The names of his heroes are often the names of his novels – 'The Adventures of Augie March', 'Henderson the Rain King', 'Herzog'. Bellow had arrived at the peak of his fictional powers in 1959. *Henderson the Rain King* marks the culmination of his developing talent in handling the symbolic mode that was strongly evident in *The Victim* and in *Seize the Day*. A magnificent parable, perhaps the most finished of his fictions, *Henderson* did not allow Bellow to exploit the major skills he had developed in his earlier fiction, his genius for rendering the thick particulars and the magic actualities of contemporary experience. In *Herzog* Bellow returned to a mode of fiction that was predominantly, though not exclusively, realistic, a mode that could "accommodate the full tumult, the zaniness and crazed quality, of modern experience" (1971: 14).

Bellow's novels are not stories whose lives have been chalked out, and the chapters simply coloured in: they are a process of discovering, revelations which are incomplete for the author as well, until the last page is reached. In each book, it is as though some wonderful actor is creating himself through roles that are wholly imaginary. In *Herzog* he succeeds because his central character is so much, so familiarly, the prey of the absurdities against which he wrestles. *Herzog*, a student of history, is frozen to the bone by his yearning for a myth of redemption, penance, and permanence. *Herzog* desperately tries to maintain an innocence in the face of his career's and civilization's wreckage, and that innocence finally succeeds because it manages to establish itself in a field of irony, of self-doubt and moral decision based upon self-doubt, which is the distinctive language of American fiction after Bellow.*

The opening pages clearly distinguish the direction of the novel. Burdened by his many failures, Moses E. *Herzog* is on the verge of insanity. His personal life has collapsed and the world itself seems chaotic and mad. He can explain none of it; life may be without meaning. Can rational thought reaffirm *Herzog's* sense of himself? Are there any moral certainties anymore? The novel shows us *Herzog's* desperate efforts to answer these questions. At the novel's beginning we find the title character, facing his second divorce, separation from his second child, and another in a long line of mistresses, confronting himself: "Late in the 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" (2). What starts out as the listing of proverbs, quotations, and other bits of wisdom expands until *Herzog* is writing letters. These are addressed to family, to friends, to church clergy, to philosophers and politicians both living and dead, and finally even to God. *Herzog* begins by writing his story, recounting his wife's infidelity in the arms of his closest friend, but again expands until he is not just discussing his own life but larger questions of life, death, happiness, misery, and obsession.

He recognizes, and yet gives into, his own vanity and engrossment with emotional upheaval. Even as he attempts to rise above his own feelings, leaving behind anger over his divorce, sorrow over the loss of his children, and confusion over his past, he is consumed by his own passions. And yet within the letters *Herzog* becomes more than another tragic figure. His words betray him as thoughtfully moving through his life, finding and facing his faults, admitting to his weaknesses, and seeking higher paths. This all seems like familiar terrain for a novel --love gained then lost due to some personal failing.

In the opening line, Herzog questions his own sanity: “If I am out of my mind . . .” At times throughout the novel, his thoughts might very well be beyond the comprehension of most people in his life. But it becomes clear that it’s more that he is *within* his own mind, not out of it. During the course of the day, he is routinely honest with himself in a way most of us are only at our darkest hours; Herzog pulls those dark truths out into the light, even going as far as to write them down. In a sense, that is one of the narrative tensions of the book that he gives light and words to such brutal self-reflection, that he toys with sending it out into the world. In the midst of this mining his own life for answers, he writes: “The dream of a man’s heart, however much we may distrust and resent it, is that life may complete itself in significant pattern” (267).

Herzog attempts to define the patterns in his life by removing himself from his physical life, whether it is in a jail cell in Chicago or holing up in the Berkshires. But he quickly understands the paradox that he will never understand his life if he is out of it. He attempts to leave behind women, his family, his children, and even himself, but with each step, he realizes that it is not in the separation of himself from things but in their presence that he can find understanding.

Within these pages he somehow manages to arrive at the highest truth, that of comprehension. And yet it is in this arrival that he realizes he is unable to reach his goal of understanding. In his cell, he writes: “Neuroses might be graded by the inability to tolerate ambiguous situations. . . . Allow me modestly to claim that I am much better now at ambiguities” (267). While at his home in the country, he writes to God: “How my mind has struggled to make coherent sense. I have not been too good at it, and you, without symbols. Everything of intensest significance. Especially if divested in me” (286). The very fact of his existence, with all of his traits, quirks, and habits, makes it impossible for him to comprehend his life, much less the idea of life in general. Life distracts Herzog from his life.

One of the first things that we must realize about Herzog is that he is alienated. He has been restlessly moving from place to place, from country to country, writing endless letters. He is isolated from friends and relatives. Unable to justify his social relationships and his intellectual theories, Moses Herzog “dangles” between engagement and disengagement. Symbolically, he cannot remain *externally* in one spot because his own *internal* state is so unbalanced.

From the beginning of the novel, Bellow emphasizes the dichotomy between body and spirit, and between reason and emotion. Because of Herzog’s sensitivity to his physical surroundings, he cannot concentrate absolutely on his problems. Even as he jots down new thoughts, one part of his mind is sensitively aware of an abandoned marriage bed, a rat gnawing bread in the kitchen, insects, and an overgrown garden, all symbolic of his fragmented emotional state. There is comic irony in the descriptions of Herzog lounging sloppily in his seedy physical surroundings, struggling to make sense of his confused memories, yet being diverted by worrying about his hair falling out. He is tugged one way by serious contemplation, another way by vanity. However, out of all this confusion, Herzog does see a certain unity: internally and externally, wherever he looks, he sees decay.

This idea of death and decay is emphasized by Bellow’s using the images of middle-aged men and women foolishly trying to preserve their youth. Herzog is repulsed by the ludicrous exhibitionism of aging people with varicose veins and “pelican bellies.” But this repulsion is a symptom of Herzog’s own fears that he too is aging and will soon lose his still-youthful physique. Throughout the novel, he suffers from an unwillingness to accept his own physical deterioration. Death and decay, however, are truths; Herzog will have to accept them if he is to gain the maturity that he is seeking.

Another idea present in this section is that of victimization. It becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish whether Herzog is the victim of Madeleine or vice versa. Is he a victim, as well, of his own neuroses? Filled with self-pity and admitted masochism, Herzog is convinced that the world is against him; he simply does not know how to reassert his identity. He broods over his passivity and tries to convince himself that he is the victim of external forces. Yet the novel is permeated with Herzog's growing awareness of his own internal failings. This seems to be Herzog's way to recovery; in order to complete his process of self-therapy, he must honestly recognize all his faults.

One of the things which Herzog hoped to do in life was write the second volume of his study of the Romantics. He continued his interest in this subject, yet his second volume did not get written, just as his second marriage did not last. When did Herzog begin to fail? Until middle age, he lived what seemed a "normal" life. Socially, privately, professionally, everything seemed to be in order. His thesis was published and well received; he was a respected Assistant Professor and apparently a good husband to his first wife, Daisy. His "normalcy," it seems, began to deteriorate after his divorce from Daisy. Suddenly, Herzog realized that he was a failure, "dangling," as it were. Now he has returned to Ludeyville to try and justify and absolve himself. Instead of doing that, however, he becomes more obsessed with his own martyrdom. He immerses himself in his suffering, his sense of failure, and his victimization.

Herzog's letters and notes are extremely important in that they distinguish his efforts to explain his problems. Some are lengthy letters to people he has known, such as his Polish mistress, Wanda, and Dr. Emmerich and Dr. Edvig; other notes are merely nonsensical phrases and quotations that make sense only in the perspective of the entire novel. Such a phrase is *tutto fa brodo*, which means that everything turns into soup. Man's life, as the phrase suggests, is a frightful stew. Some letters are to historical personages, but some merely dangle and can only with difficulty be traced to a person. All, however, are really written *by* Herzog *to* Herzog as part of his therapy.

Herzog's strange mixture of attitudes toward women is developed through his scribbled notes to his mother and to some of the other women in his life. They derive from his painful memories of Madeleine, the woman who has hurt him the most. All his life, Moses has been a man passively dependent upon women. They have offered him stability. Each one has tried to convince him that he is exceptional. But, because of Madeleine, he could not decide whether or not all women are cunning and deceitful. He fluctuates between feelings of love and hate for them.

Herzog's sexual experiences after his divorce are crucial in his self-therapy. His wife left his bed for another man's bed; he must reassess himself sexually. The most important figure in this "rehabilitation" is Ramona. In fact, most of the letter writing in this section is to her. A perfumed, seductive woman, she has taught Herzog one of his greatest lessons: No matter how abstract the mind becomes, the physical body can always respond with a "quack," a sexual reflex. It is Ramona's function throughout the novel to bring Herzog back to relative sexual stability. Whenever he is on the verge of insanity, Ramona offers herself as a physical demonstration that Herzog can still be a man. And Moses needs this affirmation because he doesn't feel like a man. He doesn't know, for sure, what a man is anymore, or even who *he* is. He is in a process of recoil. He recoils from ideologies; he recoils from the reality-instructors because they want to possess his mind; and, at times, he even flees Ramona because he fears that she might eventually possess his freedom. He recoils so that he won't have to face his failures; he wants to believe that he is a victim, yet he cannot convince himself of this. And just as he

attempts to recoil from other people's ideas and theories, he also attempts to recoil from women. He needs them sexually, but he cannot decide whether to hate them or love them.

Herzog is, we realize, both heroic and superbly comic. He tries to make sense out of his existence and still affirm the importance of the heart, a heroic task. But Bellow is too sensitive to human absurdities to think that Herzog or any modern figure can be traditionally heroic. Saints, knights, and martyrs, for instance, were superior in fulfilling *codified* systems of living; these systems of living, however, no longer exist. There are no sure "codes" for living. Thus Bellow often shows us Herzog as a blundering Jewish *schlemiel*—a long-suffering victim who stumbles through his life, ironically aware of his absurdities. The comic stance is one of Bellow's responses to living; it offers Herzog a chance of sanity in a life filled with contradictions. Herzog's mother, for example, wanted him to become a rabbi, and his name, Moses, suggests his relationship to the Jewish prophet who led his people to the Promised Land. Moses Herzog, however, finds no new tablets of the Law; instead, he ends up standing alone amidst the clutter of his life in Ludeyville, remembering how ridiculous he looked in new bathing trunks and a straw hat. He recalls his grandiose projects to definitively clarify Romanticism and is able to laugh at himself for neglecting this goal while responding to the sexual "quack" in his nature. Such juxtapositions offer some of the richest moments in *Herzog*. They represent comic relief from the seriousness of Herzog's quest, and they permit a detachment which enables the reader to make more objective judgments about Herzog.

Herzog is Bellow's most successful attempt to synthesize idea and personal reality, since its protagonist's struggle is definitely a struggle for synthesis, for order, for understanding, not only in the personal sphere but in society and in history. As John Clayton says, "In a sense, Herzog is the sum of all Western civilization since the Renaissance, as if he were reflecting on his personal past" (1971: 206). Synthesis for Herzog is connected to a true sense of value which is in antagonistic relation to a set of forces that surround him, and give him a sense of chaos that demands clarity. Thus Bellow not only "portrays Herzog struggling for order in his chaotic personal life, but he depicts him as an intellectual, striving to explain order as a part of intellectual history" (1974: 195). The synthesis which Herzog is aiming at is "... to live in an inspired condition, to know truth, to be free, to love another, to consummate existence, to abide with death and clarity of consciousness" (1974: 205). This means Herzog's affirmation of human values against alienating and repressing forces in society, his looking for a conscious state of mind in order to define his own identity, and his role in society and in history. Through his search for personal synthesis, which would affirm a true sense of human existence, he reveals his own emotional and confusing state of being, in confrontation with antagonistic forces that brought him to his present crisis; and through his search for a general synthesis, involving a whole civilization, in order to define himself as an historical and social creature, he expresses his concern with the Western cultural and social scene: manners, morals, class distinctions, politics, modern philosophies, religion, relying on historical perspective. As a modern intellectual, he goes over a number of contemporary problems concerning man and society through recollection and deep reflections in the form of interior monologues and unmailed letters, displaying Bellow's own view of man and society.

In style Herzog combines the two main impulses of Bellow's fiction: realism and romance. Like *Dangling Man*, *The Victim*, and *Seize the Day*, it conveys the sense of a real sufferer hedged in by circumstances and the neurotic attitudes. Like *Augie March* and *Henderson the Rain King* it possesses an exuberance and a sense of infinite possibilities. The combination is possible because this is not the novel of a sufferer in the city but of a sufferer who

contains the city within him. Moses Herzog calls himself a “prisoner of perception” (72), but actually perception is his prisoner. He sees only what he needs to see and we see only what Herzog sees. This dependence on a distorted perceiver has caused critical misunderstanding of the novel. Herzog is a psychological novel: the ideas have a function in the hero’s story. In each of Bellow’s novels we see an alienated hero who wants to return to community; often paradoxically, a depressive and masochist who wishes to defend the self and affirm the beauty and dignity of man. As John Jacob Clayton has rightly put it, “we see one character after other creating ideal constructions of reality, humanizing the world after his own image in order to impose himself on reality but, instead, submitting to it in a spirit of *amor-fati*” (1968: 182). Through this process Bellow has been able to affirm human possibilities--not the possibilities of preserving the self but of dissolving the self in a brotherhood. He does it once more in *Herzog*, this time in a more complex context and with the issue of belief in humanity more central. Bellow dramatizes Herzog’s consciousness in a unique way. More than a stage, Herzog’s mind is a *Kurukshetra*, a huge battlefield upon which many skirmishes and combats, intellectual and emotional, comic and tragic, take place. Herzog’s throbbing mind, like Henderson’s gigantic body, is in frenzied motion. The narrative tactics used to enact its feverish state and to reduce the distortions of solipsism are a magnified and accelerated version of those used in *Seize the Day*.

Herzog begins and ends with a partially reborn hero, Moses Herzog, at peace with the world, living amid nature – nature growing up raggedly about him, the stars overhead like spiritual fires, his food shared with rats. The rest of the novel tells the process of arriving at this state, of his initial need “to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to clarify, to make amends.” (2) – generally, to preserve his crumbling ego system. The novel tells of his divorce and confusion, of his thinking, compulsive thinking, ratiocinating about Mady, his ex-wife, and Gersbach, the ex-friend who was secretly cuckolding him. He thinks about the various women in his life – Daisy, his first wife, Ramona, his present lady friend, Wanda and Sono, encountered along the way; and he thinks especially about ideas, examining the wreck of his culture as he examines the wreck of himself, to see if both can be saved.

Herzog tells of his seemingly haphazard travels to find sanity – from New York to Maratha’s Vineyard back to New York, then to Chicago, finally to a country house in Massachusetts; of his real quest, into his own past, especially his childhood. The meaning of this past is revealed by a series of experiences – a visit to the court-house where he confronts a degeneracy he fears in himself; a trip to Chicago during which he considers killing Mady and Gersbach, is unable to, and in the process is purged. At the end, living like God’s Humble Man, he feels ready, as did Henderson, to return to community.

Herzog is alienated from the people. He is like the bearded Negro who blows a toy trumpet which can’t be heard. He writes letter after letter, but he never mails them. Herzog is corresponding really, with the president and the bishop of his own mind; he is in an imaginary, not actual community. The device of the mental letter that is at times jotted down but never sent was an inventive reworking of the eighteenth-century mode that gave Bellow freedom to range over space and time. As a shifting gear, it allowed him to regulate and vary the novel’s ongoing rhythms. As a form of punctuation, it broke up what could have been long, monotonous stretches of brooding and meditation. It allowed Bellow to tunnel into the hidden recesses of Herzog’s psyche. And it solved a major problem for Bellow, that of naturalizing ideas in his fiction. Until Herzog’s transformation, his consciousness is composed of words; he is living in words, not in the world, and the letters, far from attaching him to other people, make them more distant and unreal. The figures dim, the ratiocination catches all the light. Waiting on her bed

for sexy Ramona to appear, Herzog considers Rousseau, Kant and Hegel (203). In the middle of a letter about radiation, a conductor takes Herzog's ticket. "He seemed about to say something". But Herzog, considering the fate of man, ignores this reality and continues writing, deciding also to avoid club car, where he might have to "talk to people" (52). Forgetting his class, he jots down note after note – notes with fine ideas: "on the knees of your soul? Might as well be useful. Scrub the floor". (3)—but ideas which have little to do with his life.

It is not accidental that Herzog happened to fall in love with Mady. He is always attracted to the aggressive, masculine woman (202). "Female arrogance" excites him (334). Potentially asexual as well as a moral masochist, he speaks metaphorically of "writing under this sharp elegant heel" (76). Madeleine is the modern age, in which the darker and debased forms of romanticism (a modern phenomenon, according to Bellow) flourish (1965: 27). Madeleine and the world which she flings him into will teach Herzog a number of lessons, cruel, sad and comic, about himself. Herzog, the scholar of Romanticism, needs Madeleine, that arch romantic, to teach him the truth about his intellectual pretensions, just as Herzog, *zisse n'shamele*, that sweet little soul (as Tennie calls him) needs Madeleine, the one with the murderous bitch foot, to tell him the truth about his own nature. When he remembers the red – light district in Hamburg, the image that he retains is one which would excite a Masochist: "Some of the whores, in black lace under things, wore German military boots and rapped at you with riding crops on the window panes" (46). Ramona is a sensualist and flowers are an important part of her life: she exhibits them to Herzog and her apartment, which he visits often, is full of them. At first, they do not seem to affect him at all: "With his eye to the viewer," he said, "it's very pretty. All those flowers. But he felt heavy-hearted – dreadful" (15). With time, however, Herzog starts to recognize their beauty and be positively influenced by them. While approaching Ramona's shop, he notices "daisies, lilacs, small roses, flats with tomato and pepper seedlings for transplanting, all freshly watered" and he can "smell the fresh odor of soil." The sight and smell of flowers and soil coexist with the influx of positive feelings caused by spending time in Ramona's company; her "perfumed kiss" and "fragrant face" intensify Herzog's pleasure and joy. The character observes "the buses pouring poison but the flowers surviving" and he is possessed by wistful musing: "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..." (206). The flowers symbolize, among other things, strength and a natural urge to survive – values essential to Herzog's return to balance and values that Ramona consistently introduces into his life. In addition to flowers and fragrances, she offers him meals, touch and sexual fulfillment. These three aspects of life: nutrition, human touch and sexual intercourse— belong to human beings' natural needs and, hence, may be said to be a part of the quotidian, even when these experiences are regarded as extraordinary. Ramona strongly believes that there is not "any sin but the sin against the body, for her the true and only temple of the spirit" (151). Gloria Cronin (2001: 61) and Jonathan Wilson (1990: 26) interpret Ramona as a narrowly provocative and erotic goddess, limiting her role in Herzog's life to a provider of sexual pleasures. In fact, her immense corporeal power is in conflict with Herzog's spiritual and mental power, which leads him to pose disquieting questions to himself: "But is that the secret goal of my vague pilgrimage? Do I see myself to be after long blundering an unrecognized son of Sodom and Dionysus – an Orphic type? (Ramona enjoyed speaking of Orphic types.) A petit-bourgeois Dionysian?" (17). However, although Herzog does not subscribe to Ramona's extreme practice of contemplating the flesh (to him, it is yet another ideology) and evades her and her propositions a couple of times (fearing that she hides a desire

to marry him), he seems to realize the benefits of their relationship in the second part of the novel:

She wanted to add riches to his life and give him what he pursued in the wrong places. This she could do by the art of love, she said, the art of love which was one of the sublime achievements of the spirit (184).

An extremely pronounced appreciation of the senses is found in Ramona. Through her the author reinforces the message of the significance of the senses in human life. She tenderly looks after a depressed and distressed Herzog. She is portrayed in this fashion:

That was Ramona – no mere sensualist, but a theoretician, almost a priestess, in her Spanish costumes adapted to American needs, and her flowers, her really beautiful teeth, her red cheeks, and her thick, kinky, exciting black hair (150).

Ramona succeeds in helping Herzog heal his broken heart and confused mind with “fleshly love” (Pradhan 75), Ramona’s self-acceptance, as Cohen argues, is the embodiment of Herzog’s desire of coming to terms with himself (Cohen 2004: 8). In addition, she is characterized by sincerity, as she offers Herzog no lies – her words are confirmed by her actions. Further still, she helps Herzog by turning his attention to life’s basics: sensual pleasures (touch and body), natural phenomena (flowers and smells) and everyday activities (meals, caretaking, conversation). Partly owing to Ramona, Herzog appears to regain stability through centering his attention on the simplest aspects of life. Moreover, he imagines what kind of mother Ramona would make (161) and he generally admires the value that she attaches to family feeling: “Still, Herzog observed that Ramona had genuine family feeling, and of this he approved” (153). Family, another feature of ordinary life, is absent from his own life and he silently yearns for it. As the character liberates him from neurotic analyses of ideas, including the critique of the many bodily pleasures promoted by Ramona, he abandons his judgmental attitudes about Ramona herself and begins to recognize her worth as a partner: “Indeed, Ramona did look like those figures of sex and swagger,” notices Herzog, “but there was something intensely touching about her, too. She struggled, she fought. She needed extraordinary courage to hold this poise. In this world, to be a woman who took matters into her own hands?” (337). Besides her perfect body and unusual sexual skills, Herzog perceives important values in her: courage and independence, which he himself is in great need of. In summary, Ramona’s role should not be reduced to that of a “sexual professional (or priestess)” (17), because, as the novel progresses, aside from finding pleasure in her body, fragrance and touch, Herzog confides in Ramona, seeks comfort in her company, conducts ordinary activities with her, appreciates her familial instinct and ultimately learns to accept his mismanaged life. At the conclusion of the story, Herzog invites Ramona to his house in Ludeyville for dinner and, following her example, picks flowers, because he knows she is fond of them. The performance of simple activities, some of which Ramona has taught him, proves vital to achieving peace of mind. Ramona’s truthful character contrasts with other protagonists’ false characters.

Herzog praises Martin Luther King for “moral dignity” (67). Even his social conscience – paternalistic and utopian – is of the century of Tolstoy: owners of large estates are to give up their land to the peasants. But more specifically, the basis of his ideas is Jewish. His standard is the Jewish family as he knew it in childhood. He may bitterly laugh at his own principles, thinking of “young Jews, brought up on moral principles as Victorian ladies were on pianoforte and needle point” – but they are his principles. His is a disgrace to himself, unable to live up to his Jewish, 19th century ideal of a man. This ideal, comes also from his father, who was “a

sacred being, a king” (147). It is from this father-king that Herzog derives his belief in the dignity of the individual: “personalities are good only for comic relief. But I’m still a slave to papa’s pain. The way Father Herzog spoke of himself that could make one laugh. His ‘I’ had such dignity” (149). Thus Herzog’s standard – and Bellow’s – would appear to be the majestic 19th century individualist combined with the religious Jew. Herzog’s Faustian interest in social questions, comic in its impotence, is a sign that he is breaking out of his isolation and his concern with abstract questions. As he observes in the middle of his letter to Bhave, one has to start with injustices that are obvious to everybody, not with big historical perspectives. Like King Lear, whose tragic sufferings made him acutely aware of human injustice, Herzog travels from his own pain to injustices in the world around him. By way of the mental letter Bellow was able to introduce ideas into the novel, for Herzog, as intellectual and scholar, is naturally interested in the social, political, and metaphysical problems of his day. Bellow’s fictional problem was to ingrain these abstract ideas into the textural flesh of the novel. The fact that they issue from a single consciousness was not enough to make for any real coherence. Bellow achieves the fictional miracle of establishing order among all these elements by gradually heightening the sad and funny story of Herzog into the tragicomic saga of twentieth-century man. The problems that torment Herzog turn out to be the major problems that haunt and baffle the mind of modern man. In many other ways Herzog’s character relates to his ideas. The most obvious is that his thinking is compulsive; he has to think and write in order to stay balanced. “Quickly, quickly more!” he thinks in the middle of a letter (68). First, he must vent his feelings somehow; second, his private indignation and despair must be transmuted to public indignation and despair. His letter to the editor concerning radio activity is a good example of how Moses Herzog handles a personal problem by generalizing it to a cultural one. “Mr. Editor”, he writes, “we are bound to be slaves of those who have power to destroy us” (51). Unconsciously he means Mady, but he gains the moral stature and objectivity that come with discussion of a national problem. Herzog acknowledges later, he had always done elaborate intellectual work “as if it were the struggle for survival” - as if he would die when thinking stopped (265). But the thinking is more than compulsive. It justifies him, as well. His ideas enable him to feel a victim of sweeping cultural trends – and therefore not responsible: he is a victim of the debased romanticism found in Gersbach and Mady; his self-contempt is the result of cultural self-contempt (164). If his problems are universal, they are easier to live with.

In a sense, Herzog is the sum of all western civilization since the Renaissance, as if he were reflection on his personal past. Herzog is representative man fighting for survival. However, the equation of Herzog with the culture functions with respect to his character. He writes to the Monsignor who converted Mady to Catholicism, “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” (106). This experiment is to see whether the individual – Moische Herzog could live successfully; if so, perhaps there may be hope for Man. It is a courageous experiment; but if Herzog is trying to be an unsung culture hero, he is also acting paranoiac victim. Here again, the experiment, the paranoia: “The progress of civilization – indeed the survival of civilization – depended on the successes of Moses E. Herzog. And in treating him as she did, Madeline injured a great project” (125). Hitler and Robespierre had similar ideas; so did the minor Machiavellians in *Augie March*. Soon Moses sees his conflict with Mady and Val as universal – sees himself defending man against revolutionary mobs “sacking Versailles, wallowing in cream desserts or pouring wine over their dicks...” in other words, dressing up as the defender of the culture may lead to murder for a

“good cause”.

For Herzog, intellectuality has always been a way of humanizing reality through words so as to stifle the reality of death. While his mother is dying, Herzog sits in the kitchen studying *The Decline of the West*, preferring to consider cultural decline than personal decline. As he remembers in court, when he is forced to confront what Asa and Augie call the “darkness”, his mother had tried to teach him what death was, rubbing the palm of her hand until the dirt that we come from appeared; he doesn’t want to learn. When she enters the kitchen just before her death, her eyes tell him: “My son, this is death”. Herzog reflects: “I choose not to read this text” (234). He prefers to read cultural history.

Herzog is burdened, like so many Bellow’s characters, by the weight of the past. He must get the weight off his back. He needs to smash down his false self before he can construct a fresh life. In the course of the novel Herzog is -- and therefore, for Bellow, Man is -- partially redeemed, because he accepts himself and he accepts his death. Herzog’s redemption is achieved. Moses Herzog is at Ramona’s filled with sexual guilt and guilt because he has deserted his traditions. He retells his story until Ramona asks to stop. Finally they make love, and he has some peace that night and next morning. But then his problems resume. The casting off of selfhood has been the dominant movement in *Dangling Man*, *The Victim*, *Seize The Day* and *Henderson*. Once again, it is true in *Herzog*. As always, the hero defends his individuality – a defense which is surely Bellow’s as well; Herzog thus attacks the Himmelsteins of his world, who believe “you must sacrifice your poor, squawking, niggardly individuality...to historical necessity” (93). But Bellow also believes that to be redeemed one must lose one’s individuality: not lose it to the crowd, not lose it in acquiescence to “historical necessity”, - no, but lose it by becoming one with his fellow man. “Brotherhood is what makes a man human” (238).

Richard Poirier complains, “Nothing but nothing in Herzog’s career – are we, to think of his surrender of his wife’s diaphragm to her messenger Gersbach? – suggests that his self hood and self development have been ‘this great bone-crushing burden’” (1965: 269). But self-hood is Herzog’s burden, for it is Herzog’s defense of his Self that leads to his masochistic posturing. Like Joseph, Asa, Augie, Tommy, Henderson, Herzog will not put his burden down. “Should he have been a plain, unambitious Herzog?” (43), *Meshugenah*, bohemian Nachman, a quack who like Tamkin and Dahfu knows the truth, tells Herzog:

We do not love ourselves, but persist in stubbornness. Each man is stubbornly, stubbornly himself. Above all himself, to the end of time. Each of these creatures has some secret quality, and for this quality, he is prepared to do anything. He will turn the universe upside down, but he will not deliver his quality to anyone else. Sooner let the world turn to drifting powder... you’re blind, old friend... Rooted in yourself. But a good heart (134).

Herzog has been carrying the world on his shoulders. That is, he has been carrying his own world, his special version. After the trip to Chicago he can put it down. He can stop crying to control the world with words and ideas and instead simply live in it. He can stop defending his “special destiny”, his individuality, and live unencumbered as another creature in the world that is. “A man,” Herzog thinks in Chicago, “is somehow more than his characteristics, all the emotions, strivings, traits, and constructions which it pleases him to call ‘my life’” (266). Thus like D.H. Lawrence, Bellow is trying to get below individuality to something more basic, to get underneath the “old stable *ego* of the character” (1959: 289-90). Like Lawrence, he is concerned

with the carbon underlying the diamond and coal - and for Bellow, this carbon is a state of transpersonal, mystical unity. “Go through what is comprehensible and you conclude that only the incomprehensible gives any light” (266). This incomprehensible, Herzog argues, is not death. Never is it named, because it cannot be named, but the closest word is *love*.

Herzog recovers his ordinary human self during his visits to the courtroom and the police station where people from all walks of life assemble every day for some personal or social reasons. Herzog’s efforts to shape his life according to ready-made ideas from books like *The World As Will And Idea* and *The Decline Of The West* keep him unaware of the truth of human nature. After reading these books and soaking himself in the sea of ideas, he considers himself an extraordinary person “a marvelous Herzog” (93). But he becomes aware of the truth of common life when his second wife, Madeleine, divorces him and moves in with his closest friend, Valentine Gersbach.

Madeleine’s betrayal shatters his ego and breaks him. But Herzog decides to set everything right for himself. He resolves his intellectual confusions by writing letters to public heroes and recovers his composure by participating in public phenomena. Advised by Simkin, Herzog goes to court to consult his lawyer about the legal possession of his child. There he happens to hear the proceedings of some criminal trials, one of which is about the merciless murder of a child by its mother and her paramour. The trial moves Herzog to imagine Madeleine and Gersbach murdering his own daughter in a similar manner. He immediately picks up his pistol and sets out for Chicago with the intention of killing Gersbach. But to his utter surprise, he finds his enemy bathing his daughter tenderly. “As soon as Herzog saw the actual person giving an actual bath, the reality of it, the tenderness of such a buffoon to a little child, his intended violence turned into theatre, into something ludicrous” (258). This incident brings about a change in Herzog’s perception of life. He encounters the reality of human nature and finds it contrary to what he had imagined. After hearing the proceedings in court, he had concluded that human life was a “wicked dream,” completely devoid of emotions. But when he finds his enemy bathing his daughter so affectionately, he realizes that even a wicked man like Gersbach can have the potential for goodness, and a good man like himself can have the potential for evil. This realization liberates Herzog from his romantic notions about himself and leads him to an understanding of the complexities of human nature. He realizes that:

... a man is somehow more than his “characteristics,” all the emotions, strivings, tastes, and constructions which it pleases him to call “My Life.” We have ground to hope that a Life is something more than such a cloud of particles, mere facticity: Go through what is comprehensible and you conclude that only the incomprehensible gives any light (266).

In short, the episode makes him aware of the fact that the comprehensible aspects of human life and its ready-made realities as given by the Reality Teachers can at times be thoroughly misleading. Realizing this, he moves away from his pretender self and comes closer to his real human self. This real self becomes evident subsequently when he tells Luke Asphalter, who is wasting his life in isolation in pursuit of petty obsessions, “Man liveth not by Self alone but in his brother’s face . . . Each shall behold Eternal Father and love and joy around” (272).

Afterwards Herzog meets with a car accident while taking his daughter to the museum. It gives him another shock, which leads him towards further moral refinement. The policemen search him as they would a common man and arrest him for keeping a pistol without a license. They then take him to the police station, where he finds himself “down in the ranks with other

people ordinary life?” (287). Surrounded by ordinary people in a public place, Herzog behaves like an ordinary person, completely contrary to his earlier posture of defiance. Thus gradually he loses his egotism and regains his ordinary human self which knows its bond of kinship with other people. At the end Herzog returns home, where he feels “confident, cheerful, clairvoyant, and strong”.

Now Herzog is living in reality, the reality Henderson enters. Herzog too, has moved from “the states that I myself make into the states which are of themselves” (289). In the past he had traded on innocence and meekness, he had humanized reality, he had lived in *his* world. Now he buys his daughter a periscope so that she will grow up seeing what *is*, even if it isn’t pleasant; as a guru in the woods he writes this exquisite note to God:

How my mind has struggled to make coherent sense. I have not been too good at it. But have desired to do your unknowable will, taking it, and you, without symbols. Everything of intensest significance. Especially if divested of me (326-27).

Reality for Herzog is not a bitter pill; its true apprehension is in love and joy: in *amor fati*. Bellow has spoken of a “spontaneous mysterious proof [of the justification of life’s continuation] that has no need to argue with despair” (1963: 62). In doing so, he washes his hands of the two diseases with which society – and Herzog – are infected: the romantic glorification of the self and the devaluation of the self; Faustian striving and the self-contempt of them who, not finding paradise within, see a waste land both within and without. The cure for both diseases is selflessness. Accepting life and death, he feels “pretty well satisfied to be, to be just as it is willed and for as long as I may remain in occupancy” (340).

Herzog is undeniably a unique fictional character. Nevertheless, his thoughts and behaviour are representative of those of many men in his situation. During the novel, we see Herzog move through various stages which are typical for those mourning a divorce: first, shock and denial right after his wife suddenly throws him out; second, months of depression which he defends against through restless travel and brief sexual flings; third, after he discovers his wife had been carrying on an affair with his best friend, a phase of homicidal anger mixed with nearly suicidal depression, culminating in an impulsive flight to Chicago and a plan to kill her and her lover (he lurks outside her house but can’t do it); and fourth and last, after an accident and an arrest for possession of an unregistered gun bring him down with a crash, a withdrawal to the country where he begins recuperation and acceptance, able to forgive others and, most of all, to forgive himself. The psychiatrist Gerald F. Jacobson writes that “the divorce process requires a profound readjustment that in many instances produces a picture indistinguishable from that of more deep-seated pathology” (Jacobson 37). Although grief may resemble mental illness, it is a temporary, normal healing process that usually follows predictable stages. The individual may even emerge strengthened at the end, as Herzog seems to do. Nevertheless, “Bereaved people are so surprised by the unaccustomed feelings of grief that they often ask, ‘Am I going mad?’ . . .” (Parkes, Bereavement 164)--just as Herzog does.

Both letters and interior monologues show Herzog’s mental debates and a significant analysis of contemporary experiences, his philosophical, social and political ideas, his arguments, his protests, and his polemics. As Clayton says he has to think and write in order to stay balanced. First, he must vent his feelings somehow; second, his private indignation and despair (1971: 205). The letters, at the superficial level, give an impression of formlessness, but they actually reveal the thematic as well as the aesthetic unity of the novel, for they unify the universe of the novel both in terms of social, historical and ideological background, and by

serving as a continual commentary in the meaning of Herzog's real life in his search for a personal synthesis. Through the letters, Herzog excavates both his own past and that of our civilization as well as displays his present chaotic practical life and the social and political world in which modern man lives. He writes letters to living and dead people, including philosophers, scientists, religious representatives, politicians, people related to him in his personal intricacies: friends, mistresses, ex-wives, relatives, scholars, doctors, psychiatrists, lawyers, judges, and even to God. His letters, though apparently formless, as we have said, cover his own personal history and the history of his civilization. He tries to explain his letter writing when he says:

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 (333).

There is a dialectic between past and present, personal and cultural. "Most of the novel is concerned with Herzog's examination of his own past and Western man's as he attempts to analyze his professional and marital failures and relate them to the history of civilization" (1971: 33). His letters thus supply a structural means of portraying a man who tries to clarify his own chaotic life by universalizing his personal situation; Herzog's letters also show the dialectic between man's fallen state and his possibility of salvation. As Sewell points out "In order for Herzog to arrive at a realistic view of himself as a man of decline but one with potential, he must think his way to clarity in his personal life as he evaluates the present in terms of the past. Because the task involves sometimes long and weighty exposition the imaginary letters serve as a plausible means for the protagonist's engagement in the process" (1974: 207). Here again, Herzog's personal search for synthesis is expanded into man's search, through his letters. His rejection of the notion that his present chaotic situation is definite, which is shown through his struggle to reach clarity, expands into, a historical vision of the world dialectically oriented. He opposes negative views of history. Asserting man's ability to overcome his own condemnation, showing his own sense of fall as husband, and resenting his wife's immoral behavior he states in his letter to an intellectual friend of his wife's:

Are all traditions used up, the beliefs done for, the consciousness of the masses not yet ready for the next development? Has the filthy moment come when moral feeling dies, conscience disintegrates, and respect for liberty, law, public decency, all the rest is. cowardice, decadence, blood? (95-96).

He goes on in the same mood, refuting what he calls "the commonplaces of the Wasteland outlook", believing in a new orientation, in a better spiritual life for modern man, when he says, "I can't accept this foolish dreariness. We are talking about the whole life of mankind" (96).

Besides its structural function, Herzog's letters help reveal his own character, the character of an intellectual, whose mind is given to analysis and mental arguments, able to articulate ideas into syntheses. Though, Herzog covers not only the history of its protagonist but the history of Western civilization, the present action of the novel is compressed in five days of Herzog's life which reveals Bellow's remarkable ability in handling time. The narrator shifts to and from two different levels of time: the timeless omniscient level in which he summarizes the subjective contents of Herzog's mind and the space-time world of the linear narrative in which

he describes Herzog objectively as an object in a scene, or his general state of mind. But most of the novel covers an inner realm of time, that of Herzog's mind, where time is psychological and consists of recollections, though, as we have already commented, the narrator's summary of Herzog's past sometimes blurs with Herzog's recollections. In spite of its remarkable technique in time-shifting, internal monologues and the letter-writing device for dramatizing consciousness, the novel is rather a traditional novel, in the sense that it deals with the whole life of a man in the realist tradition, blended with elements of the picaresque novel. The novel, however, is centered in the actual consciousness of its protagonist (everything we know about the people in the novel we know from Herzog's mind), and the journey we take is the journey of the mind, the novel thus, being, a probing, introspective novel, of ideas. Bellow presents the thoughts of a man trying to cope with the social reality of time; trying to grasp the paradoxes of modern history, science and philosophy. All sorts of questions and problems obsess Herzog's mind, which is working at full speed all the time.

Thus, by assimilating isolated people into a common bond, Bellow seems to discard theories of alienation created by the "writers of 'sensibility'" (1963: 25). Unlike the theorists of alienation, he avers that "private" and "public" dissolve into each other by way of one's unavoidable solidarity with the rest of humanity, as embodied in the public phenomenon. Bellow thus creates a new humanism in his novels, an existential humanism based on human integration, human equality and kinship.

Herzog undergoes a change during the course of the novel. This is signaled by his abandonment of letter writing and his adoption of enthusiasm for the most prosaic aspects of life. Herzog is finally able to fully connect with the external world and complete everyday actions: having an honest conversation with his brother, making plans to spend more time with Marco (334), describing Ramona as "a woman, a florist, a friend from New York" (335) without an unnecessary analysis of her sexual ideology; telephoning Ramona instead of writing her a mental letter, and eventually preparing dinner for her (337) rather than being invited to one. He also re-establishes connection with the Ludeyville community by asking Mr. Tuttle to fix electricity in his house and Mrs. Tuttle to help him clean up the cottage (335). Heidegger's "fall into the quotidian" is conclusively refuted through Herzog's final actions. The end reveals the origin of his recovery.

Only when Herzog realizes his flaws, which entails his stepping out of his egotism and seeing himself and others in proportion, does his growth become possible. The moments of realization emerge in the second part of the novel; the most crucial one occurs in the scene where Herzog flies to Chicago with the intention of killing Madeleine and Gersbach. However, the first change in his generally egotistical perspective and ironic style is found in the Napoleon Street passages. There Herzog suspends introspection and recalls his childhood; simultaneously, the narrator drops his humorous tone in favour of an elevated and lyrical one (136). Another conspicuous aspect of this section is the absence of Herzog's letters or notes. Though a letter to Nachman does open the Napoleon Street passages, Herzog stops writing after just a few lines and begins to recall his childhood. He returns to the letter at the end of the passages only to abort it, having realized that he does not even know Nachman's address. Moreover, he suddenly sees no point in asking Nachman why he fled when Herzog spotted him, which is why he was writing (129), because he knows the answer: Nachman's wife committed suicide and "Nachman ran away because (who could blame him) he would have had to tell Moses all about it" (149).

His realization that he lacks Nachman's address and his recognition of his friend's difficult life prove that Herzog is able to both relate to reality and include others in his

perspective. Likewise, the attention that he gives to his family by reminiscing about them indicates a change in his perspective--from the inward to the outward.

The main interest in Herzog's search is to reach an adequate notion of contemporary man and of himself, recognizing the need for synthesizing absolute views and positions, and though his conclusion is the impossibility of full consciousness, we surely see him reach awareness, after his dialectical discussion, of man's individual possibilities for survival, not necessarily depending on his intellectual ability. This seems to be the reassuring truth Herzog grasps, after so much struggle and thinking out of the confusion in which he found himself. It is also the core of the comedy in the book, for though Herzog is very serious in his purpose as a humanist intellectual, he is seen by himself and by the omniscient narrator, throughout the novel, as a comic figure. This paradoxical aspect points to the impossibility of one's making sense of contemporary life, so that the only true synthesis Herzog can reach, which reality itself cannot deny, is man's potential ability to overcome crisis, which is translated in Herzog into a sense of hope and peace Herzog reaches at the end.

Though it might seem to the reader that Herzog is in the process of disintegration, which he himself admits at the beginning of the novel (3, 37), this disintegration proves not to be an incurable condition. As critics have argued, *Herzog* is a novel about deliverance from suffering and liberation from intellectual versions of reality, thanks to which the protagonist eventually manages to regain stability and peace. That Bellow decides to turn to the self in *Herzog* and structure the story around it implies "the vision of self as inviolable, powerful, and nery, self as the only real thing in an unreal environment" (Roth as quoted in Tanner 297). The in-depth examination of the essence of self and the struggle with everything the self is shaped by: education, memory, family, relationships, surroundings, and the confusion which self-analysis creates – indicate the insufficient character of the self to live and develop on its own. Herzog recognizes the value of community, "I really believe that brotherhood is what makes a man human" (272), yet, being preoccupied with his personal crisis, he finds it difficult to establish meaningful relationships. Herzog's balance comes from instability– the time and energy he has spent on making amends are vital to his eventual recovery of harmony. The ideas that have plagued his mind and the suffering that crushed his heart no longer dominate his thinking. At the end, back in Ludeyville, Herzog writes in a letter to the Russian philosopher of the turn of the 19th and 20th century, Vasily Rozanov:

A curious result of the increase of historical consciousness is that people think explanation is a necessity of survival. They have to explain their condition. And if the unexplained life is not worth living, the explained life is unbearable, too (322).

Through formal characteristics, the novel *Herzog* criticizes trends in the intellectual community. It may be read as Bellow's creative response to the "new novel" that was being applauded at the time of its publication. In essays written in the mid-1960s, Bellow denounces this new fiction, which he associates with the French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet and the European writer Samuel Beckett. Bellow terms the new writing "a literature of victimization," because human character is flattened and generalized with its source in the philosophical movements of German phenomenology and French Existentialism, this literature denigrates the traditional idea of character as a complex of thought, feeling, and action. By exaggerating and distorting human behaviour, it presents an image of man that is, in Bellow's conviction, ugly and diminished. In contrast, the protagonist of *Herzog* has full human stature. He is recognizable as a human being in an everyday setting. That Herzog takes his problems seriously further indicates

Bellow's commitment to a life-like human image. For Herzog is a character whose primary aim is to clarify his disordered life. In Bellow's words, "Herzog had been overcome by the need to explain. . . to clarify, to make amends" (2008: 234). Because of this need, Herzog moves toward a condition of self-awareness. After having discovered evil in others, Herzog learns that he has been blind to his own malevolent instincts. Near the climax of the novel, he witnesses the trial of a mother and her lover who have beaten her child to death. Herzog imagines that his daughter is exposed to a similar threat at the hands of his wife and her lover. Taking an old pistol, he travels from New York to Chicago in order to ensure the welfare of his daughter. However, when he takes her to a museum, Herzog has an automobile accident. Thus he himself endangers the life of his child. When policemen investigate the accident, they find that Herzog has no registration for his old pistol. As a result, he is taken to the police station, where he recognizes that jealousy and murderousness are facts of his own experience.

In Herzog's movement from confusion toward self-knowledge, Bellow depicts human life as an experience of moral growth. This movement typifies the protagonists who appear in Bellow's fiction. They are figures who reveal their creator's belief in "a self-perfecting, self knowing character" (1963: 12).

Herzog finally finds a sense of peace at the end of the novel when he declares himself to be free of his obsessive pursuit of Madeleine. Although he has not come up with any firm answers to the questions he has been raising throughout the novel in his letters, he determines "I am pretty well satisfied to be ... just as it is willed" (301).

Through his hero, Bellow seems to be saying that Man's earthly salvation is not to be gained in social movements, utopian visions, political nostrums, scientific investigations (and this compulsive activity is what Herzog's letters are all about), but in learning to live with himself as he exists in the subangelic position of man.

NOTES: All quotations are from Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, New York, Viking Press, 1964

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