

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO

SAUL BELLOW

by

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PREFACE

Theology, in its quest for relevance and understanding, has recently begun to probe modern literature with fresh vigor in a search for the values of the modern man. This paper is an attempt to underline the themes in the writings of Saul Bellow—a Jewish writer who is commonly acknowledged to be the best novelist of his generation—which are pertinent to the theologian seeking understanding of modern man.

I wish to thank Fr. Bernard Cooke, whose encouragement and direction has made this paper possible.

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INTRODUCTION

At first glance, Saul Bellow's literary accomplishments read like a Madison Avenue promotional stunt. His writings--six novels, several plays and short stories, numerous articles for Hudson Review, Atlantic Monthly, New Yorker, Esquire, New Republic--have earned him a cluster of awards.¹ In 1948, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship; four years later he received the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award. The Adventures of Augie March, published in 1953, won him the National Book Award in 1964, and ten years later Herzog scored a repeat, along with the frosting of a \$10,000 international literary prize. In 1960, he received the Friends of Literature Fiction Award, and in 1962 he was made an honorary doctor of literature by his alma mater, Northwestern University. In Bellow's case, however, the glitter of success does not point to superficiality or crude popularization. Rather, he is acclaimed by critics as "one of the most celebrated and influential of living novelists,"² and as "the generation's leading novelist."³ His solid critical reputation is based on many factors. As a stylist, he is called by one reviewer "the greatest virtuoso of language the novel has seen since Joyce."⁴ Fellow writers esteem him as a novelists' novelist, because while continuing to grow in insight he has experimented with several different types of novels.⁵ His intuitions of reality have the authority of the classic European novel behind them--the speculative earthiness of Cervantes, the social

scope of Balzac, the spiritual leanness of Dostoevsky--and yet are solidly rooted in contemporary American culture.⁶ His world encompasses the American experience from the Depression through two wars to the automation and conformity of the 50's and the renewal of the 60's.⁷ In a sense, Bellow is the spokesman of his generation--he was the first gifted American novelist of the post-war era to search for a new mode of expression, following in the footsteps of an exhausted literary avant-garde.⁸ Bellow is "possibly America's most intellectual novelist ever,"⁹ that is, not only does he express himself on a high level of sophistication and complexity, but he also involves his characters more closely with ideas than do other authors of the period. As a result, Bellow has assumed leadership of a "large and influential body of intellectuals,"¹⁰ and in this capacity as leader, he has carried a great responsibility: "There is, indeed, a sense in which it may even be said that the validity of a whole new phase of American culture has been felt to hang on whether or not Saul Bellow would turn out to be a great novelist."¹¹

Bellow rose to this lofty position from humble beginnings. Born in Lachine, Quebec, of Russian Jewish immigrants, he moved to Chicago in 1924 at the age of nine. There he attended the University of Chicago for two years before receiving his B.A. at Northwestern in 1937. He studied

anthropology at the University of Wisconsin, but dropped out of school before finishing his M.A., in order to get married. Since then Bellow has taught at various schools: the University of Minnesota, Princeton, New York University, Bard College, and the New School for Social Research. His first novel, Dangling Man, was published in 1944; shortly before publication he spent a year in the Maritime Service. Bellow has been married three times, and has two children.¹²

These facts help one to understand Bellow's centrality and relevance in American letters. He is in touch with the immigrant experience, immersed in the complexities of urban life, alive to the currents of the most advanced thinking, and subject to the disruptions of love that modern society can produce. He has lived through the Depression, World War II, the atomic bomb, the Korean War, and the Eisenhower era. His contemporaneity evolves from his sensitive understanding of these events, and yet the finished product is not simply the reflection of modern life. As we shall show later, his work represents a convergence of three traditions in his life: the Russian, the Jewish, and the American.¹³

FOOTNOTES

1. For a complete bibliography, both of Bellow and of critical studies of Bellow, cf. H. W. Schneider, "Two Bibliographies: Saul Bellow, William Styron," 3 Critique, 1960, pp. 71-91.
2. A. Kazin, "My Friend Saul Bellow," 215 Atlantic Monthly, 1965, p. 53.
3. Jack Ludwig, Recent American Novelists, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), p. 7.
4. Norman Podhoretz, Doings and Undoings, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964), p. 206.
5. Jonathan Baumbach, The Landscape of Nightmare, (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 35.
6. Ihab Hassan, Radical Innocence, (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1961), p. 290.
7. C. E. Eisinger, "Saul Bellow: Love and Identity," 18 Accent, 1958, p. 179.
8. Podhoretz, op. cit., p. 206.
9. Ludwig, op. cit., p. 9.
10. Podhoretz, op. cit., p. 206.
11. Ibid.
12. Granville Hicks (ed.), The Living Novel, (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1957), p. 225. cf. also J. Ethridge (ed.), Contemporary Authors, (Detroit: The Gale Research Co., 1963), p. 37-38.
13. Tony Tanner, Saul Bellow, (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1965), p. 2.

CHAPTER ONE:

THE NEW INTEREST IN THEOLOGY AND LITERATURE

The interdisciplinary study of theology and literature is a well established field of inquiry. Both art and religion summon mankind to the presence of the transcendent, and in so doing "they provide each other with a kind of mutual confrontation."¹ Doctoral programs at the University of Chicago Divinity School and Union Theological Seminary, plus a spate of articles and books on the subject, are evidence enough for the validity of this "mutual confrontation." The purpose of this paper is not to explore and justify the confrontation, but for purposes of introduction it is advisable to indicate the broad outlines of current theology-literature interest.

Behind the interest is a basic shift in the theological perspective of our time: the radical split between the sacred and the secular, the holy and the profane, seems no longer to do justice to the fact that the whole world is God's world, and that "Jerusalem cannot therefore afford skeptically to wonder whether it need have anything to do with Athens."² The concern for contemporary man, for man in the world, is reflected at all levels: in the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Vatican II states: "Literature and the arts are also, in their own way, of great importance to the life of the Church. For they strive to probe the unique nature of man, his problems, and his ex-

periences as he struggles to know and perfect himself and the world."³ (Article 62)

The confrontation between the two disciplines has taken the form of a reciprocal movement.⁴ This movement will be outlined here and then treated in greater detail. First, theology has recognized that the general themes of literature are its own themes, and that these themes are presented by a literary imagination that is inseparably theological. Further, theology has come to see that art is, of its nature, sacramental, and thus of prime importance to a sacramental church. Corresponding to this movement of theology to literature is a movement from literature to theology which is evidenced by the theological sophistication of the best young writers.

First, the themes that literature treats are of prime importance for theology. The fiction writer begins with man, and explores man's position in the cosmos. What is man's relationship to death? Does death, as an inescapable end to life, mean a negation of the meaning of man's existence?⁵ What is man's identity? Is it to be found by himself or with others? If man is to live in a community, what is his responsibility to it, and in default of that responsibility, what is his guilt? How does man reconcile his freedom with the needs of the community? And if man is to live in the world, what place does his nature have in the context of

nature? What is his nature?⁶

Answers are scarce; most often the writer ends with a question. His task has been to pose more sharply the human dilemma, to clarify issues, and often to be content with a negative disclosure that witnesses to the absence rather than to the presence of meaning.⁷ The truth that the writer presents is not proverbial truth, or ethical precept, or historical verisimilitude, or philosophical logic, but rather that of the existential situation.⁸ From the writer we learn what it feels like to hold certain beliefs.⁹ The truth presented does not depend on the writer,¹⁰ but rather on the genre, the author's presuppositions, and on his fidelity to those presuppositions.¹¹ Thus the work of art has its own autonomy--it is not a work of theology. Yet it raises the pressing questions of man's existence, and great literature drives man to the point where he stands perplexed and helpless before the problems of death identity, guilt, etc.¹² It thus affirms man's mystery. If Christianity is to be relevant, it must concern itself with man in mystery; it must resolve the basic questions of man's relationships in an existential resolution.¹³ But it must understand the questions first.

While theology can grant to the work of art its autonomy, it must insist on the fuller dimensions of the literary imagination. In his pioneering work, Christ and Apollo, Father William Lynch sees the literary process as "a highly cognitive passage through the finite and definite realities of man and the world."¹⁴ This passage is not theological, nor

sociological, but it has dimensions, included within the literary organism, which are theological. Thus, continues Fr. Lynch:

Over and against any naive and romantic assumption to the contrary, there is no such thing as a purely spontaneous and autonomous literary image, absolutely "creative" and free of metaphysics or theology.¹⁵

The reason for this is that the concrete experience and its meaning are inseparable; theology is "not an exploiting appendage" but rather "gets into the interior" of the literary imagination.¹⁶ Thus, according to Nathan Scott, there is no such thing as a non-Christian writer. Paganism has been compromised by two thousand years of contact and conversation with Biblical religion, and imagination is inextricably involved with seeing problems with at least some tinge of the Biblical imagination.¹⁷ All criticism must be, in the end, theological.¹⁸ The critic respects the work of art, for it has its own raison d'etre. He cannot approach it as a hobbyist, but rather must learn its own rules; nor can he utilize it for polemical purposes.¹⁹ While theology and literature treat similar themes, they function in different ways, and the theologian must understand thoroughly how art functions. But he must insist that there is no such thing as the autonomous literary imagination, that literary images have theological implications, and that this justifies theology's examination of literature.

This problem is also approached from the viewpoint of an incarnational aesthetic.²⁰ In Christ the Christian imag-

ination sees the fundamental structure of reality in the world.²¹ As eternal Word spoken into the world, Christ introduces order into chaos.²² Christ as ordering Word is then the source of all meaning in the world. Nothing is insignificant, and everything has meaning in relation to him. Further, through the Incarnation, reality becomes sacramental. All things point to Christ; all meanings are witness to his meaning.²³ Finally, Christ communicates himself to men by sending to them the Spirit of truth.

The work of the artist shares in this incarnational, sacramental system.²⁴ Faced with unstructured, chaotic experience, the artistic imagination structures it into meaningful arrangements. The words by which the artist arranges his experience are participations in the Word who is the primary order of existence: artists

partake in some sense, however difficult to posit, of that juxtaposing by which what was inans et vacua became radiant with form and abhorrent of vacua by the action of the Artifex, the Logos....²⁵

The writer introduces meaning into his experience, and, according to this theory, all meaning in the universe is that of Christ. But the writer also communicates this structured experience; and his own spirit of truth is an indispensable adjunct to the effectiveness of his communication; truth "performs the liberating act that lifts the novelist from immersion in his subjective states and enables him so to objectify his experience that it is communicable, to others, indeed, but first of all to himself."²⁶ This rea-

soning leads to the same conclusion as that of Father Lynch. There is no need for a specifically Christian philosophy or a Christian criticism, for if Christ is truly the Logos then all apprehensions of truth witness to him "whether they occur within a framework of Christian concern or not."²⁷

In this approach, the autonomy of the artist is also preserved: "The work of art is an object of which the raison d'etre, necessary and sufficient, is to signify organically, and by means of its own structure."²⁸ The meaning which the writer introduces by his words is inseparable from those words and would not exist without them. Thus the artist fulfills his mission insofar as he is a good craftsman and insofar as his works signify efficaciously;²⁹ his art is a sacramental witness to the meaning and order of Christ.

The artist, then, partakes in Christ's sacramental dispensation. For example, if he portrays the alienation of self, society or nature by his work he has chosen a sacramental means of portrayal and thus his very writing is an act of love--a healing. The act of ordering or uniting his experience of alienation opposes the alienation which he sees in reality.³⁰ The great achievement of T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets was the sacramental re-possession of nature and time, things and history, by means of contemporary sensibility and knowledge.³¹

This redemptive aspect of literature should be emphasized because it is one that Bellow himself shares. In one

of his several essays, he quotes Simone Weil to the effect that choosing man as a subject for writing is itself an act of love. He goes on to say: "The kind of power that the writer wields, the power of imagination, enables the writer to give meaning to the feebleness and servitude of man's life." Thus the writer "reclaims the individual through love" and makes him aware of his identity.³² Out of love, Bellow gives the word about man; he attempts to redeem him by showing him what he should be. The work itself is a sacrament of man's identity. Bellow is aware of the ordering process of art: "I feel that art has something to do with the achievement of stillness in the midst of chaos."³³ This takes place in the existential order; he says that inspiration has the task of redeeming the concrete and particular and of recovering the value of the flesh and bone. That is enough of an objective for the artist, he says, for particulars "are mysterious enough as it is."³⁴

Seen from this incarnational point of view, literature may be looked upon as a form of pre-evangelization. In one of his letters, Martin Luther compares the literary task to that of John the Baptist:

I see that there has never been a great revelation of the Word of God unless he has first prepared the way by the rise and prosperity³⁵ of languages, as though they were John the Baptists...

The Church is the community that possesses knowledge of the "last things." But when it seeks the profound identification

with time that true eschatology demands, it must open itself to what Bonhoeffer called "the things which go before the last things," that is, to the "penultimate expressions of humanity" which prepare for the Gospel.³⁶ For the community of the Church, this identification involves listening to what is broken and problematic in life, as enunciated by the artist. For the writer, it means that his vision must rest not on a sense of his individual isolation but rather on a sense of his belonging to a community of men who, in these troubled times, are estranged from themselves and their society, and especially "from that immanent Logos within the human heart which is Love and in the power of which man's alienation can alone be transcended."³⁷ It is this sense of brotherhood in an estranged human community which Saul Bellow most strongly enunciates. It may seem ironical that once again the Jew stands before his brothers, pointing the way to the Word in powerful novels.

Secondly, the movement of theology to literature has been met by a gradually increasing literary interest in theology. In American letters this is a relatively recent phenomenon. Our country's better novelists have heretofore treated religion either as only a part of the cultural setting or have ignored it completely. Hawthorne and Melville dramatized the conflict of the Calvinistic conscience without forcing themselves to a solution. Later, novelists in the naturalistic tradition, like Crane, Norris, and Dreiser, propagated a natural morality divorced from theological considerations. In the 30's, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and Nathanael West turned the popular image of organized

Protestantism to ridicule. The new wave began with men like Faulkner, Steinbeck, and Hemingway, who toyed with Christian symbolism and employed Christ figures, Old and New Testament imagery, metaphors of spiritual doubt and affirmation. But in the post-Korean war years, some authors have contributed to a religious-literary liason that moves far beyond the stage of symbolic indirection.³⁸ One of these authors writes: "Writers of fiction have been taking on the role traditionally played by religious leaders, philosophers, and metaphysicians."³⁹

There are many reasons for this increased involvement. For one thing, the search for a response to the spirit-numbing mass culture of modern America brings writers to the threshold of religious experience--Zen-Buddhism, Christian mysticism, I-Thou thought.⁴⁰ Second, the new novelists possess a theological sophistication culled from their collegiate or cultural backgrounds--where Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Unamuno, even Tillich and Buber have become required reading.⁴¹ These novelists present serious religion in serious fiction, and "function as the products of a literary perspective that draws from theology for its ultimate orientation even while it transforms the theological mode of expression."⁴² Finally these writers have been aided by the philosophy of existentialism which has restored the spiritual as a valid area of inquiry:

What has happened since the days of William James is that the religious phenomena which were then examined as vagaries of consciousness, have become objective material for existential analysis....⁴³

Religion is treated not as a sociological or psychological aspect of American life, but as a valid experience, and perhaps, in these times, the distinctive event of human life. In literary terms, the writers dramatize what they consider the apex of religious striving: "the individual spiritual crisis that leads to the acceptance or rejection of God."⁴⁴

The new novelists are not dogmatists, nor are they interested in turning metaphysics into flesh and blood. They present "individuals in dilemmas that are first characteristically human and then open to theological definition."⁴⁵ Faced with such sophistication, the theologian may not only accept literary images as a fruitful source of illustration but may be forced to use them as a significant formative force in the definition of his tenets.⁴⁶

This brief analysis of the theology-literature background indicates the method of procedure in this paper. Bellow's novels will be considered as autonomous works of art, not as occasions for polemic or vehicles of dogma. Theological categories will not be imposed on the images which he presents.⁴⁷ Rather, the images will be allowed to speak for themselves. From these images, we will attempt to uncover the spiritual crisis that is at the center of his work, regarding it as one of the "penultimate preparations" for the Gospel. That is, in Father Lynch's terminology, we will try to show the dimension of Bellow's images which is especially significant for modern theology; or, according to the incarnational

aesthetic, we will indicate how Bellow's work is a redemption of modern man.

In the pages that follow, we will consider Bellow's literary and cultural background. First, we will outline and give examples of the basic theme of modern literature-- death. Second, against that background we will indicate Bellow's response to the spirit of modern literature, and this will involve presenting a hypothetical set of conclusions. Third, we will summarize briefly the three cultural influences which have shaped Bellow's approach: Russian, Jewish, and American. Finally, we shall proceed to detailed analysis of each of his six novels.

FOOTNOTES

1. Nathan Scott, The Climate of Faith in Modern Literature, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1964), p. 11 (Hereafter cited as Climate.)

2. Ibid., p. xii.

3. W. M. Abbott, (ed.) The Documents of Vatican II, (New York: The Guild Press, 1965), p. 269.

4. Scott, The Climate, p. xiv.

5. R. M. Frye, Perspective on Man, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949), p. 84.

6. J. Waldmeir (ed.), Recent American Fiction, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), p. 38.

7. S. R. Hopper, (ed.), Spiritual Problems in Contemporary Literature, (New York: Harper and Bros., 1952), p. xi.

8. Frye, op. cit., p. 23.

9. Cleanth Brooks, The Hidden God, (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1963), p. 131.

10. According to St. Thomas: "The test of the artist does not lie with the will with which he goes to work, but in the excellence of the work which he produces." (Summa Theologica, I-II, 57, 3.) St. Augustine says that, in order that God's good gift of beauty not be made an idol, "God dispenses it even to the wicked." City of God, 15.22.

11. Frye, op. cit., p. 52.

12. Ibid., p. 166.

13. Ibid., p. 80-81.

14. William Lynch, Christ and Apollo, (New York: Mentor-Omega Books, 1963), p. xiii.

15. Ibid., p. 161.

16. Ibid.

17. Scott, Climate, p. 37.

18. Robert Detweiler, Four Spiritual Crises in Mid-Century American Fiction, (Gainesville: U. of Florida Press, 1963), p. 50.

19. Nathan Scott, The New Orpheus, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), p. 181. (Hereafter cited as Orpheus).
20. Ibid., p. 16.
21. Scott, Climate, p. 14.
22. Scott, Orpheus, p. 86.
23. Frye, op. cit., p. 19.
24. Scott, Orpheus, p. 16.
25. Ibid., p. 38.
26. Ibid., p. 295.
27. Scott, Climate, p. 6. John Calvin speaks of the unity of the Spirit of truth: "If we consider that the Spirit of God is the only fountain of truth, we will neither refuse nor despise the truth itself, wheresoever it shall appear, except we will dishonorably use the Spirit of the Lord..." Institutes of the Christian Religion (II,ii,15), cited in Frye, op. cit., p. 59.
28. Hopper, op. cit., p. 176.
29. Ibid., p. 182.
30. Scott, Orpheus, p. 90.
31. Ibid., p. 91.
32. Saul Bellow, "Distractions of a Fiction Writer," The Living Novel, Granville Hicks (ed.), (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1957), p. 19. (Hereafter cited as "Distractions").
33. Saul Bellow, "The Art of Fiction," 36 Paris Review, 1966, 48-73. (Hereafter cited as "The Art").
34. Saul Bellow, "Facts That Put Fancy to Flight," Opinions and Perspectives from the New York Times Book Review, (Ed. Francis Brown), (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1964), p. 28. (Hereafter cited as "Facts".)
35. Martin Luther, "Letter to Eoban Hess, March 29, 1523," Luther's Correspondence, tr. and ed. Preserved Smith & C. Jacobs (United Lutheran Publication House, 1918), Vol. II, p. 176. Cited in Frye, op. cit., p. 13.
36. Scott, Climate, p. 17.

37. Nathan Scott, Rehearsals of Discomposure, (New York: King's Crown Press, 1952), p. 8. (Hereafter cited as Rehearsals).

38. Detweiler, op. cit., p. 1-2: Writers like John Updike, Ralph Ellison, William Styron. Popular writers of religious literature--the life of Christ historical romance, conversion story, the what-would-Jesus-do fiction of the social gospel movement--has not had any influence in the American literary tradition because it is simply not good fiction. Catholic fiction in America earns a stern rebuke: "The general quality of Catholic fiction has not surpassed the level of Protestant literary propaganda." Ibid., p. 3-4, note 1.

39. Herbert Gold, cited in Waldmeir, op. cit., p. 38.

40. Ibid., p. 29. One type of response to mass culture, is the "Beat" novel. Born with Jack Kerouac, this type "spangles a chintzy weave of souvenir strands--handbook Kierkegaard, outline Nietzsche, synoptic Camus and fragment Freud, lumpen Zen Buddhism, tenth-remove Existentialism, 50th-remove Christ. The decline of the West is, instead of lamented, exemplified." Ludwig, op. cit., p. 7. The new theological writers are more sophisticated in their approach.

41. Detweiler, op. cit., p. 48.

42. Ibid., p. 4.

43. H. W. Schneider, Religion in 20th Century America, (Cambridge; Harvard U. Press, 1952), p. 190.

44. Detweiler, op. cit., p. 4.

45. Ibid., p. 49.

46. Ibid.

47. I take my cue from Bellow himself. In one article, with typical irony, he inveighs against "deep readers:" "Things are not what they seem. And anyway, unless they represent something large and worthy, writers will not bother with them. Any deep reader can tell you that picking up a bus transfer is the reisemotif (journey motif) when it happens in a novel. A travel folder signifies death. Coal holes represent the underworld. Soda crackers are the host. Three bottles of beer are--it's obvious. The busy mind can hardly miss at this game, and every player is a winner." Saul Bellow, "Deep Readers of the World Beware," New York Times Book Review, February 15, 1959, p. 34.

CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND

PART ONE:

THE SPIRIT OF MODERN LITERATURE

As I have indicated above, Saul Bellow is considered by many to be the leading novelist of his time. The word "leading" must be understood not only in the sense of "outstanding" and "exceptional" but also in the sense of "showing the way." Because Bellow has demanded that the leading literary themes of his time be tested on the hard rock of his experience, he has come closer than any of his contemporaries to providing a viable way of life for the modern world. In one article he says that the no of the novelist ought not to be founded on a study of literature, and the fact that the greatest of writers and geniuses have cursed life proves nothing. He goes on to say in vivid prose:

We have had our bellyful of a species of wretchedness which is thoroughly pleased with itself. In France the wretched angry hero has come to be as common in bookshops as choucroute garnie in restaurants--despairing sauerkraut, a sidedish to the knackwurst of middle class Prometheanism. Really, it's about time everyone recognized that romantic despair, is absurdly portentous, not metaphysically absurd. There is grandeur in cursing the heavens, but when we curse our socks, we should not expect to be taken seriously.¹

He accuses modern writers of "unearned bitterness" and of automatically scorning contemporary life. They have, he says, inherited this tone of bitterness from the great poems and novels of the century, "many of which lament the passing of a more stable and beautiful age demonished by the barbarous intrusion of an industrial and metropolitan society of masses..."²

A brief glance at the literary and social context of this inherited bitterness may be of value for a full understanding of Bellow. His worth as a leader can be appreciated only in light of the disturbing social events of the twentieth century and the equally disturbing literary reaction of his predecessors to those events.

Death, expressing itself in the form of alienation and sense of loss, is the leitmotif of the century's fiction. For instance, the first decades of the 1900's begin with the death of the priest on the first page of Joyce's Dubliners, with Mann's Death in Venice, and later with Eliot's Wasteland.³ The social phenomena responsible for the theme are well known: the physical horrors of two world wars, the furnaces at Dachau and Auschwitz, the conflagrations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Russian Revolution. But the sense of death also echoes the hum of modern machinery the clanging of the factory, and the shuffle of the mass society--a "half welfare and half-garrison society in which the population grows passive, indifferent, and atomized...and in which man becomes a consumer, himself mass-produced like the products, values and diversions he absorbs."⁴ The sense of death grows with international politics, mass movements, technical and political decisions shared only by a few; with a massive military establishment, automation, and modern advertising techniques; "with vivid and formless turbulence, news, slogans, mysterious crises and unreal configurations"⁵--in short, with all the major

social events of our time which tend to dwarf the human person.⁶

The city becomes the arena and focal point of this conflict.⁷ The city dweller is enslaved by time and fact; for the modern mind, "the city identifies itself as the city of time and fact alone, and views itself as the succession of manifestations in time--but in no other dimension."⁸ Severed from tradition, sealed in time, the city-dweller nevertheless desires to be superhuman; he seeks transcendence through technology:

If nature and its laws can be subdued and exploited, man will have transcended in some obscure sense, his bondage to it....

Thus the city dweller

Is divorced more and more each day from the natural world and is situated in a framework of artifice made possible by continuous technical innovation.⁹

The basic impulses of a technological society have been toward a way of life and a hierarchy of values "which have robbed the life of the spirit, the life of the mind, of its traditional dignity and usefulness to the community."¹⁰ The most radical form of modern death, then, is not physical, but moral, spiritual, and cultural death. The "very structure of the human psyche and the shape of its relation to the universe" is threatened.¹¹ The human self is submerged; man has lost his place in the cosmos. Gone are easy, structured views of reality.¹² The loss has been observed in history, politics, psychoanalysis and philosophy:

History predicts no salvation for man and accords no meaning retrospectively to his efforts. The dominant political trend of the age fortifies the collective and technical organization of society. Freudian psychoanal-

ysis reveals that the antagonism between instinct and civilization is founded on the more hopeless opposition between love and aggression. Existentialist philosophy exposes the absolute nudity of the self in a world devoid of preconceived values or significance.¹³

This death-dealing society is Bellow's environment; his world encompasses the American experience from the Depression through two wars and the automation and conformity of the fifties.¹⁴ He is well aware of the century's effect on the human self; public life, he says, drives private life into hiding. The romantic 19th century idea of the self is intolerable in the 20th century:

Just what the reduction of millions of human beings into heaps of bone and mounds of rags and hair or clouds of smoke betokened, there is no one who can plainly tell us, but it is at least plain that something was being done to put in question the meaning of survival, the meaning of pity, the meaning of justice and of the importance of being oneself, and the individual's consciousness of his own existence.¹⁵

We shall show that it is his response to this experience, in contrast to the other authors, that defines his position as leader.

Modern authors express death and alienation in various all-too-familiar forms. In general, they concentrate on the human self, the individual--a natural enough preoccupation in an age which tends to denigrate self. Here we will present a few examples, taken at random from both Europe and America,¹⁶ of modern fiction which delineates the death of the self.

Some authors see modern life as alienating man from him-

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self. Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilyitch"--a story in which the protagonist, about to die, realizes that he has hidden from himself in his social and official functions--is a grim harbinger of 20th century alienation.¹⁷

Attendant upon this alienation is the loss of freedom, a condition illustrated by the naturalistic novels of the thirties--which propose man as determined by his compulsions--and by the social novels of the same period, which insist that man is determined by his social conditions.¹⁸ Steinbeck, Farrell, and Dos Passos picture man as the victim of the big bosses, industrial society, or politics.¹⁹ Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* depicts the spiritually impoverished self deteriorating under the social and economic pressures of the big city--in this case, Chicago.²⁰ John Steinbeck, especially in earlier novels like *In Dubious Battle* and *Grapes of Wrath*, shows man fighting a losing battle against the dislocations of the Depression.²¹ Sinclair Lewis stands back and laughs at the middle-class conformed self.²² Dos Passos, in his massive trilogies, dwells almost exclusively on the defeat of individualism in a politically corrupt society.²³

If it is found, freedom becomes an intolerable burden, and drives its possessor underground. Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, written in 1864 (stretching the idea of modernity perhaps to its permissible limit) is the prime example of the self cringing and snarling against life in what Camus calls metaphysical rebellion.²⁴ Franz Kafka de-

picts the self as recoiling against itself, the victim of an unappeasable and anonymous power (The Trial), discovering its own absurdity and turning into a huge and hideous vermin ("Metamorphosis"). 25

Other authors see the human person as alienated from the human community. Community has been replaced by society:

The sociological jeremiads underline the extent to which community has been absorbed into a massive all-devouring society. Such a monster is unsanctifiable and unsanctifying. Having destroyed essential human community, it throws up pseudo gods to be loved and obeyed—Success, Security, Popularity, Sexual License, etc.²⁶

Nathan Scott calls this "relational alienation," "an agonizing sense of isolation from the modern community," and cites as examples Ignazio Silone, Andre Malraux, George Orwell, Ernest Hemingway, etc.²⁷ Accompanying this social disaffiliation in novels, which follows from the idea that society is naturalistic, is a sort of moral disaffiliation, based on the further assumption that morals are social and at best relative. The self is displaced in an ethical vacuum in which tolerance is the password.²⁸

The novels of Dos Passos and Farrell acquaint us with the urbanization of fiction, and the consequent split between man and nature. Man's attempts to utilize nature have tumbled him into a world of artifice. William Faulkner images man's alienation from history and from nature (symbolized by the land) in his short novel The Bear. This great Southern writer aimed to show that man could control neither nature nor history, but he never showed how man could be reconciled to either.²⁹

Finally, the chaos of the world attacks the very faculty

in man which must order his experience--the imagination. Philip Roth cites the dismay of the writer in the face of the confusing welter:

The American writer in the middle of the 20th century has had his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make credible, much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meagre imagination.³⁰

The common man is subdued by this depersonalizing chaos until he can comprehend his world only in terms of "mechanical adjustments to the narrower exigencies of materialistic life," and so his spirit becomes arid and dies.³¹

R. W. B. Lewis claims that behind all expressions of alienation is the "felt loss of the presence or even of the life of God."³² However, it seems that the question of God can no longer be raised until the problem of the self is answered. As Nathan Scott points out, modern novelists have nothing to do with "an arcane God dwelling in distant splendor, and have turned instead to a God who is present in the midst of life."³³ If transcendence is to be found, it must be found in the midst of the human community. Thus the modern hero is the victim-rebel--responsible to the self rather than to a prescribed code,³⁴ not struggling to fulfill some revealed view of his destiny but learning instead that the struggle itself is his definition.³⁵ Cast in the role of victim by the outrages that society perpetrates on him,³⁶ this new hero seeks to create in society the values whose

absence causes his predicament.³⁷

While presenting death under these various guises, the writers of the 20th century have sought to transcend it. They are not satisfied with a submerged self. With greater or lesser success, they attempt to put the self into place in the cosmos--to give it an identity. The best way of distinguishing the literary generations of our century is by their response to death.³⁸ The first generation, characterized by Joyce, Proust, and Mann, attended not to man's visible life or to the motives of hope, but rather gave the impression of hopelessness. The fixity and form of art became their answer to the death they saw in life. Art became life.³⁹

The second generation, characterized by Moravia, Camus, Silone, Greene, sensed more sharply than their predecessors the death in society, and were pushed to the brink of absolute nihilism. The wavering premonitions of the first generation were for them verified.⁴⁰ For example, Albert Camus' first novel, The Stranger, begins with a stoic, almost numb confrontation with personal tragedy:

Today my mother died. Or perhaps yesterday. I don't know. I received a telegram from home: "Mother deceased. Burial tomorrow. Sincere condolences."

But this generation rejected the answer of previous writers; art provided an escape, but not a foundation.⁴¹ Neither was death an answer, for to write at all they had to continue living.⁴² They turned from a sense of death to a sense of

life's possibilities--living was the only answer, sharing alienation with one's brothers. A secular humanism was their mutual affirmation. Man was fulfilled when he reached out to his fellow in need.⁴³

In America, Hemingway, Faulkner, Steinbeck, and Fitzgerald provided their answers to the dilemma of the self. Hemingway's short story, "A Clean Well Lighted Place," summarizes his moral preoccupation. Man finds himself in a meaningless universe. The best he can do is find some little area of order and light within the engulfing dark. But the order and light is supplied by him; it is not an inherent order concealed in the universe. By his courage man gives order to the world.⁴⁴ For Whom the Bell Tolls emphasizes this glorification of self; man is certainly to be defeated, but at least he can be defeated on his own terms. Robert Jordan's courage at the end of the book creates a meaning and an order.⁴⁵ Faulkner, too, senses the death in American society; in Sanctuary Horace Benbow comes to self-knowledge through the vision of original sin; i. e. the discovery of evil in the very nature of things. Yet Faulkner in many novels carries on the theme of the solitary individual, striving at all costs and often to his own calamity to communicate with the world.⁴⁶ In his much quoted acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in 1951, Faulkner reminds the writer of his duty "to help man endure by lifting his heart,

by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifices which have been the glory of his past."

Sherwood Anderson found another answer: he devoted his fictional life to depicting the self walking out on industrial society.⁴⁷ As we have noted, Steinbeck, Farrell and Dos Passos, the great social novelists of the 30's, made industrial society the villain for the difficulties of the self.⁴⁸ The solution was simple for them; if one could reform industrial society, then one could reform man. Thus these men, and a great segment of the cultural avant-garde, identified with liberal and radical left wing political movements. With an "easy optimism about history and human nature," they felt that politics and social reform would make man whole again.⁴⁹ The second World War collapsed that hope, and led to two new movements: a new Conservatism and a religious revival.⁵⁰

This brings our survey up to Bellow. We have seen how modern literature has attacked the human person, and how this offensive has led to the sense of death in modern literature. Up until Bellow's time, various writers had proposed their solution to the dilemma of the self. But no one had given a satisfactory answer. Camus' shared alienation, Hemingway's courage, Faulkner's endurance, and the proletarian novels of the 30's left the self in alienation. To establish the self by placing it in exile was really no

answer at all for Bellow:

Undeniably the human being is not what he commonly thought a century ago. The question nevertheless remains. He is something. What is he? And this question, it seems to me, modern writers have answered poorly. They have told us, indignantly or nihilistically or comically, how great our error is but for the rest they have offered us thin fare. 51

Bellow's particular merit lies in the fact that he wants to put the self back in its rightful place by putting it back into dialogue with the world. In the following section we will consider the steps he has taken to begin this dialogue.

FOOTNOTES

1. Saul Bellow, "The Writer as Moralist," 211 Atlantic Monthly, 1963, p. 61.

2. Saul Bellow, "Some Notes on Recent American Fiction," Encounter, 1963, p. 26. (Hereafter cited as "Some Notes"). Bellow reveals his disaffiliation from the middle class in his comments. Modern writers, he says, are self-centered, trained by their middle-class background to ignore contradictions such as American poverty and wealth, selfishness and good will, liberal and conservative politics. They embrace both. They really care for neither. The only injustice they feel is their own misfortune. Neither for themselves nor for their fellows do they attack power and injustice directly and hotly.

3. R. W. B. Lewis, The Picaresque Saint, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1959), p. 19.

4. Waldmeir, op. cit., p. 8-9.

5. Bellow, "Some Notes," p. 23.

6. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 179.

7. Waldmeir, op. cit., p. 84.

8. Scott, Climate, p. 145.

9. Ibid.

10. Scott, Rehearsals, p. 5.

11. Lewis, op. cit., p. 25.

12. Leslie Fiddler, No! In Thunder, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. 10.

13. Hassan, op. cit., p. 20.

14. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 179.

15. Bellow, "Some Notes," p. 23.

16. In the days of Emerson and Whitman, it was possible to distinguish American and European fiction, but today, with modern communication methods, the respective cultural

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and artistic barriers have broken down. Hassan, Radical, p. 32. Richard Lehan notes the influence of European writing on American; in many cases, while no direct influence is discernible, there is an affinity of spirit; the themes and same problems are treated on both sides of the ocean. R. Lehan: "Existentialism in Recent American Fiction: The Demonic Quest," (Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 1959), 181-202.

17.. Hopper, op. cit., p. 143.

18. Ralph Freedman, "Saul Bellow, The Illusion of Environment," 1 Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, 1960, p. 50.

19. Liddwig, op. cit., p. 8.

20. Frederick J. Hoffman, The Modern Novel in America, (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1951), p. 142.

21. Ibid., p. 146.

22. Ibid., p. 111.

23. Ibid., p. 138.

24. Hassan, op. cit., p. 23.

25. Ibid., p. 25.

26. Julian Hartt, The Lost Image of Man, (New Orleans: Louisiana State U. Press, 1963), p. 114.

27. Scott, Rehearsals, p. 3.

28. Waldmeir, op. cit., p. 54.

29. Brooks, op. cit., p. 130-131.

30. Philip Roth, "Writing American Fiction," 31 Commentary, 1960, p. 204.

31. Brooks, op. cit., p. 130.

32. Lewis, op. cit., p. 26.

33. Scott, Rehearsals, p. 93.

34. Waldmeir, op. cit., p. 59.

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35. Fieldler, op.cit., p. 14.
 36. Hassan, op. cit., p. 4.
 37. Waldmeir, op. cit., p. 31.
 38. Lewis, op. cit., p. 19.
 39. Ibid., p. 21.
 40. Ibid., p. 23.
 41. Ibid., p. 24.
 42. Ibid., p. 27.
 43. Scott, Climate, p. 93.
 44. Brooks, op. cit., p. 10.
 45. Ibid., p. 20.
 46. Ibid., p. 25.
 47. Hoffman, op. cit., p. 106-7.
 48. Ludwig, op. cit., p. 8.
 49. Podhoretz, op. cit., p. 207.

50. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 179. Bellow is indebted to religious revival or a new conservatism for his doctrine, since these propagate a hard view of reality demanding a harsh appraisal of man in terms of his culpability (as part of the reaction against liberalism). Bellow is aware of man's fallibility; yet he declares for love in a Jewish tradition which is at once the source of and the refuge from his personal alienation. Ibid. p. 181.

51. Bellow, "Some Notes," p. 29.

PART TWO:

SAUL BELLOW AND THE SPIRIT OF MODERN LITERATURE

Bellow seeks to take the self from Dostoevsky's underground and to bring it above ground. Generally, this process consists in putting the self in dialectic with the other--under the form of tradition, environment, society, and persons. More specifically, the dialectic moves at different levels of conflict between the needs of man for freedom and his needs for love, that is, between individuality and community. On another level it becomes the antithesis between the imaginative and the factual world--that is between the ideal and the real. In terms of this conflict Bellow wrestles with the realities of tradition and natural abilities; the self, in its struggle for realization cannot forget to take these determining factors into account.¹

It is in this process of dialogue that Bellow's qualities as a leader emerge. First, of all, he has refused to accept the idea of death; rather, he wants to affirm life with natural, unstrained arguments:

Either we want life to continue, or we do not. If we don't want to continue, why write books? The wish for death is powerful and silent. It respects actions; it has no need of words.

But if we answer yes, and we do want it to continue, we are liable to be asked how? In what form shall life be justified? That is the essence of the moral question. We call a writer moral to the degree that his imagination indicates to us how we may answer naturally, without strained arguments, with a spontaneous mysterious proof that has no need to argue with despair. ²

Bellow is not tied down by any philosophy of life³--the basis of his acceptance is the mystery of life. He is concerned with human characteristics that have no need of justification. There are many writers around who reject life on philosophical standards; yet, he says, "it seems to me they can't know enough about it for confident denial. The mystery is too great."⁴ Bellow gives no pat answers to the problem of life--rather he affirms the mystery. If the self is to be fulfilled, it is at great cost, as Augie March finds out at the end of his adventures. The deepest answer that Bellow can give to the question: "Why am I here?" is the answer, "Because we are all here together on earth. It is both enough and not enough."⁵ And that is the basis of his acceptance, not philosophy.

Second, Bellow parries the attacks of modern chaos on the self by reaffirming the power of the imagination to find a meaningful way of life in the world. People are so concerned with facts, he says, that their imaginations become weak; because they cannot imagine what they should be they cannot become it.⁶ That is why modern man has accepted death as his part in life--and that is why writers have failed to depict a way to live. Bellow is well aware of the clutter of the 20th century life. The prime example of this is Leopold Bloom in Joyce's Ulysses; experience in all its diversity passes through his mind like an ocean through a sponge. Bellow asks:

How much of this must the spirit suffer, in what detail is it obliged to receive this ocean with its human plankton? Sometimes it looks as if the power of the mind has been nullified by the volume of experience.⁷

In this world real feelings become hidden. Modern society requires so much of a man that he cannot fully involve his feelings in every situation. And so a system is indispensable--a system of response which is looked upon as normal. But the system is grown too large, so that real feelings and intuitions are hidden.⁸ Yet it is the imagination which must tell us how to live--because it can order the chaos: "In a work of art the imagination is the sole source of order... Why were we born? What are we doing here? Where are we going? In its eternal naivete the imagination keeps coming back to these things."⁹ Thus Bellow's heroes start out with a suffering appreciation of personal and societal chaos--clutter, boredom, distraction, things.¹⁰ Their first reaction is to slough off the chaos in an extreme romantic gesture--an escape clause of the American character in the tradition of Cooper, Whitman, Twain, and Hemingway.¹¹ Some of Bellow's minor characters radically assert themselves in this squeezing world--Machiavellian figures who fascinate Bellow and who transcend for a moment all moral obligations.¹² Yet his heroes end up in dialogue with external existence in all its clutter. According to Richard Chase, this is one of Bellow's strong points:

He believes that if we ever define our character and our fate it will be because we have caught up with

our own legend, realized our own imagination. Bellow's fertile sense of the ever-possible conversion of reality and imagination, fact and legend, into each other is the source of the richness and significance of his writing... which is to say that Bellow's sense of the conversion of reality and imagination is something he shares with the greatest novelists.¹³

Third, against the absurdity and disgust with the self, as exemplified by writers like Kafka, Bellow affirms the value of the self. He notes the attacks on human individuality:

Modern literature is not satisfied simply to dismiss a romantic outmoded conception of the self. In a spirit of deepest vengefulness it curses it. It hates it. It rends it, annihilates it. It would rather have the maddest chaos it can evoke than a conception of life it has found false. But after this destruction, what? ¹⁴

Bellow, rather, accepts the self as comic; he sees the absurdity of the absurd, and the ridiculousness of the serious, and this comic sense of self is in a way an American identity.¹⁵ But acceptance, for Bellow, means acceptance of humanity as it is, and so the notions of inherent baseness and human nature sharing the bestiality of nature itself lurk in all his characters.¹⁶ The greatest obstacle to the quest of the self is the denial of the body, that is, the death and primitive irrationality that are a part of physical being. Man's denial of human limitation is a denial of his identity--in his obsessive effort to achieve a symbolic immortality he creates a living death. Bellow maintains that the self is overcome not by absurdity but by an excessive intensity of the will to live.¹⁷

Fourth, Bellow rejects the Pyrrhic alienation stance of so many authors. His characters face the dilemma of meeting the sacrifice of self demanded by social circumstance with a strong sense of self. But Bellow insists that they move from the position of separate and unaccommodating identity to accommodation.¹⁸ His characters discover that alienation is a fool's plea, because they find chaos of the outside within them.¹⁹ There is no refuge for self in self.

Nevertheless, freedom is the condition of the self's quest. This freedom does not bring disgust, nor the horror of choice, nor does it drive the hero underground; rather it drives him on a quest which brings him self-knowledge, which in turn reveals to him a world intelligible only in love.²⁰

Sixth, against those who deny the possibility of love in American society, Bellow strongly affirms the need of man for reconciliation. Love is a theme developed more acutely with each novel, and this love means an attitude of joyful acceptance--of the world and of other persons. As Bellow writes:

"To believe in the existence of human beings as such is love" says Simone Weil. This is what makes the difference...to manifest love...can that be superfluous. Is there still so much of it about us? Not so much. It is still rare, still wonderful. It is still effective against distractions.²¹

Bellow surmounts an even greater source of despair than the death of God--the death of man's belief in the reality of love. In his maturity Bellow qualifiedly affirms that the self can reconcile itself in some way to the community--not achieving sacrifice but rather a sense of peace.²²

Finally, Bellow's novels invade the stronghold of society's death-dealing influences: the city. His novels are cast in New York and in Chicago (the milieu of Henderson the Rain King is an urban Africa). The complexity of the city points to the clutter he must organize; here "the energy and the despair, the softness and ferocity of American life, are projected in a thousand grotesque forms."²³ In the city the rites of love are enormously difficult, and yet it is in urban circumstances that modern man must learn how to live.²⁴ In the city, too, Bellow's heroes come to grips with determinism, and they continually ask the question: What am I to do with my background, and what am I to do with my natural abilities? Am I determined in the mass society?

Bellow's attempt to give the self an identity is not marked by oversimplification. The process is complex, demanding an interplay of nature, self, and external existence in all its clutter. Freedom is the condition of the quest--freedom qualified by necessity. Imagination shows the hero how identity should be achieved, and yet if his imagination is not corrected by reality he falls into solipsism. When the hero collides with the "profound recalcitrance of reality," freedom ends and love begins.²⁵

Bellow's ambiguous conclusions witness to the precariousness of the search; he intends no more than to sharpen the factors involved. He shows that the essentials of human experience are in human beings seeking themselves and love, fleeing annihilation.²⁶ What remains when the seeking is done is the inestimable gift of hope, of life willing and over-

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reaching itself. And this is "an axiomatic statement beyond which the heroes of Bellow cannot go."²⁷

In the following final section of this chapter we will delineate briefly the cultural background that has contributed to Bellow's position as literary leader.

FOOTNOTES

1. Malcolm Bradbury, "Saul Bellow's The Victim," 5 Critical Quarterly, 1963, p. 119.
2. Bellow, "The Writer," p. 62.
3. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 203.
4. Bellow, "The Art," p. 67.
5. Waldmeir, op. cit., p. 40. This is especially true in modern America. "For us the wonder of life is bound up with the literal fact, and our greatest ingenuity is devoted to the real; and this gives reality itself magical and even sacred properties..."
6. Bellow, "Facts," p. 235.
7. Bellow, "The Art," p. 66.
8. Saul Bellow, "Distractions," p. 19.
9. Saul Bellow, "The Creative Artist and His Audience," 9 Perspectives, 1954, p. 101.
10. Waldmeir, op. cit., p. 123.
11. Ibid., p. 127.
12. Ibid., p. 132. Cf. his "Talk With The Yellow Kid", 15 Reporter, 1956, p. 41-44. The Yellow Kid was a Chicago con-man weaned in the Capone days, a Machiavellian who, not without humor, managed to establish himself in a brutal world.
13. Richard Chase, "The Adventures of Saul Bellow", 27 Commentary, 1959, p. 327. (Hereafter cited as "The Adventures").
14. Bellow, "Some Notes", p. 28.
15. J. C. Levenson, "Bellow's Dangling Man," 3 Critique, 1960, p. 11.
16. Waldmeir, op. cit., p. 134.
17. Keith Opdahl, The Crab and the Butterfly: Themes of Saul Bellow. Unpublished Dissertation. University of Illinois, p. 61.
18. Waldmeir, op. cit., p. 134.
19. Ibid., p. 131.
20. Hassan, op. cit., p. 291.

21. Bellow, "Distractions," p. 20.
22. Hassan, op. cit., p. 292.
23. Ibid., p. 292.
24. Waldmeir, op. cit., p. 123.
25. Hassan, op. cit., p. 323.
26. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 203.
27. Hassan, op. cit., p. 291.

PART THREE:

BELLOW'S CULTURAL INHERITANCE

Bellow's thirst for the self arises from a curious amalgam of Russian, Jewish, and American factors, that is, from a blend of his Russian immigrant background, his Jewish heritage, and his American life in Chicago.¹

While responsive to the flexibility and openness of American life, Bellow is also at times one of its sharpest critics. In a book review he offers acerbic criticisms of American vacuity:

Love, duty, principle, thought, significance, everything is being sucked into a fatty and nerveless state of wellbeing. My mother used to say of people who had had a lucky break, in the old Yiddish metaphor, "they've fallen into the schmaltz-grub"--a pit of fat. The pit has now expanded into a swamp, and the lucky ones may be those who haven't yet tasted the fruits of prosperity. ²

In the face of the leveling influence of American culture, however, Bellow consistently affirms the ability of the human spirit to survive. Neither society nor the material order can provide the definition of the self. Tanner says that 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" is a part of Bellow's Russian heritage.³ Bellow often refers to the great Russians, especially Dostoevsky and Tolstoy:

Like it or not, says Dostoevsky, it is our nature to be free, and under the sting of suffering to choose between good and evil. 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.⁴

Both Russians stood out against 19th century European materialism to assert the independence of the human spirit; some of Bellow's indictments of the American mass mentality recall the vituperation of Doestoevsky's Underground hero:

Why today we don't even know where real life is, what it is, or what it's called...we don't know what to join, what to keep up with; what to love, what to hate; what to respect; what to despise. We find it painful to be men--real men of flesh and blood, with our own private bodies; we're ashamed of it, we long to turn ourselves into something hypothetical called the average man....⁵

But Bellow is saved from Dostoevsky's lacerating metaphysical ironies by another tradition--his Jewish background, which provides him with a more euphoric, affirmative, spirit.⁶

Bellow's basic attitudes--an overwhelming need for love and the joy in life--are similar to the principles of Hasidism, an 18th century Jewish sect. He is aware of this heritage, and is both a translator and reviewer of Yiddish stories. While he evidences no Hasidic mysticism or theism, he is according to one critic, a secular Hasid.⁷ Hasidic tenets summarize the main Bellovian themes.

The chief spokesman of neo-Hasidism in our time is Martin Buber.⁸ The core of his teaching is the concept of a life of fervor, or exalted joy, which suffering cannot diminish. Every man is bound to others in a relation of love and responsibility; sin may occur, but man can be redeemed. The life of chastened appetite is encouraged, and in the struggle between reason and instincts, it is not at all clear that the rational man shall achieve his goal. Life

is glorified against the book, and knowledge and intellect are less important than faith.⁹ As we have seen, this teaching echoes Bellow's love for life and his concern for "human qualities that need no justification"--the basic instincts.

Another Jewish quality which Hasidism may have suggested to Bellow is the sense of dialectic. Jewish tradition conveys a strong sense of the many tensions in life: "Jewish thinking and living can only be adequately understood in terms of a dialectical pattern, containing opposite or contrasted properties."¹⁰ The most significant of these tensions is between heart and head. Jewish respect for learning is proverbial. Yet that respect is balanced by feeling which cures rationalism; in Jewish tradition "over-intellectualization is sinful; it is responsible for exile, unholy family life, and 'bad times.'"¹¹ Another tension is between tradition and history. The God of Israel was primarily the God of events, not the God of nature:

He spoke through events in history; while the deities of other peoples were associated with places or things,¹² the God of the prophets was the God of events....

The Jewish concern for history leads to conflict in the modern age: can a Jew retain his sense of tradition in the rapidly changing world that seems to devalue the past, that is, can he accept evolution?¹³ A third tension for the Jew is between his land and the Promised Land; he is victim to a double alienation because he is separated from his own land by his hope for the Promised Land.¹⁴

These polarities are reflected in the typical Jewish humor--irony. Irony expresses the Jewish "will toward righteousness;"

So long as the actual and the ideal are disparate, so long as the hopes of the heart are not embodied in the contexture of things about us, there is work for man to do, and there is an urgency to stir the conscience to do the work...¹⁵

Bellow, in a review of a Yiddish story, says:

The Jew of the ghetto found themselves involved in an immense joke. They were divinely designated to be great and yet they were like mice. History was something happened to them; they did not make it...but when history had happened it belonged to them, inasmuch as it was the coming of the Messiah--their Messiah--that would give it meaning. Every male child was potentially the Messiah. The most ordinary Yiddish conversation is full of the grandest historical, mythological, and religious allusions. The Creation, the Fall, the Flood, Egypt, Alexander, Titus, Napoleon, the Rothschilds, the sages, and the Laws may get into the discussion of an egg, a clothesline, or a pair of pants.¹⁶

As Tanner points out, this comment is highly relevant to Bellow's own comic style, "in which the pants and the philosophy come bundled up together."¹⁷ Alfred Kazin comments on Bellow's tragicomic sense of buffoonery with an old Jewish saying that expresses typical anguish and wit: "If God lived on earth, his windows would always be broken."¹⁸

In Yiddish literature Bellow finds some of his characters. The traditional Jewish characters of schlimazl and schlemiel, the fall guy and the innocent fool, are a part of his fictional cast.¹⁹ Another character is das kleine menschele, the little man of the East European ghetto, the stetl. This character is forced by the presence of perils everywhere to find ingenious ways of survival; one of these

ways is mock heroism. In Bellow's imagination the city represents the stetl; mock heroism is a way of self assertion in a community that will not allow for the self.²⁰

Finally, from his Jewish tradition Bellow receives the idea of God. Irving Malin insists that modern Jewish authors like Herbert Gold, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, and Saul Bellow continue to search for God.²¹ Heschel says that the craving for God has never left the Jewish soul;²² but these contemporary authors have rebelled against orthodox seeking, and have tried to find some new, relevant God.²³ They are torn by the polarities of their Jewish-American life, and they believe that God must be the Transcendence of those polarities. "In trying to identify this Transcendence they point everywhere-- at sex, joy, nature--and although they do not eventually accept the Jewish God, they do give us a 'legacy of wonder and mystery.'"²⁴

But Bellow's roots also strike deeply into American soil. His work relates him especially to Walt Whitman and Theodore Dreiser. In Democratic Vistas Whitman celebrated the paradox that is at the center of both his and Bellow's work; he sees a new harmonious community ("democracy") based on love and equality. But he also envisioned a more important principle--the free unencumbered self:

For to democracy, the leveler, the unyielding principle of the average, surely join'd another principle, equally unyielding, closely tracing the first, indispensable to it, opposite.... This second principle is individuality, the pride and centripetal isolation of a human being in himself--identity--personalism. 25

Whitman stressed the value of the native personality, not dependent on culture or knowledge or intellect. No amount of conditioning could transform that self.²⁶ At the same time he wanted a valid community. All these ideas and problems recur in Bellow; even the poet-narrator of Whitman's "Song of Myself" is a harbinger of some of Bellow's own narrators.²⁷ Richard Chase's comment on "Song of Myself"-- "Of great importance is the fact that most of 'Song of Myself' has to do not with the self searching for a final identity but with the self escaping a series of identities which threatened to dissolve its lively and various spontaneity"²⁸--sounds like a character description of Augie March, Bellow's third protagonist.

The passionate celebration of self is an honored American tradition; Natty Bumppo, Daniel Boone, Hester Prynne and Ahab are all on the same road, if not in step. Huck Finn, forging his own destiny, refuses to join civilization after having been there; Melville's Bartleby cries "I would prefer not to"--not to be reasonable, not to play society's game, preferring aloneness; Henry James' American has the look of being committed to nothing in particular.²⁹ Later Jake Barnes, Jay Gatsby, and Ike McCaslin exemplify the classic American pattern of individualism and conformity.³⁰

Another American tradition is the passionate celebration of the American scene--a revelling in an incredibly fecund land. Whitman had this, but more important for Bellow is Theodore Dreiser, who was able to grasp urban life in immense handfuls. Bellow notes that American urban life has

become so ugly that many American writers cannot lift up the facts around them, and so by way of compensation develop a special language of art. But "Dreiser had no need for this use of language because of his greater lifting power."³¹

Dreiser depicts the teeming, determining, engulfing forces of the city--a far cry from the free uninhibited world of Whitman's narrator. Yet Dreiser does not submit to pessimism: according to Bellow:

This is what is so moving in him, his balkiness and sullenness and then his allegiance to life. The fact that he is a modern American gives an extreme edge to this allegiance; it is made after immersion in the greatest difficulties and reasons for pessimism and with all the art of which he is capable, and stubbornly insisted upon under the severest discouragements.³²

Bellow's problem, like Dreiser's, is do justice both to the claims of the individual will and the heavy pressures of urban industrial complexity. If he has absorbed Whitman's joy in the untrammelled human spirit, he has also comprehended "Dreiser's far-reaching and vastly honest urban determinism."³³ Bellow has the lifting power for American urban society; yet, like Whitman, he does not want to be stuck in it. He neither capitulates to the urban world nor does he renounce it. It is between these tensions that his art weaves its way, drawing vitality from the inevitable conflict.³⁴

FOOTNOTES

1. Tanner, op. cit., p. 2.
2. Saul Bellow, "The Swamp of Prosperity," 28 Commentary, 1959, p. 79.
3. Tanner, op. cit., p. 5.
4. Saul Bellow, "The Sealed Treasure," Times Literary Supplement, 1 July, 1960, p. 414. In an interview on the art of writing fiction, Bellow mentions his dependence on the 19th century Russian authors. cf. Bellow, "The Art."
5. Fyodor Dostoevsky, Notes from the Underground, (tr. Andrew McAndrew) (New York: Signet Classic Books, 1956) p. 42.
6. Tanner, op. cit., p. 7.
7. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 182.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 183.
10. A. J. Heschel, God in Search of Man, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1955), p. 141.
11. Irving Malin, Jews and Americans, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), p. 84.
12. Heschel, op. cit., p. 60.
13. Malin, op. cit., p. 60.
14. Ibid., p. 14.
15. Israel Knox, "The Traditional Roots of Jewish Humor," 12 Judaism, 1962, p. 331.
16. Saul Bellow, Review of The Adventures of Mottel the Cantor's Son, Saturday Review, May 30, 1953, p. 15.
17. Tanner, op. cit., p. 8.
18. Kazin, op. cit., p. 53.
19. A schlimazl is defined as an "individual who is the victim of bad luck, a fall guy to whom unattractive things happen." A schlemiel, on the other hand, is "a person who can't do anything right, a 'bumbler', a futile clown with a non-removable mask." Levenson, op. cit., p. 6.

20. Waldmeir, op. cit., p. 133.
21. Malin, op. cit., p. 122.
22. Heschel, op. cit., p. 29.
23. Malin, op. cit., p. 175.
24. Ibid., p. 104.
25. Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose, 1955, ed., p. 514.
26. Chase, "The Adventures," p. 326.
27. Tanner, op. cit., p. 11.
28. Levenson, op. cit., p. 3.
29. Tanner, op. cit., p. 12.
30. Levenson, op. cit., p. 3.
31. Saul Bellow, "Dreiser and the Triumph of Art," Commentary, May, 1951, p. 502.
32. Ibid., p. 503. Bellow admires Dreiser for his sense of feeling: he "was rich in a kind of feeling which has been ruled off the grounds by many contemporary writers-- the kind of feeling that every human being recognizes as primary. Dreiser has more open access to primary feelings than any American writer of the 20th century." "The Art," p. 52.
33. Tanner, op. cit., p. 15.
34. Chase, "The Adventures," p. 326.

CHAPTER THREE:

THE NOVELS OF SAUL BELLOW

We are now ready to begin the analysis of each of Bellow's six novels. Dangling Man is the first of these novels, published in 1944; it was followed by The Victim (1947), The Adventures of Augie March (1953), Seize the Day (1956), Henderson the Rain King (1959), and finally Herzog (1965). There are marked similarities among the novels, as well as striking differences, especially in the matter of form; rather than summarize them here, we will let them emerge as we go along. Written as they were over a long period of time, in rapidly changing societal conditions, the novels exhibit a remarkably unified thematic development, following as it were the maturing of Bellow's own intellectual concerns, as well as reflecting then current societal patterns. The progression, too, will become apparent in the course of the dicussion. While many avenues of approach recommend themselves, due to the complexity of Bellow's artistic imagination, we will treat the novels from the viewpoint of what is both his main concern and the salient point of interest for theology. Three problems, which are really one, form the heart of this investigation: freedom, love, and identity.¹ These human concerns involve Bellow in a search for values and insights into human nature which reflect the problems of classical dogmatic and moral theology. And in 1965 Moses Herzog is still wrestling with these questions that Joseph, the dangling man, introduced in 1944.

DANGLING MAN

Dangling Man is the account of an unemployed man-- Joseph--awaiting his call for service in the army during the Second World War. Bureaucratic red tape delays his call for several months, and so he begins a journal to keep himself in touch with reality. The diary records the sequence of incidents, meditations, and moods which precede and precipitate his decision to volunteer for service and end his state of dangling.

The style of the novel, as Bellow himself admits, is well-made, organized in the Flaubert-James tradition.² As a monologue in diary form, the book perfectly expresses Joseph's inability to strike a dialogue with the world. The intended solipism, however, stretches the imaginative fabric of the book thin, so that no character or scene clearly emerges. Joseph--his name ironically suggests the exile of the Biblical patriarch,³ as well as the spiritually defeated hero of Kafka's The Trial--stands out as a cantankerous, complaining, and self-defeating victim of his time.⁴ His world is sparse: a "six-sided box" from which he sporadically wanders into a drab, wintry Chicago. He oscillates between quotidian inertia and compulsive self-inquiry, wrestling with problems of self and world which have a drastically deleterious effect on his character and which bring him to the point of complete spiritual defeat.

Bellow's first novel is both positive and negative, in that it treats the themes which Bellow wishes to reject, and also looks forward to what most engages him.⁵ Joseph is, characteristically for Bellow, on a search. But before he can

begin that search the ground must be cleared so that the hero is not hindered by excess baggage.

The following analysis, then, will first treat the conditions or ideas which are considered extraneous for a spiritual search. Only then will positive aspects be explored. These latter will be few, since Joseph is unable to reach a synthesis of the two worlds between which he dangles. What Bellow does in this novel, however, is to present all the terms and themes which constitute his fictional concern.

First, Bellow clears away various novelistic approaches to the dilemma of the self. In the World War II school of the novel, the simplicity of diction, of dialogue, and of character reading established by Hemingway became an accepted manner.⁶ The opening paragraphs of Dangling Man record an attack on this code of hardboiled reticence; or the "aesthetic of understatement:"⁷

Today, the code of the athlete, of the tough boy--an American inheritance, I believe, from the English gentlemen--that curious mixture of striving, asceticism, and rigor, the origins of which trace back to Alexander the Great--is stronger than ever. Do you have feelings? There are correct and incorrect ways of indicating them. Do you have an inner life? It is nobody's business but your own. Do you have emotions? Strangle them...If you have difficulties, grapple with them silently goes one of their commandments. To hell with that. I intend to talk about mine, and if I had as many mouths as Siva has arms and kept them going all the time, I still could not do them justice...The hardboiled are compensated for their silence; they fly planes or fight bulls or catch tarpon, whereas I rarely leave my room.

Hemingwayism provided a style of novel that would be inimical to a treatment which sought to lay bare the thoughts and feelings of its subject.⁸ Joseph feels the necessity of ex-

posing his mind: "In my present state of demoralization, it has become necessary for me to keep a journal--that is, to talk to myself--and I do not feel guilty of self-indulgence in the least." Here, then, Bellow is indicating that the self must be brought out into the open if it is to be brought into dialogue with the world.

As has been mentioned, one group of writers identified themselves in the 30's with radical left-wing politics in hopes of a political or revolutionary answer to the problems of the spirit.⁹ Joseph meets one of his former comrades in a restaurant, the equivalent of a coffee-house, and creates a scene when the former comrade, whom he had regarded as his friend, refuses to recognize him because he has defected from the party. Joseph explains later:

I haven't forgotten, that's all. You see, I thought those people were different. I haven't forgotten that I believed they were devoted to the service of some grand flapdoodle, the Race, le genre humain. Oh yes, they were! By the time I got out, I realized that any hospital nurse did more with one bedpan for le genre humain than they did with their entire organization.Reformism! A terrible thing.

But Bellow's revolt goes deeper here than a repudiation of the Marxist doctrines of a small group; he revolts against the hostile posture toward middle-class society adopted by nearly all the important writers of the modern period, "whatever their particular political persuasion."¹⁰

But if the revolutionary attitude is a pose, equally unsuitable is the escape to art that had provided the answer for novelists like Joyce and Proust. Joseph receives a letter from an artist-friend who must work commercially to support himself; the friend ridicules his fellow employees:

I am the only one in this fifty-three story building who knows how childish it is. Everybody else

takes it seriously. Because this is a fifty-three story building, they think it must be serious. "This is life." I say, this is pish, nonsense, nothing! The real world is the world of art and of thought. There is only one worthwhile sort of work, that of the imagination.

Joseph reflects on the letter:

It is an attractive idea, it confers a sort of life on him...he is telling me what he feels: that he has escaped a trap. That really is a victory to celebrate. Is it because he is an artist? I believe it is. Those acts of the imagination save him.

But he asks plaintively:

But what about me? I have no talent for that sort of thing. My talent, if I have one at all, is for being a citizen, or what is today called most apologetically, a good man. Is there some sort of personal effort I can substitute for the imagination?

Only for the talented elite can art provide an escape; the common man must find his salvation in some sort of action.

Joseph's catalogue of rejection reaches further than a mere repudiation of novelistic answers to the problems of the spirit. He directly attacks current American political and social ideals. The war is a "misfortune", and he is a "moral casualty" of that misfortune. War cannot be dignified by personalizing it:

I support the war, though perhaps it is gratuitous to say so; we have the habit of making these things issues of personal morality and private will, which they are not at all.

If a person could make any choice, it would be between two imperialisms: "But as between their imperialism and ours, if a full choice were possible, I would take ours." Desirable alternatives, he says, grow only in imaginary trees.

Even in wartime, the Puritan ideal of success as the measure of manhood prevails. Amos, Joseph's profiteering brother who hoards what he feels to be his just desserts as a wealthy businessman, considers Joseph a fool because he

reaps no benefit from the war--Joseph would rather be a "victim than a beneficiary," and would rather "die in war than consume its benefits." Joseph refuses to visit his own home because his father pries into his life; he prods Joseph with stories of neighborhood friends who have entered professional careers and who have excellent jobs. Joseph wryly notes:

This means that I, too, should have been a chemist or physicist or engineer. A nonprofessional education is something the middle classes can ill afford. It is an investment bound to fail. And, in the strictest sense, it is not necessary, for any intelligent man can pick up all he needs to know.

In America, "bread and butter come first." Here Bellow exposes the plight of the intellectual in a society that devalues intellectual effort and emphasizes material effort. Bellow's charge is that American society is antagonistic to the things of the spirit: because artists and thinkers perform no "essential function" they are either excluded or patronized, as Joseph finds when he tries to cash a check. Humiliation is the price of standing outside society.¹¹

Directly related to this indictment is the charge levelled against the community. The party which Joseph attends is a major symbol of Bellow's disenchantment with friendship and community.¹² It is a gathering of old friends, but Joseph, with the new eyes of his dangling condition, sees them as they really are:

And it came to me all at once that the human purpose of these occasions had always been to free the charge of feeling in the pent heart; and that, as animals instinctively sought salt or lime, we, too, flew together at this need as we had at Eleusis, with rites and dances, and at other high festivals and corroborees to witness pains and tortures, to give our scorn, hatred,

and desire temporary liberty and play. Only we did these things without grace or mystery, lacking the forms for it and relying on drunkenness, assassinated the Gods in one another and shrieked in vengefulness and hurt.

Such gatherings, Joseph finds, leave the self disgusted; in his condition he needs someone to talk to, someone with whom he can share his difficulties. Yet no one is willing to explore the "craters of the spirit" with him. His friends gather only to release their egos for an evening of mad play. Eisinger notes Bellow's reverence for humanity and concern over the "absence of love that permits a man to isolate himself."¹³

It is no wonder that Joseph feels himself alienated. He rejects his family, his friends, his country, his society. Yet more elements fall under his scrutiny. On a walk through the drab squalor of a March Chicago neighborhood, Joseph looks for signs of "humanity:"

Where was there a particle of what, elsewhere, or in the past, had spoken in man's favor? There could be no doubt that these billboards, streets, tracks, houses, ugly and blind, were related to interior life. And yet, I told myself, there had to be a doubt. There were human lives organized around these ways and houses, and that they, the houses, say, were the analogue, that what men created they also were, through some transcendent means, I could not bring myself to concede...In their businesses, and politics, their taverns, movies, assaults, divorces, murders, I tried continually to find clear signs of their common humanity.

The clutter and filth of daily life is one of the greatest deterrents to Joseph's experiment in freedom, because it attacks the imagination. The radio, the papers, the other tenants in the rooming house where he lives, the constant drip of the faucet--all these will not allow him to concentrate on what is important: "My mind redoubles its efforts, but thoughts of doubtful relevance are straggling in and

out of it, the trivial and the major together."

Joseph has nothing to support him in his state of alienation. His great personal change has rendered his beliefs inadequate:

My beliefs are inadequate, they do not guard me. I think invariably of the awning on the store on the corner. It gives as much protection against rain and wind as my beliefs give against the chaos I am forced to face.

Nor can he approach his wife Iva. Iva, a characteristically colorless and unsatisfying Bellovian wife, has a peculiar quality that keeps Joseph from talking openly to her.

Joseph's final rejection is a rejection of God. The dangling man will not clutch at a deus ex machina; in fact, he will not ask for God's help at all. Listening to a Haydn divertimento on the phonograph, Joseph becomes aware of his own meanness. He wonders how he shall overcome his lack of grace:

And was I to become this whole man alone, without aid? I was too weak for it, I did not command the will. Then in what quarter should I look for help, where was the power?

The music tells him that he should look for help in the universal source--God. But he immediately rejects the answer:

But what a miserable surrender that would be, born out of disheartenment and chaos; and out of fear, bodily and imperious, that like a disease asked for a remedy and did not care how it was supplied....No, not God, not any divinity, That was anterior, not of my own deriving.

He does not want to "catch at any contrivance in panic;" for even though the religious answer is so easy, it sacrifices the mind that sought to be satisfied. From that antidote an even greater disease would spring. He would rather settle for

the inadequacy of an answer from his own reason than for the emotional answer of religion: "Out of my own strength it was necessary for me to return the verdict for reason, in its partial inadequacy, and against the advantages of its surrender."

It is important to note this point carefully, for it defines the limits of this theological investigation. Each of Bellow's characters, with the possible exception of Herzog, strive completely by themselves, seeking salvation by their own efforts.¹⁴ God is not denied:

I was not so full of pride that I could not accept the existence of something greater than myself, something, perhaps, of which I was an idea, or merely a fraction of an idea.

God is simply excluded as a factor in the search. All of Bellow's characters then, seek love, freedom, and identity without any thought of God. Their quest may be called spiritual, but not religious.¹⁵ It is a search for the transcendent solely in human nature.

Adding God and his own belief to Joseph's list of rejections makes his state of alienation complete. He has cleared the ground for his spiritual quest. In Dangling Man, this quest has as its goal freedom--absolute freedom:

All the striving is for one end. I do not entirely understand this impulse. But it seems to me that its final end is the desire for pure freedom. We are all drawn toward the same craters of the spirit--to know what we are and what we are for, to know our purpose, to seek grace.

Freedom, in Joseph's estimation, will bring self-knowledge,

and that will enable him to return to society and to love other men.¹⁶ Love would be the end of the search:

We struggle perpetually to free ourselves. Or, to put it somewhat differently, while we seem so intently and even desperately to be holding on to ourselves, we would far rather give ourselves away. We do not know how.

But Joseph is doomed to failure because he cannot imagine how he should love. Because he has defined his freedom as an absolute, he cannot join love with it.

Through the course of the account, Joseph becomes aware that his freedom has not brought him self-knowledge but isolation. Having rejected the external world, he must also reject the internal one. That is the real significance of his dangling. He can find no foothold either inside or out. Bellow depicts the same alienation that previous writers felt; yet he provides no philosophy to back it up. Joseph had dreamed of establishing a colony of the spirit for his friends, where they could share their alienation. But the party at Christmas shatters that ideal. Joseph slowly begins to realize that the "nasty, brutish, and short,"--words of Hobbes which he had used to characterize his society--applied also to him.

For let us admit the truth. One was constantly threatened, shouldered, and sometimes invaded by the "nasty, brutish, and short," lost fights to it in unexpected corners. In the colony? Even in oneself. Was anyone immune altogether? In times like these: There were so many treasons: they were a medium, like air, like water, they passed in and out of you....

Alienation is a fool's plea; one cannot "banish the world

by decree if it's in you:"

How can you? You have gone to its schools and seen its movies, listened to its radios, read its magazines. What if you declare you are alienated, you say you reject the Hollywood dream, the soap opera, the cheap thriller? The very denial implicates you.

This is an important step for putting the self into dialogue with the world, for Bellow's hero is the first to blame not only the world but also himself for the disorders of the self: "It's too easy to abjure it (the world) or detest it. Too narrow. Too cowardly....The failing may be in us, in me. A weakness of vision."¹⁷ Freedom, Joseph finds, cannot be merely freedom from something, but rather freedom to do or be something.

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. My perspectives end in the walls.

His friends have all accepted "ideal constructions" to help them live--that is, they have used their imaginations to show them a path.¹⁸ Yet, according to Joseph, "the obsession exhausts the man;" people can become entrapped by their own ideal constructions. While it is probable that people need some sort of apparatus to get by in the world, yet they must be aware of "the gap between the ideal construction and the real world, the truth." Therefore, when Joseph's ideal construction--the colony of the spirit--falls through, he is left dangling.¹⁹ The best ideal construction, he says, is one that would unlock the imprisoning self.

The short book ends ambiguously. Joseph, who previously had refused to apply for immediate induction into the service

because he was unwilling to admit that he did not know how to use his freedom, goes to the draft board and requests in writing that he be inducted immediately. On the last day of civilian life he writes:

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 canceled. Hurray for regular hours. And for supervision of the spirit. Long live regimentation.

While this is not total cynicism, it is a defeat, for Joseph must admit, "I had not done well alone." The hero returns underground, having made a valiant attempt at dialogue with the world.

Bellow stubbornly refuses to let defeat be the final message of the book. Joseph must solve the problem of his relation to the world--it was "undeniably" to his interest to do so. He and his fellow men were figures in the same plot, eternally fixed together, and were necessary to each other's survival. It was a mistake to think of this century as the nether curve in the cycle of history, a condemned age. For Joseph, the world is both good and bad, and judgment of it is second to wonder. "In a sense," he says, "everything is good because it exists. Or, good or not good, it exists, it is ineffable, and, for that reason, marvelous." This Hasidic sense of wonder is paralleled by Bellow's Dreiserian "lifting power" of the urban scenery. The drab Chicago that had been the bleak background for his crisis rejuvenates in the springtime, coinciding exactly with Joseph's decision to hasten his induction. The impossible spring rebirth of the dead city suggests an ironic hope; and Joseph, because he dangles, is at least a worthier image of modern man than

Camus' outsider.

Yet, in this first novel, Bellow sounds a bitter note. The attempt at dialogue ends in a dangle: in the modern world, a man seeking freedom must in the end deny it; love cannot be found with family, wife, or friends. It is a world in which transcendence must be found in everyday life, because the Transcendent God is denied as an answer. Joseph attempts to find this transcendence in a dialogue with the world, but he finds that the dialectic between civilization and the self has broken down. Yet Joseph affirms that alienation cannot be the answer, and this affirmation itself suggests the hope that somehow the dialogue can begin. This hope, characteristic of Bellow's heroes, is a truly eschatological dissatisfaction with present values and a pointing toward an unknown ethical standard. Within Joseph's constricting limitations, Bellow continues his search in the next novel, The Victim.

FOOTNOTES

1. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 183.
2. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 187. According to Bellow: "My first two books are well-made. I wrote the first quickly but took great pains with it. I labored with the second and tried to make it letter-perfect. In writing The Victim (his second novel) I accepted a Flaubertian standard." Bellow, "The Art," p. 56. Eisinger claims that this standard applies also to the first.
3. Reuben Frank, "Saul Bellow: The Evolution of a Contemporary Novelist," 18 Western Review, 1954, p. 103.
4. Hassan, op. cit., p. 303.
5. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 183.
6. Hoffman, op. cit., p. 175.
7. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 184.
8. Ibid., p. 184.
9. Podhoretz, p. 208; Farrell, Dos Passos, etc.
10. Ibid. p. 207.
11. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 86.
12. Frank, op. cit., p. 103.
13. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 187.
14. Denis Donoghue, "Commitment and the Dangling Man," 53 Studies, 1964, p. 182.
15. That is, they will have nothing to do with organized religion.
16. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 185.
17. Joseph still feels alienated: he is still "the alienated modern man who has been a leading figure in the literature and social thought of the 20th century, but he differs from his immediate ancestors in lacking a plan or program to justify...his estranged condition." Podhoretz, p. 210.
18. Malin, op. cit., p. 24.
19. Levenson, op. cit., p. 5.

THE VICTIM

The Victim, published in 1947, is Bellow's second novel. It is the story of Asa Leventhal, a middle-aged New York Jew, editor of a small trade magazine, a suspicious, moody, persecuted, and neurotic individual. The book depicts a crisis in Asa's life: during a heat wave in the city, while his wife is caring for her mother in Baltimore, a former Gentile acquaintance, Kirby Allbee, now a bum, appears out of nowhere to pin responsibility for his wife's death and his own loss of job on Leventhal. The process by which Asa comes to accept his part in Allbee's downfall forms the core of the book.

In this novel Bellow is again delving into the problem of what the self owes the self and what the self owes the rest of the world.¹ The tack is slightly different here: while Dangling Man showed the self seeking absolute and pure freedom, divorced from society, The Victim portrays a self externally involved with society and struggling with the responsibilities of inter-relatedness.² In his second novel, Bellow concentrates on the factors which qualify and limit freedom. For an introductory quotation Bellow tells a story from the Arabian Nights about a merchant throwing away some date stones, only to be confronted by a huge sword-wielding Ifrit who claims that the date stones killed his son and who now demands reparation and revenge. The moral points to the theme of the book--that the quest of the self for realization is limited by the needs of others.

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As in Dangling Man, the focus of the search arises from a social problem: in this case anti-semitism. However, for Bellow it is a "superficial social phenomenon,"³ a vehicle, like the war in Dangling Man, to get at the profound human values and conflicts that lie underneath. Bellow here shows the same ruthless tendency to rip through surface matters to get at essentials; he offers no easy answer to the problem of the self, for example, such as social tolerance.

The setting of the book, like Dangling Man, is the city; this time, however, Joseph's six-sided room is expanded, given more richly imaginative furniture, and moved to New York.⁴ Bellow's prose evokes powerful images of the size, complexity, and detail of the city. In one "lifting Dreiserian handful" he opens the novel with a picture of the summer heat wave:

On some nights, New York is as hot as Bangkok. The whole continent seems to have moved from its place and slid nearer the equator, the bitter gray Atlantic to have become green and tropical, and the people, thronging the streets, barbaric fellahin among the stupendous monuments of their mystery, the lights of which, a dazing profusion, climb upward endlessly into the heat of the sky.

The exotic tropical suggestion is not incidental but essential to the meaning of the book. For one thing, it images the city as a tiny village placed in the midst of a teeming jungle that threatens to engulf it; cruelty and violence are the terms of survival. Civilization, Bellow is suggesting, may be an illusion.⁵ Within the city are masses, pushing, squeezing, and jostling one another in a welter of "crowded, unrelated density."⁶ The sense of impending chaos and encroach-

ing violence builds slowly in the novel until the suicide scene in Leventhal's apartment. Second, this passage introduces the tension and sense of displacement that pervades the book, and which is the atmosphere for the self in contemporary society. Besides the obvious tension of Jew-Gentile, there is, in the subplot concerning Asa's nephew, the tension of the mixed marriage between Max Leventhal and Elena, his old-world Italian Catholic wife. Kirby Allbee exemplifies another kind of tension: between aristocratic American lineage and a classless society.⁷ Allbee, the descendant of New England's Governor Winthrop, can find no place in the shifting sands of New York society. He feels especially displaced by the waves of Jews who, he feels, have taken over his culture.⁸ Tradition and background lose their meaning in the contemporary world; and Bellow is pointing to the danger of the flux of the democratic, "melting pot" society, in which insecurity becomes inherent in a culture so that no one identifies with it.

Time also becomes broken and discontinuous, like the broken phone connection on the first page. The past is important and yet to be feared. Both Allbee and Leventhal peer into the past to find out why Allbee lost his job; Leventhal looks for the original sin which is the source of his guilt.⁹ Asa rejects his father and his materialistic credo--

"Ruf mir Yoshkee, ruf mir Moshke
Aber gib mir die groschke" 10

and yet he fears inheriting his mother's insanity. The only guidelines for the self seem to be those which determine it and drag it down.

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The departure of his wife, for Asa, means the absence of normalcy. He is by nature susceptible; he finds himself buying tickets at the office that he really doesn't want and then giving them to the office girls. Crowds press in upon Asa in the subway, on the Staten Island Ferry, in the automats, until he feels "that there is not a single part of him on which the whole world does not press with full weight." Even his clothes bind and chafe him. The heat is oppressive and keeps him perspiring. Gradually the situation comes to a head; his sense of persecution, irritability, and sickness increases; he sees mice in the corners of his flat; he broods and changes moods from exaltation to depression. His oversuspiciousness to anti-Semitism makes him a perfect target for the accusations of Allbee.

Allbee confronts Leventhal with the accusation that Leventhal had purposely insulted his--Allbee's--employer in a job interview so that Allbee would be fired. As a result of losing his job, Allbee's wife left him, and he blames Asa for this, too. Allbee is down and out--an alcoholic, living in cheap flophouses, unwilling to work. At first, Leventhal flatly denies any responsibility for Allbee's troubles; he snorts: "I haven't thought about you in years, frankly, and I don't know why you think I care whether you exist or not. What, are we related?" He feels that people are responsible for the quality of their own actions and that they determine their own fates.¹¹ Thus at the beginning he has no understanding or humanity. He will admit a "general wrong," but he is so blindly self-engrossed that he cannot be bothered.¹² No wonder he thinks there is no relation between

him and Allbee.

But Allbee's continued and ironic (the Gentile as victim)¹³ pose as victim begins to eat away at Asa's conscience. It soon becomes apparent that he is his own worst enemy; his susceptibility and truculence¹⁴ lead him to the point where he must find out whether the accusations are true. He finds out that his friends, too, believe that he was partly responsible for Allbee's demise, and finally admits a relationship and a responsibility for Allbee.¹⁵

Meanwhile, Allbee moves in with him in the beginning of a subtly developed mutual involvement, until the question arises as to who is the real victim. Allbee invades Leventhal's personal life--he sleeps on his sofa, reads his intimate cards from his wife, sleeps with a prostitute in his bed, and finally tries to involve him in a suicide attempt. This victimization of Asa by Allbee has the effect of tearing down Leventhal's self-limiting defense, so that he finally comes to terms with his guilt.¹⁷ This is concretely portrayed by his feeling, one afternoon at the zoo, of an almost physical identification with Allbee.¹⁸ The basis of this kinship is Asa's recognition that Allbee embodies everything he most fears in the world and in his own soul. Only when he has come to grips with Allbee can he achieve self-knowledge. In the final scene he throws Allbee out of the apartment after the suicide attempt, and immediately he feels better, as it were after an exorcism.¹⁹

Allbee's crude and belligerent attack on Leventhal, along with the crisis of his nephew's death, prods Asa into two realizations. As we have mentioned, Joseph's attempt (in Bellow's first novel) at dialogue with the world led to dangling. Asa Leventhal's reaction, at the beginning of the second novel, has been numbness. This is the response of the timid self and the engulfed imagination to the complexity of modern life. Asa, to be sure, is very sensitive; he weeps at the death of his brother's son, and is perceptive of the small beauties he sees around him. Because of this sensitivity he is also aware of the violence and general madness around him. One morning he observes a street scene from his apartment window: a man threatens to beat his wife, whom he has caught red-handed in prostitution, while two soldiers responsible for the trouble stand by grinning. Afterwards Asa takes a walk, and reflects on how carefully he has sheltered himself from such chaos:

The scene on the corner remained with him, however, and he returned to it every now and then with the feeling that he did really not know what went on about him, what strange things, savage things. They hung near him all the time in trembling drops, invisible, usually, or seen from a distance. But that did not mean that there was always to be a distance, or that sooner or later one or two of the drops might not fall on him.

Asa has not completely insulated himself, and the turgid stirrings of spirit beneath his phlegmatic exterior attest to his dissatisfaction. But he fears crossing over a certain boundary of feeling, beyond which are violence and the darker passions.²⁰ Bellow's strategy at the beginning of the novel is to deny Asa that definition of self man must achieve in order to be responsible.²¹ Before he can be responsible, he

must be,²² and this is precipitated by his relationship with Allbee, who materializes his vaguely realized sense of guilt.²³ Allbee accuses him of being afraid, of being unwilling to open himself to the depths of feeling and involvement which bring self-knowledge:

You people take care of yourselves before everything. You keep your spirit under lock and key. That's the way you're brought up. You make it your business assistant, and it's safe and tame and never leads you toward anything risky. Nothing dangerous and nothing glorious. Nothing ever tempts you to dissolve yourself. What for? What's in it? No percentage.

In his early years, Asa has hovered dangerously close to being "down and out." But he considers himself lucky; he "had got away with it."

He had almost fallen in with that part of humanity of which he was frequently mindful (he never forgot the hotel on lower Broadway), the part that did not get away with it--the lost, the outcast, the overcome, the effaced, the ruined.

Asa feels fortunate to have worked out a superficial arrangement with the anonymous powers that be.²⁴ Yet, toward the end of the novel, Leventhal realizes that there had to be a crisis, and that he had to come to terms with the chaos around him. After the scene in which Asa catches Allbee in his own bed with a prostitute, Asa reflects:

Both of them, Allbee and the woman, moved or swam toward him out of a depth of life in which he himself would be lost, choked, ended. There lay horror, evil, all that he had kept from himself.

Yet, his heart, with a strange fascination, kept drawing him toward that depth of life "with awful pain and dread, in heavy blows." No longer could he hide behind indifference and neglect. He had to face involvement, which meant guilt.²⁵

This then is the first stage of Leventhal's crisis; through him Bellow launched an assault of the prudence, caution, and spiritual timidity that was behind alienation in a post-radical world.²⁶ The first alienation that must be overcome, says Bellow, is the alienation of the self from itself.²⁷

Allbee was the involvement which Leventhal had to face, and he brings out the second point about the self, which flows from the first: namely, that the self cannot pursue its goal in isolation from other men. Allbee is one who has explored the lower depths of feeling, who actually embodies chaos for Leventhal.²⁸ In effect, he is trying to shake Leventhal out of his narrow shell so that he can see that the requirements of love outweigh the requirements of justice (ironically, an old Christian truth). It is not enough for Asa to admit that there was a general wrong; rather by a deeper law he is guilty for Allbee's downfall, and by a deeper law he is also responsible for him. Asa, opened to new depths of his spirit, comes to realize that modern man is taught to pursue the development of self to the exclusion of everything else:

You couldn't find a place in your feelings for everything, or give at every touch like a swinging door... you had to flash. That was the peculiar thing. Everybody wanted to be what he was to the limit...we were all the time taking care of ourselves, laying up, storing up, watching out on this side and on that side, and at the same time running, running desperately running as if in an egg race with the egg in a spoon.

The aspirations of the self are limitless and devouring: "The peculiar thing struck him that everything in nature was bounded; trees, dogs and ants didn't grow beyond a certain size. But we...go in all directions without any limit." On the other hand there is something animalic in this self

which must be taken into account, as Leventhal realizes when he compares the glaring light of the city 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." This limiting factor clashes with the limitless aspirations of the self, and so man is confounded by his need for and his straining against limits.³⁰ The wise Schlossberg emphasizes the futility of a greed for limitless life by pointing out man's mortality:

There's a limit to me. But I have to be myself in full. Which is somebody who dies, isn't it? That's what I was from the beginning. I'm not three people, four people. I was born once and I will die once. You want to be two people? More than human? Maybe it's because you don't know how to be one.

This is a crucial point for Bellow's characters in their search for self-knowledge: acceptance of the self's limitation both by death and by the primitive chaos of animality that lurks within each man. These limitations shift responsibility from anonymous societal forces to the self. Asa, like Joseph, is primarily the victim of his own shortcomings.³¹ But over and above this, these limitations define the quest of the self. The person can no longer seek indefinite expansion, regarding the rest of the world as a means for its own aggrandizement. Nor can it retire and conserve itself in caution and timidity, for it must become human. Schlossberg voices the ideal: "It's bad to be less than human and it's bad to be more than human." For him, "to be human" is

achieved in terms of the value man attaches to life;

I am as sure about greatness and beauty as you are about black and white. If a human life is a great thing to me, it is a great thing. Do you know better? I'm entitled as much as you. And why be measly? Do you have to be? Is somebody holding you by the neck? Have dignity, you understand me? Choose dignity. Nobody knows enough to turn it down.

Self-knowledge and humanity come at once; realizing who one is makes one aware of what it means to be human, that is, that one shares this humanity with everyone else. And as soon as one admits that this man is a brother, one assumes the responsibility of loving him.³² Thus the same responsibility that man bears to himself must also be born to others, which is another way of saying that freedom can be exercised only in community.

When Allbee points his finger at Leventhal and says "You," he is, in effect, saying that one is not free to pursue one's selfhood in society without regard to consequences. Asa comes to a sort of wisdom: "he liked to think 'human' meant accountable in spite of many weaknesses at the last moment, tough enough to hold." Man has a real responsibility to others; in fact, Bellow suggests that the very achievement of selfhood may depend on the fulfillment of this responsibility. But it is impossible to fulfill this responsibility without self-knowledge, and as Allbee makes clear to Asa, self-knowledge is non-existent if one has already accepted a narrow, satisfied definition of self which leaves out

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whole depths of human experience. The second point that Bellow makes, then, is that freedom of self is profoundly qualified by responsibility to others--that is, the duty of love which may well be the fulfillment of that freedom, (although this conclusion is merely hinted at).

There is, however, a final qualifying factor to the search of the self. Leventhal avows that he did not intentionally harm Allbee; yet the harm was done. Who is to blame? Bellow's complex weaving takes into account here the impersonal forces of chance and fate. He suggests that free will can operate in the world, but not with a guarantee for the consequences; responsibility comes if the consequences are perverse.³³ Chance subtly pervades our world in counterpart to choice.³⁴ Leventhal, pondering his nephew's rare disease, wonders why it struck Mickey and not someone else:

Well, did medicine have any idea how a thing like that singled out a child in Staten Island rather than, say, St. Louis or Denver? One child in thousands. How did they account for it?

Allbee, inconsistent with his blame of Leventhal for his misfortune, also considers himself the victim of chance.³⁵

Between life and death, he says, which are matters of fate, we have little opportunity for choice. He calls Asa luckier than he, but tells him not to forget that luck cuts both ways: "That's the whole thing, that it...swings us around by the ears like rabbits." Here, too, for the first time, Bellow introduces the theme of money, an all pervasive force that is equated with death in later novels like Seize the Day. Without the "connections" that come with money and power it is impossible to survive in the city. That is why Asa, who considers himself an outsider, feels lucky to

"have gotten away with something."

The ending of the book is characteristically ambiguous. Several years later Leventhal meets a prospering Allbee in the theater. Leventhal is portrayed as a stronger, more relaxed, open figure; the fact of his wife's pregnancy suggests that he has become potent as a result of his crisis. 36 Yet the changes in Leventhal are not striking. He still cautiously sees the world as ruled by chance: "It was shuffle, all, all accidental and haphazard." The conversation between the two ends with an unanswered question: "What's your idea of who runs things?"--and does little to show whether Asa has absorbed his lesson in self-knowledge or whether he has forgotten it. As Pódhoretz comments:

The Victim is thus highly characteristic of the post-war ethos, restricting itself to a consciousness of how difficult and complicated things are and seeing little hope of remedial action of any kind whatever. 37

Yet the book raises serious questions. First, if man is not responsible to God, he is certainly responsible to other men. Joseph's quest of pure freedom is a myth. Allbee forces a societal awareness upon Leventhal, and shows him that the self cannot be pursued in a vacuum. Guilt, Asa learns, cannot be impersonal; someone must take the blame for the wrongs of mass society. Second, the book indicates the most radical basis for self-acceptance: acknowledgement of the chaos which lurks in the depth of the spirit. Asa learns to sweep away his niggling self-concept and look at himself as he is. He finds evidence of a basic flaw in human nature which later heroes like Tommy Wilhelm and

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Henderson will explore more fully. Finally, The Victim explores the problem of man's destiny: in a complex world of chance, determined by inherited factors and environment, just what role does human choice play in achieving one's ultimate goal?

There is a characteristic note of hope in this book:

There were more important things to be promised. Possibly there was a promise, since so many felt it. He himself was almost ready to affirm that there was. But it was misunderstood.

The "promise" of life was Bellow's concern in his next novel, The Adventures of Augie March.

FOOTNOTES

1. Tanner, op. cit., p. 26.
2. Waldmeir, op. cit., p. 122.
3. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 192.
4. Ludwig, op. cit., p. 10.
5. Podhoretz, op. cit., p. 211.
6. Tanner, op. cit., p. 29.
7. Freedman, op. cit., p. 54-5.
8. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 190. Bringing together Allbee and Leventhal is a stark contradiction between traditionalists and intruders. In the struggle, neither can find security in his background. Frank, op. cit., p. 106.
9. Malin, op. cit., p. 73.
10. "You may call me Ike or call me Moe, but all I ask is give me the dough." Maxwell Geismar, American Moderns, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958), p. 218.
11. Malcolm Bradbury, "Saul Bellow's The Victim," 5 Critical Quarterly, 1963, p. 123.
12. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 188.
13. Hassan, op. cit., p. 300.
14. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 191.
15. Baumbach, op. cit., p. 40.
16. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 191.
17. Baumbach, op. cit., p. 45.
18. Hassan, op. cit., p. 302.
19. Baumbach, op. cit., p. 46.
20. Podhoretz, op. cit., p. 212.
21. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 189.
22. Ibid.
23. Baumbach, op. cit., p. 54.

24. Podhoretz, op. cit., p. 211.
25. Baumbach, op. cit., p. 50.
26. Podhoretz, op. cit., p. 213.
27. Podhoretz, op. cit., p. 212.
28. Baumbach, op. cit., p. 40.
29. Hassan, op. cit., p. 301.
30. Tanner, op. cit., p. 34.
31. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 188.
32. Bradbury, op. cit., p. 120.
33. Frank, op. cit., p. 107.
34. Ibid.
35. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 189.
36. Baumbach, op. cit., p. 46.
37. Podhoretz, op. cit., p. 215.

THE ADVENTURES OF AUGIE MARCH

The Adventures of Augie March is Bellow's third novel, written by him in Paris and published in 1953. It was immediately acclaimed by critics and won the National Book Award.

With a radical reversal of style this book explores the same problem that haunted Bellow in his first two novels: the relation of the self and society. Augie March is Joseph turned about-face, seeking freedom in rather than away from society. He is the hero returned from Dostoevsky's underground,¹ now the rebel rather than the victim.² If, in The Victim, Bellow explored the limitations of freedom, in The Adventures of Augie March he explores the possibilities of freedom.³ Asa Leventhal wanted to know who ran things, but Augie is more concerned with how to run things and how to give a broad human significance to his life.⁴ He affirms the world around him as a vale of possibilities rather than of tears;⁵ instead of a bitter, withdrawn, and narrow hero, as were Joseph and Asa, Augie is "larky and boisterous," full of joy in life and experience. He exemplifies a new dialectic between the self and environment; no longer is society opposed to the hero, but rather reflects his activity while remaining the source and creator of his condition.⁶ For the Eisenhower era, Augie March offered a way out of the impasse which the alienated post-war generation had come to; he embodied the possibility of participating fully in the life of his time without the loss of individuality.⁷

The style of the novel reflects this new spirit. Almost every critic has characterized the style as "picaresque,"⁸ and many in the same breath compare it to Huckleberry Finn.⁹ "Picaresque" style is characterized by looseness of structure, saltiness of language, thickness of incident, robust extroversion, and comedy.¹⁰ In a Jewish atmosphere the picaresque hero is something of a schlemiel, bouncing from one involvement to another; his search or spiritual quest takes the form of one adventure after another.

Bellow had done his duty to the "well-made" novel of Flaubert. In one article he quotes Flaubert, who said: "I abhor ordinary existence....I am turning towards a kind of aesthetic mysticism." Most modern novelists, says Bellow, have followed this standard. He goes on to delineate what is behind the imitation:

Disappointment with its human material is built into the contemporary novel. It is assumed that society cannot give the novelist suitable themes and characters. Therefore the important humanity of the novel must be the writer's own. His force, his virtuosity, his powers of poetry, his reading of fate are at the center of the book. 11

Such an "aesthetic standard," feels Bellow, is implicitly negative toward life, and his picaresque style attempts to counteract that tendency. Bellow, (unlike Philip Roth, whom we quoted in chapter one), insists that the artist's imagination need not be swamped by the complexity of modern life, even though he recognizes much in American society that is inimical to the spirit.¹² He is intent on resisting the low view of contemporary man, the agreed picture that this is a doomed civilization, since such constructions make man resist "new forms of reality." The novelist must get beyond

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systems and "find enduring intuitions of what things are real and what things are important."¹³ To this end he has turned from complaint to comedy:

I got very tired of the solemnity of complaint, altogether impatient with complaint. Obligated to choose between complaint and comedy, I chose comedy, as more energetic, wiser, and manlier.

Bellow's prose "flames out"¹⁵ into affirmation of the real world; it "combines literary complexity with a conversational ease...joins the idiom of the academy with the idiom of the streets," recording the colors, sounds, joys, and glories of the world around.¹⁶ Augie's erratic course through life includes everything and yet by "calculated indiscriminateness" discards everything,¹⁷ and the novel pulsates with the same beat of Augie's engagement and disengagement. Here, in true Yiddish style Bellow combines the pants with the philosophy. In short, he has achieved an organic style which perfectly fits his protagonist and theme.¹⁸

The beginning of the book serves notice: that Augie's style is essentially a Whitmanesque "Song of Self:" "I am an American, Chicago born...and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent." He affirms the new cultural spirit of exuberance of his time, and his simple declaration of identity attempts to cut through all the problems of the relation of self to society.¹⁹ Augie is out to suppress nothing and to reaffirm the possibilities

of experience in America at a time when the individual found it too possible to shrink in terror from his world.²⁰ He has a sense of joyous connection with the common grain of American life;²¹ and even though in the end he is aware how much disappointment lies in the essentials of existence, he affirms experience with a savor that strongly suggests Hasidic joy in life.

Augie's "Song of Self" takes the form of a rhythm between engagement and disaffiliation, and according to these main movements this analysis will proceed.

Augie's courtship of experience begins with early life. Born an illegitimate Jew in the Chicago slums into a bizarre, broken household, he is projected into a brutal world at the age of twelve to learn his way. Throughout the book, he meets and deals with over eighty characters; his adventures lead him from Chicago to Mexico to the war to Paris. He has various jobs, and as he mentions, "saying various jobs I give out the Rosetta stone, so to speak, to my entire life." He is a little of everything; student, petty thief, adopted son, tramp, lover, apprentice to assorted people and trades, would-be intellectual at the University of Chicago, Trotskyite, eagle tamer, and merchant seaman; as Richard Chase says, he is something of a schlemiel.²² All kinds of queer people who appear normal enter his life: a lover who trains eagles to hunt iguanas in Mexico; a philosophical cripple who serves as a Napoleonic figure; a scientist who believes he has uncovered the secret of life; a millionaire writing a book on human happiness from the rich's point of view, etc.

Yet the world in which Augie lives makes it difficult for him to become committed. Each engagement in experience is followed by a digging in of the heels, a disengagement.²³ For Augie is holding out for the highest bid of experience; he will not let himself be defined by a false identity. He believes that to commit himself to any sort of function in the going concern of society is a form of death.²⁴

On one level, society kills by the imposition of a materialistic ethos; people are divided crudely, according to "whether they screwed or were screwed, whether they themselves did the manipulating or were roughly handled, tugged, and bobbed by their fates." His brother Simon is the exact opposite of Augie; he has accepted society's challenge and has fought ruthlessly to achieve a brilliant success, meanwhile corrupting all that is good and decent in him.²⁵ The theme of money, introduced in The Victim, again appears to cut across love, family ties, happiness, and self respect. In an affluent society one must either serve wealth or possess it, or remain an outsider.²⁶

But on another level, society imposes on Augie through people--the so-called "reality-instructors" of Herzog, people with a scheme, a system or an ideal construct, people who have let their imaginations run amok, and who try to enlist others to their way of thinking.²⁷ Augie resents these people the most: "of all the impositions this was the worst imposition. Not just to be as they make you but

to feel as they dictate."

The trouble with these people is that they fail to take account of the real world:

Everyone tries to create a world he can live in, and what he can't use he often can't see. But the real world is already created, and if your fabrication doesn't correspond, then even if you feel noble and insist on there being something better than what people call reality, that better something needn't try to exceed what, in its actuality, since we know it so little, may be very surprising.

Life is too mysterious to be figured out and schematized, and Augie says, maybe if we take the trouble to know reality better we will be very surprised.

Most people with ideal constructions end up being trapped by them,²⁸ and Augie fears this; in his Trotskyite period, he says: "Please God!...Keep me from being sucked into another one of those great currents where I can't be myself." People who begin by putting a false front before the world end up by doing what the world expects. To expose the real self is to be exposed to shame.²⁹ Most people are types, creating false fronts, and Augie wants to be a personality.

Augie himself dreams of a private school in the country so that he never has to "loan myself again to any other guy's scheme." But that falls through, and he begins to realize how small a role reason plays in life. In the end it is the instincts that dominate life, while the weakness of reason and the will are constantly exposed.³⁰ This is the tension of heart and head mentioned above.³¹ Life, for Augie, is essentially in act, not in thought. While he does not deny ideas, he places them lower in his scale of values.³² A mad scientist with whom Augie is marooned in a lifeboat would use

reason to save the world, but Augie knows that he lacks heart. At one point, Augie says, "after much making sense, it's senselessness you submit to."

All the same, Augie does not live entirely by senselessness. His continued disengagement from schemes suggest some sort of ideal. Robert Penn Warren calls him "The Man with No Commitments,"³³ and yet Augie has a very definite commitment--to himself. Augie's self-conception draws upon both Whitman and Dreiser.³⁴

In the naturalistic tradition of Dreiser, Augie says at the beginning of the book that a man's character is his fate. By this he means that character is the given part of a man's nature and determines what he is likely to receive.³⁵ He goes on: "all the influences were lined up waiting for me: I was born, and there they were to form me...!"

But Augie March is a typically American figure, without an inherited identity.³⁶ For Leventhal and Allbee of The Victim that was a source of anxiety, but it makes this child of the city "larky and boisterous." The rootlessness of city life and his shifting family background leave him free from tradition, and so he is ready to choose an identity from the world and history.³⁷ He reflects on

what very seldom mattered to me, namely, where I came from, parentage, and other history, things I had never much thought of as difficulties, being democratic in temperament, available to everybody and assuming about others what I assumed about myself.

At the end of the book Augie simply inverts Heraclitus' quote about character; "it's obvious that this fate, or what he settled for, is also his character." This is the Whitman-

esque tradition of the autonomous self, which no amount of conditioning can change. Man has a large part to play in his fate, and Augie can go no further than to say that this part is largely eluding all identities proffered to one by the world, by one's past, and by one's friends.³⁸ In this novel the search for self, while taking place on the stage of the world, is essentially passive; Augie's efforts are oriented to keeping the territory of his personality free. His character is essentially ambiguous, holding to self and yet open to experience³⁹—and it is this ambiguity which has led many critics to comment on his lack of substantiality.

Augie never knows quite where he is going, and this, he recognizes, is frightening.

You will understand...that 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?

But, he realizes, it is better to be what you are, even if it isn't good enough: "I will never force the hand of fate to create a better Augie March, nor change the time to an age of gold." His friend Mintouchian replies, "It is better to die what you are than to live a stranger forever." That is the source of the "opposition" that Augie's friend Einhorn notices; Augie realizes that identities must be chosen carefully and correctly. He treasures his freedom of choice, and knows that once choice is exercised freedom is limited. He feels that at least unexercised choice contains hope and that that state is better than false choice.⁴⁰ For that

reason Augie remains a suspended, passive, uncommitted character. As Tanner says, he is not a dangler but a circler.⁴¹

At the end of the book Augie remains circling. Attempting to take the unsafe road and be a personality rather than the safe road and be a type still leaves him with his search. He remains optimistic:

Why I am a sort of Columbus of those near-at-hand and believe you can come to them in this immediate terra incognita that spreads out in every gaze.

He has gained in self knowledge, learning the disparity between what he thought life would be and what it turned out to be.⁴² He has discovered that living, not thinking, is the road to self-discovery, even though he has not yet found himself.

Even marriage does not take away the burden of self-realization. His conflict between independence and communion reaches its highest pitch whenever he falls in love.⁴³ He had already walked out on one engagement, but near the end he marries Stella, one of his lovers, moves to Paris, and becomes involved in a shady business. He finds the experience not totally satisfying, and laboring with this insoluble problem he comes to a decisive insight into the nature of the self. He finds that even if love conquers all, there is much for it to conquer and to go on conquering. Everyone must continue living, and love does not dissolve the burden of personality or take away the independence of the quest.⁴⁴ Thus again we see Bellow's muted affirmation: there is much running and brawling, with little possibility for real freedom or community, even though the battle must continue.⁴⁵

Freedom lovingly exercised, he finds, still may not bring one into communion with society.⁴⁶

But Augie retains an unaccountable openness. Although he has received the hard raps of life, he continues to embrace man and experience. He accepts the claims of history and nature to the full, and still remains open to the freshness of the present life.⁴⁷ He admits to himself that he is only a servant of love--a neophyte in the mystery of acceptance. At the end we see him laughing. Walking through biting winter cold in the French countryside with a grotesque old house-maid, singing songs, as she suggested, to keep their stomach from freezing, Augie breaks into laughter when she tells him of her dream to go to Mexico someday. Later, he smiles again at the thought:

I was still chilled from the hike across the fields, but, thinking of Jacqueline and Mexico, I got to grinning again. That's the animal ridens in me, the laughing creature, forever rising up. 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 thinks it can win over us and the power of hope? Nah, nah! It never will. But that probably is the joke, on one or the other, and laughing is an enigma that includes both.

The final note of the book is not then freedom, love or even endurance, but laughter.⁴⁸ Life is a joke, and comedy, transcending the categories of pain and joy, assimilates the contradictions of reality in a mysterious way. It enables man to continue without being crushed.⁴⁹ Bellow ends with the enigma of enduring hope; reality, however, remains contradictory, and in these terms Bellow's work remains exploratory.⁵⁰ But the grandeur of life is not disproved by failure, says Augie, in his self-comparison to Columbus: "I may well be

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a flop at this line of endeavor. Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America."

The Adventures of Augie March underlines the role of human freedom in achieving man's destiny; if it does nothing else, man can reject false identities. While a man can be determined by birth and environment, life presents a kaleidoscope of choices which must be carefully sorted and examined. Even love does not remove the burden of selection, Augie finds; yet a man cannot take his search too seriously, lest the world crush him. Life's tension can be dissolved in laughter.

Augie, for all his affirmation of modern experience, was a test case of the failure of American spirit of the 50's to find repose in that experience.⁵¹ The buoyancy and optimism were on the surface. Bellow, along with others, began to see that behind the loss of values was a sickness at the roots. A mere loss of values, comments Podhoretz,

began to seem inadequate to account for the dimensions of the spiritual vacuum that many intellectuals saw lying beneath the surface prosperity and apparent confidence of the Eisenhower Age. 52

Bellow's next work, Seize the Day, was addressed to that sickness.

FOOTNOTES

1. Ludwig, op. cit., p. 10.
2. Tanner, op. cit., p. 41.
3. Podhoretz, op. cit., p. 216.
4. Ludwig, op. cit., p. 13.
5. Ibid., p. 15.
6. Freedman, op. cit., p. 51.
7. Podhoretz, op. cit., p. 217.
8. Tanner, op. cit., p. 14.
9. Chase, "The Adventures," p. 325.
10. Podhoretz, op. cit., p. 216.
11. Bellow, "The Sealed Treasure," p. 414.
12. Tanner, op. cit., p. 42-3.
13. Bellow, "The Writer and The Audience," 9 Perspectives USA, 1954, p. 100.
14. Bellow, "The Art," p. 62.
15. Ludwig, op. cit., p. 10.
16. Roth, op. cit., p. 229.
17. Waldmeir, op. cit., p. 131.
18. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 199.
19. Podhoretz, op. cit., p. 216.
20. Hassan, op. cit., p. 311.
21. Podhoretz, op. cit., p. 216. Joyce, Proust, and Mann illustrated the barrenness of modern culture by eulogizing past civilizations. But Augie is awed even by the wonder of 20th century America: for example, half-joking and half-serious, he compares his patron, Einhorn, with Caesar, Machiavelli, or Ulysses.
22. Chase, "The Adventures," p. 326.

23. Tanner, op. cit., p. 48.
24. Chase, "The Adventures," p. 325.
25. Frank, op. cit., p. 110.
26. Hassan, op. cit., p. 307.
27. Freedman, op. cit., p. 60.
28. Levenson, op. cit., p. 8.
29. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 198.
30. Ibid.
31. Malin, op. cit., p. 97.
32. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 193.
33. G. J. Goldberg, "Life's Customer, Augie March,"
3 Critique, 1960, p. 16. Cf. P. R. Warren, "The Man With No
Commitments," 129, New Republic, 1953.
34. Chase, "The Adventures," p. 326.
35. Hassan, op. cit., p. 304.
36. Podhoretz, op. cit., p. 217.
37. Frank, op. cit., p. 109.
38. Chase, "The Adventures," p. 325.
39. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 193.
40. Frank, op. cit., p. 111.
41. Tanner, op. cit., p. 49.
42. Goldberg, op. cit., p. 17.
43. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 196.
44. Ibid.
45. Waldmeir, op. cit., p. 122.
46. Chase, "The Adventures," p. 325.
47. Hassan, op. cit., p. 305.

48. Ibid., p. 308.
49. Malin, op. cit., p. 134.
50. Hassan, op. cit., p. 308.
51. Podhoretz, op. cit., p. 218.
52. Ibid. p. 220.

SEIZE THE DAY

Seize the Day, a novella published by 1956, was considered by many critics to be Bellow's finest piece of work to that date. In this short novella Bellow continues his relentless probing into the nature of love, freedom, and identity in the modern world. He narrows his search here to the question of human failure.

The main character, Tommy Wilhelm, a New York Jew in his 40's, is almost the exact opposite of Augie March. Augie exemplified freedom, undefined by social reality, seeking some sort of reconciliation; Tommy is a picture of freedom defined by social reality, still seeking reconciliation in spite of the failure with which his societal ethos has saddled him. Augie March's mistakes had merely multiplied his choices, whereas Tommy's errors define and limit his career.¹ Seize the Day is a study of the effect of failure on the human person; it asks the question: What happens to a man in middle age when he suddenly realizes that he has misused his freedom? Can the dialogue between the self and other begin? Here, for the first time Bellow has presented a "fully adequate, dramatically concentrated image of what the central figure is up against."² Like Augie, Wilhelm lives in a world of Machiavellians, but this time they exert a real and sinister power which, by the end of the book, has all but crushed him. His conflict is with the American ethic of success: namely, the contradiction that to be born is to be, but on the day-to-day level to be is to succeed. "The American way of life says that all men are

created equal, but only he who rings the bell gets the cigar."³ In this work, the imagination has been overwhelmed by the chaos of the world; Tommy cannot imagine how he should live. Bellow also continues the theme of freedom hampered from within--the self limiting itself by vanity, and egotism.

Norman Podhoretz scores the prevailing intellectual opinion of the time--the feeling that contemporary society was divorced from nature, feeling, and intuition:

We were a people so far removed from nature, so lost in abstraction, so cut off from the instinctual, that only--as Norman Mailer put it-- a "revolution backward toward being" could save us. ⁴

Bellow's novella, he said, presented an image of society "at the end of its historical term a civilization, whose particular compromise with nature has all but broken down."⁵

The major symptom and cause of this divorce, as presented in Seize the Day, is money and its associated influences. The three short stories published with his novella reflect Bellow's preoccupation with the terrible and ubiquitous power of money. A character in "A Father-To-Be" says, "money surrounds you in life as earth does in death." Everything, even the most sacred values, responds to the insidious touch of the dollar.

Uch! How they love money, thought Wilhelm. They adore money! Holy money. Beautiful money! It was getting so that people were feeble-minded about everything except money. While if you didn't have it you were a dummy, a dummy! You had to excuse yourself from the face of the earth. Chicken! That's what it was. The world's business.

People, Tommy reflects, become cynical, especially successful people; "So many people nowadays were (cynical). No one

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seemed satisfied, and Wilhelm was especially horrified by the cynicism of successful people. Cynicism was bread and meat to everybody."

But money also corrupts natural relations. Because Tommy is not successful, Tommy's father, an old, revered, and vain doctor, is disgusted with his son and calls him a "slob." Tommy feels the alienation strongly:

No, but you hate me. And if I had money you wouldn't. By God, you have to admit it. The money makes the difference. Then we would be a fine father and son, if I was a credit to you--so you could boast and brag about me all over the hotel. But I'm not the right type of son. I'm too old, I'm too old and too unlucky.

His wife, from whom he is separated, also uses money as a lever to make him come crawling back. Margaret milks him dry, demanding money for insurance, for her continued education, for living expenses, for the two boys, until Tommy cries out, "You must realize you're killing me!" But Margaret remains adamant, and Wilhelm wonders in stupefied amazement, "Can you be the woman I lived with?...Have you forgotten that we slept so long together? Must you now deal with me like this, and have no mercy?" His former love apparently means nothing. Even communication breaks down in the dollar-minded society, realizes Tommy, as he sits in front of the trading board at the stock exchange. A person would faint for a glass of water before he could tell someone his need: "Every other man spoke a language entirely his own, which he had figured out by private thinking; he had his own ideas and peculiar ways." The skyscrapers of

New York become the new towers of Babel, leading man away from his roots by the dream of success.

Money, for the ordinary man, is also the robber of freedom. Caught between conflicting demands, the common man is crushed. Tommy tells his father:

Don't talk to me about being free. A rich man may be free on an income of a million net. A poor man may be free because nobody cares what he does. But a fellow in my position has to sweat it out until he drops dead.

Behind the desire for success and money is a deeper malaise--the desire to be more than human, to transcend the limitations of death. This Promethean urge equates money and life, but in reality, says Bellow, money is death, and success is aggression.⁷ The dubious Dr. Tamkin points out this fact to Tommy: "Money and Murder both begin with 'M'... Money making is aggression... People come to the market to kill. They say, 'I'm going to make a killing.' It's not accidental." Death is a constant theme, communicated by the clutter and congestion of the city, and exemplified by the old people of the Hotel Gloriana where Tommy lives, who have nothing to do but "wait out the day" in living death. Tommy's father, Dr. Adler, who has subscribed to the success ethic, fears death, and does not like to be reminded of it by his importunate son. In his obsession for continued life, the old doctor becomes divorced from time; he cannot even remember the year his wife died. Each day he goes down to the health room of the hotel for a massage and a steam bath, to keep himself youthful.

Under the influence of this ethic, manners and style are all that count. Tommy muses: "How we love looking fine

in the world." Real feelings are submerged; his father lives according to the latest fashions and yet cannot loan Tommy a dime in his troubles.

It is no wonder that Tommy wants to live, liberating himself from the false values that had heretofore dominated his soul.⁸ He says wistfully: "The world's business. If only he could be free of it." He feels congestion and pressure to an extent that Augie never did, and the movement of the book, covering only one day, goes from a growing feeling of suffocating congestion to a moment of complete physical and spiritual release. Throughout the book Tommy's anxiety grows: "His heart and his head were congested with anger...I'm so choked up and congested anyway I can't see straight...you've got to let me breathe." When he wants to show his father what Margaret, his estranged wife, is doing to him, he actually begins to choke himself. As Tanner says, "It is a graphic enactment of a character suffering from the hands of the world's business gripped around his throat."⁹

To understand the movement of the book from congestion to release, it is necessary to examine more closely the character of Tommy Wilhelm.

Tommy is a representative failure: an unsuccessful ex-actor, separated from his wife and his two children whom he especially loves, unemployed because of a love-affair as a salesman, aware that he has "done nothing to distinguish himself," he still believes and hopes that he looks "passably well." He is not without his humorous aspects; his father

observes his numerous tics and twitches, and his neurotic dependence on pills of all sorts; he butts his cigarettes in his pocket without being aware of anything unusual; he lives in a filthy apartment, drinks gin out of a water glass, and keeps a cluttered, greasy Pontiac which he absentmindedly drives in second gear; with typical maudlin self-pity he laments the fact that his wife not only denied him his children, but especially the dog, Scissors, to whom he was very close. Yet in spite of all this he has great charm, and still has a handsome face.

At the start of the day which this book records, he is aware that it will be a day of reckoning, for he is spiritually bankrupt. Like all Bellovian characters, he faces a crisis: "He was aware that his routine was about to break up and he sensed that a huge trouble long presaged but till now formless was due." This morning he felt it necessary to separate the truth from the lies, to force open all that had been hidden. He looks at his past, and is compelled to admit his ambition and vanity. He had tried to free himself from "the anxious and narrow life of the average," and had been "eager for life to start." Each step--going to Hollywood, his marriage, and now entrusting his money to the con-man Tamkin--has taken place against the wishes of his deeper self: "After much thought and hesitation and debate, he invariably took the course he had rejected innumerable times." He recognizes the lies he had told others

and himself after his flop screen test, and the lies he had continued to tell to save face. His father acts as a catalyst in a discussion over the breakfast table in the hotel; he forces Tommy to admit that he had lost his job because of an unpleasant love-affair in Roxbury, and that he had been the one to leave his wife because of sexual incompatibility. Tommy begins to see his self-deception and admits the truth to himself, at the price of anger and congestion. Self-knowledge brings suffering. Even his physical appearance reflects the state of deception that he had been living in: "His broad back (was) stooped with its own weight, its strength (was) warped almost into deformity."

Tommy has indeed felt the burden of his selfhood--when-ever he stops running:

The spirit, the peculiar burden of his existence lay upon him like an accretion, a load, a hump. In any moment of quiet, when sheer fatigue prevented him from struggling, he was apt to feel this mysterious weight, this growth or collection of nameless things which it was the business of his life to carry about.

Dr. Tamkin introduces to him the distinction between the real and the pretender self. The latter acts out of vanity and egotism, following the social ethic: "The interest of the pretender soul is the same as the interest of the social life, the society mechanism." But this has an adverse effect on the person, for "the true soul is the one that pays the price...and it realizes that the pretender can't be loved. Because the pretender is a lie." The true soul on the other hand loves the truth; as a result hates the pretender, tries to kill it, and the ensuing conflict leads to deep

division within the self.¹⁰

Tommy wants to know who his true self is, so that he can know whom to love. Tamkin tells him, and he agrees: "Now! Every man realizes that he has to love something or somebody. He feels that he must go out-ward." Tommy knows also that a man is "only as good as what he loves," and since he does not want to love money, he has to find an alternative. His imagination has not been totally swallowed by chaos, and in this he is a representative figure for Bellow.¹¹ In spite of the burden of his existence, he continues to believe that he can find some answer:

There was no figure or estimate for the value of this load. But it is probably exaggerated by the subject, Tommy Wilhelm. 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.

He is a man of feeling, who can yell and cry, pray and beg, poke and blunder and go by fits and starts and fall upon the thorns of life. He feels, with some measure of hope, "that he could and would recover the good things, the happy things, the easy tranquil things of life." Mistakes and past foolishnesses must be overlooked, and the time wasted must simply be relinquished.

His failures have not been entirely his own fault. Ideal constructions have been imposed on him by others. Society has typed him. Maurice Venice, the film agent whose recommendation is a "kiss of death" in Hollywood, pulls Tommy out of college for a screen test because of his good looks. Even before the test, Venice sizes him up: "I have you placed as the type that loses the girl to the George Raft

type or the William Powell type. You are so steady, faithful, you get stood up." With hurt Tommy realizes that at the start of his career he is stamped as a born loser.

Others--his father, mother and wife--want him to follow various professions. Worst of all is Tamkin, one of Bellow's most bizarre creations,¹² a combination philosopher, financial expert, poet, psychologist, mystic, story teller, and charlatan. Bellow, as was mentioned above, is intrigued by such characters, who assert the self through words. In a crowding world, their radical self assertion is brazen enough to be fascinating. Tamkin, perhaps, is a symptom of a sick society in which words are used for deception rather than for dialogue.¹³

Tommy has entrusted his last seven hundred dollars to this man in the hopes that he will be able to make money on the market. He realizes his weakness: "I guess I am a sucker for people who talk about the deeper things in life." Tamkin deluges him with stories, facts, ideas and philosophic insights which vary from profundity to comic transparency; yet his ideas penetrate and shape Tommy. He tells Tommy to seize the day, to begin living in the present, for the past is gone and the future is uncertain. True life exists only in the present.

Tommy wonders how to seize the day in modern New York. Although born in the city, he desires to move to the country for its peace and quiet. The clutter and chaos of the city

makes it impossible to comprehend how life should be lived:

And the great, great crowd, the inexhaustible current of millions of every race and kind pouring out, pressing round, of every age, of every genius, possessors of every human secret, antique and future, in every face the refinement of one particular motive or essence...The sidewalks were wider than any causeway; the street itself was immense, and it quaked and gleamed and it seemed to Wilhelm to throb at the last limit of endurance.

The size and impersonality of it all can make a person feel like an animal, and at night men actually howl from windows like wolves. It is a world of lonely men, "a kind of hell, or at least a kind of purgatory. You walk on the bodies. They are all around. I can hear them cry de profundis and wring their hands...poor human beasts."

Tamkin, for all his talk, manages only to seize the money, and disappears with Tommy's last hope. By an inexorable process Bellow has brought Tommy to the point where he can no longer depend on money, victimized by the very society which worships money so much.¹⁴

Tommy runs out to find Tamkin, and in the process is crowded into a funeral home, where he is forced to pass by the bier of the dead man. The image arrests him, and makes him forget about Tamkin.

Soon he was past words, past reason, coherence. He could not stop. The source of all tears had suddenly sprung open within him, black, deep, and hot, and they were pouring out and convulsed his body.... The great knot of ill and grief in his throat swelled upward and he gave in utterly and held his face and wept. He cried with all his heart....The flowers and lights fused ecstatically in Wilhelm's blind, wet, eyes; the heavy sea-like music came up in 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 sunk deeper than sorrow, through torn sobs and cries toward the consummation of his heart's ultimate need.

This is the ending of the book--a blurred, deeply emotional statement beyond clear exactness. One wonders what exactly Tommy is weeping for. Undoubtedly there is a certain amount of necessary physical release from the rising congestion and suffocation which he has felt all day. But there is certainly something beyond this; it is not, as Levenson thinks, a "sloppy, pathetic, and horrifying"¹⁵ ending, with Tommy as a failure. While admittedly there is no solution or resolution presented,¹⁶ Tommy has learned something about himself, and about his relation to the world. He learns that the money-success ethic does not define human reality, and that failure in this world does not mean the end of life.

For, facing the dead man, Tommy becomes aware of what it means to be human. He comes back into contact with the nature that all the other people are trying to transcend through devotion to money. He accepts the limitation of death, and becomes aware of common humanity. And this awareness of human nature is the most radical step in self-knowledge, and the basis for love--"his heart's ultimate need."¹⁷ Seeing man beyond the reach of all distractions brings Tommy to transcend his petty troubles--"the business of the world"--and to concentrate on what is human. A line from a Shakespearean sonnet has been running through his head: "Love that well which thou must leave ere long." He begins to see that what he must leave is humanity, and that it is not too late to love. The nature that Bellow wishes to return to is the theologian's nature. Says Podhoretz: "a har-

monious universe ruled over by God, a universe in which man has reassumed his proper place in the cosmic hierarchy."¹⁸

But facing death is also facing life. Tommy weeps for the inevitable death of self and humanity, but at the same time he affirms the supreme value of life beyond financial success or failure.¹⁹ Earlier, Tamkin had told him: "Those are the only two classes of people there are. Some want to live, but the great majority don't...They don't. Or else why these wars?...The love of dying amounts to one thing; they want you to die with them." His tears are an act of love for life. Money and success have not killed his heart. Sitting in the stock market, thinking how alienated people are from one another, Tommy decides there must be "a larger body, and from this you cannot be separated." In the subway once he had experienced that union with humanity:

And in the dark tunnel, in the haste, heat, and darkness which disfigure and make freaks and fragments of nose and eyes and teeth, all of a sudden, unsought, a general love for all those imperfect and lurid-looking people burst out in Wilhelm's breast. He loved them. One and all, he passionately loved them. They were his own brothers and sisters. 20.

Life, he finds, and love in life, mean more to the person, and have more to do with the real soul than success in the world.

More important than this general love is Tommy's changing attitudes toward the self and its burdens.²¹ Man cannot become free by renouncing his humanity; rather, and directly contradictory to the naturalists who find determinism in man's nature, acceptance of his humanity makes man free.

Tommy had sought freedom, especially in his youth.

He struck out on his own to Hollywood. But his bid for liberty failed because his actions were prompted by egotism and vanity. He did not possess true freedom; it was hampered from within by the pretender soul. Later, in his moment of truth Tommy sadly realizes that there is very little a man can change at will. He may try: "When he's young and strong and impulsive and dissatisfied with the way things are he wants to rearrange them to assert his freedom." Nevertheless, he makes a gesture in the direction of change, even though he may have a foreboding that essentially he cannot change. But in middle age a man has no illusions about free choice:

In middle age you no longer thought such thoughts about free choice. Then it came over you that from one grandfather you had inherited such and such a head of hair which looked like honey when it whitens or sugar in the jar; from another, broad, thick shoulders; and oddity of speech from one uncle, and small teeth from another....

In middle age a man is overwhelmed by inherited factors, determining factors, and he must return to his inescapable self. He must face death and his true humanity.²² To carry around that burden is what man is for.²³ Tommy realizes that he was "assigned to be the carrier of a load which was his own self, his characteristic self." This act of self-acceptance and acquiescence with his fate is itself a sort of self-definition. He takes a realistic attitude toward his mistakes and failings, and even comes to see them as the stuff of real life:

But at the same time, since there were depths in Wilhelm not unsuspected by himself, he received a suggestion from some remote element in his thoughts that the business of life, the real business--to carry his peculiar burden, to feel shame and impotence, to taste these quelled tears--the only important business, the highest business was being done. 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.

Wilhelm comes to a real moment of insight: that perhaps the struggle toward self-realization and love is itself man's definition. It is he, not the money people, who is truly free, and his acceptance of the struggle of life is what liberates him.

It is interesting to note that, at one point in the narrative, Wilhelm prays for a new life, for a release from himself and for mercy:

Oh, God, let me out of my trouble. Let me out of my thoughts, and let me do something better with myself. For all the time I have wasted I am very sorry. Let me out of this clutch and into a different life. For I am all balled up. Have mercy.

It is not necessary to feel that here the pelagian Bellovian hero who rejected God as an answer in Dangling Man has been suddenly brought to his knees. It is probably a moment of weakness, an answer, as Joseph says, that would bring a greater disease. But it is the first stirring of the hand which reaches unsteadily out to the "King of Death and Life" in Herzog.

Tommy's confrontation with death has led him to an awareness of love as the ultimate value by which man must live. His insight into his own struggles makes him realize that man may be defined as a being who strains to self-

realization through love but never quite makes it. Bellow's new awareness of the difficulties of acting freely does not keep him from affirming that selfhood is a burden which cannot be relinquished. He steadfastly maintains that man's destiny is personal, not determined by impersonal factors.

FOOTNOTES

1. Hassan, op. cit., p. 317.
2. Chase, "The Adventures," p. 330.
3. Ludwig, op. cit., p. 15.
4. Podhoretz, op. cit., p. 220.
5. Ibid. The various forms of anti-rationalism, says Podhoretz, must be seen in the light of this sudden pessimism. Zen, Reichianism and Existentialism reflected that the source of civilization's problems was deeper than the surface sickness of capitalistic society.
6. Hassan, op. cit., p. 293.
7. Hassan, op. cit., p. 315.
8. Podhoretz, op. cit., p. 222.
9. Tanner, op. cit., p. 62.
10. Hassan, op. cit., p. 314.
11. Tanner, op. cit., p. 63.
12. Chase, "The Adventures," p. 326.
13. Tanner, op. cit., p. 65.
14. Ludwig, op. cit., p. 16.
15. Levenson, op. cit., p. 8.
16. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 201.
17. Ibid., p. 202.
18. Podhoretz, op. cit., p. 223.
19. Waldmeir, op. cit., p. 122.
20. Podhoretz sees in this sudden revelation "something like agapé." There seems, however, hardly enough evidence, here and elsewhere, for this judgment.

21. Tanner, op. cit., p. 68.
22. William Hanly, "Saul Bellow and the Naturalistic Hero," 4 Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 1964, p. 545.

HENDERSON THE RAIN KING

A crowd of facts came upon me with accompanying pressure in the chest. Who--who was I? A millionaire wanderer and wayfarer. A brutal and violent man driven into the world. A man who fled his own country, settled by his forefathers. A fellow whose heart said, I want, I want. Who played the violin in despair, a seeking the voice of angels. Who had to burst the spirit's sleep, or else.

Bellow's fifth novel, Henderson the Rain King, published in 1959, is the story of Eugene Henderson, a slightly demented American aristocrat who goes to Africa in search of his soul.¹

Henderson is asking the same questions as Tommy Wilhelm, but he is a Wilhelm stripped of societal constrictions. Henderson has everything--money, power, class, wife, and family.² Externally he is freed from necessity so that he may pay attention only to interior necessity.³ The emphasis here is clearly more on Whitman than on Dreiser: the book is an untrammled song of self. All the privileges of a romantic hero are extended to this huge blundering creature, and in another radical change of form Bellow provides the milieu for the theme by making Henderson the Rain King a romance rather than a novel. The book forfeits the virtues of a novel--realism, plausibility, specificity--and gains some of the virtues of romance--abstraction, freedom of movement, extreme expressions of pathos, beauty and terror.

Bellow sends Henderson to an imaginary Africa, a great charged arena divorced from passive America, where he can confront the bestial in himself as well as his human potential; ie., where he can meet the principles in human nature which determine as well as those which free the spirit.⁵ It is yet another effort on Bellow's part to bring a hero to an

awareness of his humanity and to reconcile him to the limitations of nature. At the same time it depicts more graphically than any of his works how man can create his own reality; i.e., the dialogue between imagination and reality. Tommy Wilhelm's reconciliation has not been enough; the question still remains, what form shall ordinary life take?⁶ The imaginary setting reduces the question to: Is there anywhere a man can find his self? The self that Henderson finally encounters is the struggling self, wiser in the apprehension of its goals and finding some sort of peace. Transcendence is a possibility able to be realized only with full acceptance, not rejection, of the claims of the body.

This book is the most enigmatic Bellovian enterprise yet. The first wave of reviewers compared Henderson to Don Quixote, Tarzan, Gulliver, Everyman, Huck Finn, Daniel, a Connecticut Yankee, Odysseus, and Captain Ahab.⁷ A puzzled later reviewer asked, "What is the story really about," and observed that the meaning must come from the degree of affirmation Bellow intended: "What is involved here, I think, is the nature and extent of Bellow's commitment to his story."⁸

The extent of commitment is difficult to unravel since the book is a comedy.⁹ A favorite theme for Bellow is the seriousness and pessimism which recent writers have taken toward the self. Since that approach has begun to seem "fraudulent," other writers have begun to exploit "comically the romantic theme of the precious, unique, self." He goes on:

A small handful of writers...have offered us, in comedy, our only relief from the long prevalent mood of pessimism, discouragement, and low-seriousness....Let us hope that, superfluity and solemm nonsense having been laughed and hooted away by the comic spirit, we may see the return of a genuine moral seriousness in literature. 10

Henderson, a "tremendously egotistical, presumptuous buffoon," wandering through Africe in a pair of dirty jockey shorts, insisting on the supreme importance of the history of his teeth, roaring snatches of a psalm in imitation of a lion while in the lion's den (De profooooondis), fond of his own suffering and prone to solipsism ("Reality is you," he tells himself, looking into a mirror) is a very likely candidate for Bellow's contribution to the comic appreciation of self. Yet if Henderson the Rain King is a parody of self concern, the question arises, how much of a parody is it? At first glance, many important themes, (such as human destiny, love, the power of imagination, self-identity), are represented here; but in the comic atmosphere one wonders how seriously they are meant to be taken. How much importance does Bellow himself attach to Henderson? The answer, as Tanner suggests, may be that "the surface of the book is comic and the center deeply serious." 12 Bellow may have put his ideas into a comic perspective to see how well they survive the test. Perhaps he is probing the ground between excessive concern for self and vilification of the self.

There are two parts to the book: in the first brief section Henderson explains the background for his trip to Africa, and in the second section the actual trip to Africa is detailed. This analysis will follow that scheme, briefly

examining the motives for the protagonist's jaunt, and then exploring the significance of the events which lead him to a sort of self-knowledge.

Henderson is a Hudson valley aristocrat: a great-grandfather was secretary of State, great uncles were ambassadors, and his father was a famous scholar. Yet Henderson was unable to find self-realization in his tradition; he admits that most of his life he has behaved like a bum. He is a man of mad habits--drinking, involvement with women, fighting police, raising pigs in the family estate, taking violin lessons to contact his dead father, shouting out at life with enough force to frighten an old servant to death. He himself observes that his life has been chaos:

When I think of my condition at the age of fifty-five when I bought the ticket, all is grief. The facts begin to crowd me and soon I get a pressure in the chest. A disorderly rush begins--my parents, my wives, my girls, my children, my farm, my animals, my habits, my prejudices, my brutality, my teeth, my face, my soul! I have to cry, "No, no, get back, curse you, let me alone!" But how can they let me alone? They belong to me. They are mine. And they pile into me from all sides. It turns into chaos.

While he is an amalgam of vehement forces, he remains largely unchanneled, rushing here and there in one mad scheme after another. He personifies a vague malaise, "the sense of aimless drift and unused energy, that seems to afflict a prosperous and spiritually stagnant society like our own!"¹³ His distraction reaches a fever pitch in the voice that he keeps hearing within himself: "I want. I want."

Victimized by nameless desire, he seeks a reality that will satisfy its incessant chanting. He feels he has to carry his life to a certain depth, and to move from the realm of Becoming to Being: "Enough! Time to have Become. Time to be! burst the spirit's sleep." But a confrontation with death is the immediate occasion for his journey. He inspects the room of a suddenly dead servant, and finds there the accumulated junk of a lifetime:

And I thought, Oh, shame, shame! Oh, crying shame! How can we? Why do we allow ourselves? What are we doing? The last little room of dirt is waiting. Without windows. So for God's sake, make a move, Henderson, put forth effort. You, too, will die of this pestilence. Death will annihilate you and nothing will remain, and there will be nothing left but junk.

The cluttered remains of a self-centered life frighten him, and so he resolves upon a journey, a quest for the real and the Other, which, he believes, will make him free.¹⁴ Death must not be the end of failing. His own life has been so full of errors and omissions that Henderson feels compelled to seek his reality through an act of service by which he can come to new depths of being and escape the realm of Becoming. But that ideal must be chastened, and so his journey through Africa, which is really a mental journey, begins.¹⁵ One day, while he is chopping wood on his farm, a piece flies up and hits him in the nose. He speculates that truth must come in blows, and his trip in Africa brings him successively harsher blows of truth.

His first act is one of preliminary separation from the civilization which has brought him so much dissatisfaction. He flies to Africa, "the ancient bed of mankind." There he

must live by the rules of the land, encountering greater and greater savagery until all rules of civilization are left behind and he encounters brute nature. That, for Henderson, is the "hour which burst my spirit's sleep."

He first meets the Arnewi--a gentle, peace-loving people who live in rhythm with nature. Ritual is an integral part of his education; he wréstles Prince Itelo in a half-sport half-ceremony and kisses the stomach of the old Queen Willattale. Touching her, Henderson feels "as if I were touching the secrets of life." He senses that he can come into contact with reality through her, but she can only tell him, "Grun-tu-molani. Man want to live." Henderson's gratitude for this pithy advice leads him to an attempt to clear the village cistern of plaguing frogs; but he only succeeds in blowing up the cistern, destroying the entire water supply of the Arnewi. He is too violent to be of help to these people. He has not yet learned how to live in rhythm with nature. And so in disgrace he leaves the village and embarks on the second, more difficult part of his journey.

The next tribe that Henderson and his native guide, Romilayu, meet, are the Wariri, a more sinister group who greet him with an ambush, imprison him with a corpse, and offer no explanation for their incarceration of him. After distinguishing himself by picking up the huge rain goddess statue during a religious ritual, (hence the title "Rain King") Henderson comes under the tutelage of King Dahfu.

King Dahfu is a remarkable character: educated, passionately intense, imprisoned by tribal rules which dictate that his harem wives should kill him when he becomes impotent. Henderson is exhilarated by him; he feels, as soon as he sees him, that "we should approach ultimates together." The king's quiet serenity makes Henderson believe that he can learn the secret of being from him. And indeed, everything that he does with the tribe brings him closer to the meaning of what he considers "the ultimate problem"--death.¹⁶

From Dahfu Henderson learns first of all that grun-tu-molani is not enough. Man must reach the realm of Being, and to do this he must turn to the beasts--Henderson has always been close to them with his pig farming. Dahfu has a lion which he has caught and tamed, and each day he visits it in an underground cell. Henderson thinks that the king is experimenting for "mankind as a whole, which is tired of itself and needs a shot in the arm from animal nature."¹⁷ Dahfu brings Henderson with him down into the lion's den, and persuades the terrified American to approach closer and closer to the beast. At first Henderson is too conscious of himself, but submission to the lion makes him pass through fear into a new kind of peace; Dahfu tells him: "She will make consciousness to shine. She will burnish you. She will force the present moment upon you." Getting down to the bottom of things teaches Henderson how to capture the emanations of a vital creature, how to be still and active, sufficient and attuned, how to be and to love. The lion is what Henderson is

not--external, powerful, and real. Henderson undergoes a savage encounter with something entirely foreign, entirely other, and from this encounter discovers reality in himself.¹⁸ The easy acceptance of nature points the way to Being.

But the voice, "I want," refuses to be quieted in this new peace.¹⁹ Here Dahfu rises to new heights of insight. He refuses to be pessimistic about the possibilities of humanity, for he feels that "the noble will have its turn in the world." The secret of this is the noble self-conception. Dahfu celebrates the power of the human imagination to bring man to transcendence. The world of facts is real, and not to be altered, he starts--and this world of fact corresponds to the animal nature confronted in the lion. But he continues, "there is the noumenal department, and there we create and create and create." Man, says Dahfu, is a "master of imagination." He gives Henderson an example:

Birds flew, harpies flew, angels flew, Daedulus and son flew. And see here, it is no longer dreaming and story, for literally there is flying. You flew here, into Africa. All human accomplishment has this same origin, identically. Imagination is a force of nature. Is this not enough to make a person full of ecstasy? Imagination...It coverts to actual. It sustains, it alters, it redeems.

Without imagination, man is locked in a cycle of "fearing and desiring." Henderson feels imprisoned by these forces, and agrees with Dahfu that "any good man will try to break the cycle." The power of self-redemption is within man's grasp.

This is as far as the lesson goes. The creative imagination may be able to tell man how to live, but it is not as simple as that.²¹ Henderson's ecstasy is checked

during the wild lion hunt in which Dahfu is killed and Henderson confronts the violence and death that are at the center of nature and are another part of reality.

Then, at the very doors of consciousness, there was a snarl and I looked down from this straw perch-- I was on my knees--into the big, angry, hair-framed face of the lion. It was all wrinkled, contracted; within those wrinkles was the darkness of murder...the snarling of this animal was indeed the voice of death.

He reflects that "this was all mankind needed, to be conditioned into the image of a ferocious animal like the one below." He had boasted to his wife that he loved reality, but the vision of the lion was too much for him. The pet lioness offered him one pitch of reality, and was a step on the journey from Becoming to Being, but the wild male shatters that dream.²² This type of reality, rather than being an escape from chaos, is chaos and darkness itself. To submit to this type of reality would be to submit to the inhuman real. Henderson's promethean ideal of passing from Becoming to Being is shattered. There is a certain insurmountable chaos in human nature. The ideal of self-realization cannot be realized.

Henderson escapes from the Wariri and his African education comes to an end. In the final scene we see him with a Persian boy on a fueling stop in Newfoundland, rejoicing in his new found self--"I guess I felt it was my turn to move now, and so went running--leaping, leaping, pounding, and tingling over the pure white lining of the gray Arctic silence."

The ending dissatisfied many critics. Philip Roth charged that his regeneration took place in a wholly imagined world, and hence did not exist; then Henderson celebrated that regeneration in an unpeopled, icebound, Arctic vastness.²³ Yet according to some the direction of the book as a whole seems convincing.²⁴ Bellow has isolated the imagination's attempt to find out how to live. Man, seeking nobility, having accepted the claims to animal nature, encounters death and violence at the center of that nature.²⁵ Reality remains recalcitrant. Yet Henderson has learned something about himself and man--nobility is not unreal, human greatness is no illusion, chaos does not dominate reality.²⁶ Becoming always continues; the struggle with the voice "I want" always remains.²⁷ Yet, realizes Henderson, that is the common cry of humanity: after his encounter with the lioness, he writes to his wife: "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." The mutual striving makes men brothers.²⁸

The over-all intention of the book remains unclear, and its lesson ambiguous. Yet when the book evinces Bellow's refusal to accept despair, it moves beyond the limitations of parody.²⁹ The foolish Henderson is persistent enough in his folly to indicate glimpses of how the spirit's sleep shall be broken. Realizing the role of human striving is a redemption, a sort of transcendence. It is not enough to bring

man to Being. Man is both sufficient and insufficient.
And this realization of man's insurmountable insufficiency
is the basis for Herzog.

FOOTNOTES

1. Chase, op. cit., p. 323.
2. Ludwig, op. cit., p. 17.
3. Hassan, op. cit., p. 317.
4. Chase, op. cit., p. 323.
5. Ludwig, op. cit., p. 18.
6. Waldmeir, op. cit., p. 123.
7. Tanner, op. cit., p. 71.
8. Reed Whittlemore, "Safari Among the Wariri," 16 New Republic, 1959, p. 203.
9. Tanner, op. cit., p. 84.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., p. 83.
12. Ibid., p. 85.
13. Podhoretz, op. cit., p. 225.
14. D. J. Hughes, "Reality and the Hero: 'Lolita' and Henderson the Rain King," 6 Modern Fiction Studies, 1960, p. 335.
15. Hassan, op. cit., p. 317.
16. Ibid., p. 319.
17. Bellow, at the time, was influenced by Reichian psychology, which emphasized the value of rediscovering the animal self. Harmony is the goal of this system: "At the center of Reichian psychology is the concept of 'orgone energy.' This energy permeates the universe; when the individual is 'in time' with it--worshipping it in his own orgasmic flow--he is transformed. Healthy sex unites the human and the cosmic, body and energy, creating 'cosmic consciousness.'" Malin, op. cit., p. 111.
18. Hughes, op. cit., p. 35.
19. Tanner, op. cit., p. 79.
20. Ibid., p. 80.
21. Waldmeir, op. cit., p. 130.
22. Roth, op. cit., p. 232.

HERZOG

Herzog, published in 1965, is Bellow's latest novel. It has also been his most popular novel, holding the number one spot in the New York Times bestseller list for many months and winning for its author another National Book Award.

With the novel Bellow has apparently answered the critics who contended that he failed to locate the source of that malaise that afflicts all his heroes--that is, he has failed to relate them to the world of facts, history, politics, and the noumenal department.¹ Herzog, to be sure, treats themes similar to those of his other novels. In fact, it summarizes all his main themes--self identity, freedom, love in an urban society, disgust with a low view of man, ability of the imagination to lead man, the tension between heart and head--and its main character, Moses Herzog, embodies a little bit of all Bellow's other heroes. Herzog also sums up theological issues of human destiny, culpability identity, relationship to God, etc.

But besides this recapitulating function, Herzog is also "a novel notable for its capacity to render the complex level of experience at which intelligent men in the middle 20th century live...."² Herzog locates itself squarely in the whole intellectual tradition of the West, and is thus "one of the fullest and most explored presentations of modern experience we have."³ It is thus also a novel of ideas.

But it is a quirk of Bellovian heroes to begin with a

passion for understanding and to end stifling ideas.⁴ It is the blows of reality that teach them. Herzog, more so than any, has been called an anti-intellectual novel. This is not so, says Bellow. Moses Herzog deals with thought in a negative fashion, that is, he must dismiss a great deal of nonsense in order to survive.⁵ Thus, Herzog is no anti-intellectual, but rather a comic figure, pointing to the impossibility of arriving at a synthesis that can satisfy modern demands.⁶

Herzog, then, is the title of the story and the name of the protagonist, Moses Elkanah Herzog. The name probably derives from Joyce's Ulysses--Moses Herzog was a minor character, a put-upon Jewish merchant. But the name also gives clues to the story: herzog, meaning "duke" in German, can be blended into innumerable variations in the pidgin American unconsciousness--Heart's Hog, Hairtsog, Hurtsog, Sog. The juxtaposition of the comic and the serious establishes the theme of biting self-irony by which Moses alternately laughs and cries at his situation.⁷

Moses is clearly at the end of his tether, the victim of his personal chaos; the first line of the book reads: "If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me, thought Moses Herzog." Moses-- a tortured scholar in his mid-forties, a specialist in intellectual history, author of Romanticism and Christianity, who has been abruptly turned out of his house and divorced by his formidable second wife, then discovers to his horror that he has been cuckolded all along

by his best friend and protege--is plunged into an emotional crisis which compels a total exposure of his life and thought to himself. Moses is isolated, lonely, and brooding, an alienated intellectual, reflecting the chaos of the city where he lives. He is cut off from society, from friends, and from family. As Bellow notes, a significant theme of Herzog is the "imprisonment of the individual in a shameful and impotent privacy."⁸ Moses realizes that his intellectual privilege is yet another form of bondage.

He carries on a frenzied dialectic in his mind and on paper, writing letters to politicians, scientists, dead men, lovers and former wives, wrestling with his past and present in a welter of ideas, memories, and feelings which he cannot organize. The novel represents a passage from one state of mind to another, a transition in thought and feeling made possible by the suffering he undergoes. Characteristically, Herzog is a monologue; the most important reality of the book is in his head. Contact with the real world is superficial, and his relationships seem little more than emotion or sexual pleasure. By its very form, the resolution of the book is limited to an internal one. At the end of the book, as we shall see, he reaches a solution, but it can be no more than a change of heart.

Moses has suffered, and indeed he deserves it, for he has mismanaged his affairs miserably. His childish naivete has prevented him from seeing things as they really are:

Moses refused to see evil...having discovered that everyone must be indulgent with bungling child-men, pure hearts in the burlap of innocence, and willingly accepting the necessary quota of consequent lies, he had set himself up with his emotional goodies--truth, devotion to children (the regular American worship of kids), friendship, and potato love.

Moses can point to reasons for his simplicity--his provincial ghetto background, his poor but indulgent parents, his intellectual precocity. Not seeing things as they were has made it easier for him to get through the world. He has claimed special privileges, ignoring the common truths of humanity.

Yet it has not been entirely his fault. Moses had a good heart. People remind him of this constantly: "She told Herzog he was a better man than he knew--a deep man, beautiful, but sad...." He has loved his home and family, even his shyster brother, without reservation. Moses' father is his prototype: improvident, scheming, suffering, possessing a proud Old World heritage but doomed to failure in the New World. His Jewish heritage has been the source of his "good heart:" "The children of the race, by a never-ending miracle, opened their eyes on one strange world after another, age after age, and uttered the same prayer in each, eagerly loving what they found." Life, for Herzog, is "unexpected intrusions of beauty." Once, standing by a dock waiting for a ferry, he looks at the water:

He looked through the green darkness at the net of bright reflections on the bottom. He loved to think about the power of the sun, about light, about the ocean. The purity of the air moved him. There was no stain in the

water, where schools of minnows swam. Herzog sighed and said to himself, "Praise God--praise God." His breathing had become freer. .

He feels that he is a compulsory witness to this parade of beauty, and if things were not so particular, detailed, and very rich, he would have more rest from them. But God's veil over all things makes them riddles which must be solved.

For a man like Moses, traditions are important, but he finds himself unable to live up to them. After an affair with an Oriental girl, he broods, "Is this really possible? Have all the traditions, passions, renunciations, virtues, gems, and masterpieces of Hebrew discipline and all the rest of it--rhetoric, a lot of it, but containing true facts--brought me to these untidy green sheets and this rippled mattress?"

As he continues his merciless self-probing, he isolates certain factors in his culture which, he thinks, have been responsible for his condition. This is Herzog dealing with ideas in a negative fashion, as Bellow suggests; he is dismissing a good deal of the nonsense which his culture has tried to impose on him. In a sense, Herzog is surrounded by Machiavellians more insidious than those that badgered Augie March, for he must do battle with ideas rather than persons.

First of all he examines contemporary culture.

Religion proves to be no answer; it is interesting to note that while later Herzog seems to be reaching out to God he still has no time for organized religion. Catholicism falls especially under his disapprobation. His complaint is that it offers a crutch to neurotic people, or an emotional release for women. Clerics, he says, are "ecclesiastical dolls,

gold threaded petticoats, whining organ pipes. The actual world, to say nothing of the infinite universe, demanded a sterner, a real masculine character." In the end, Catholicism is dilettantism, and is dismissed as simply being irrelevant:

Living amid great ideas and concepts, insufficient to the present, day-to-day American conditions. You see, Monsignor, if you stand on television in the ancient albs and surplices of the Roman Church, there are at least enough Irishmen, Poles, and Croatians watching in saloons to understand you.

A real religion would tell man about ordinary experience, for that is the primary question of the day. Because Christianity cannot tell man what to do in everyday life, the age has passed it by: "And what was there in modern, post-Christian America to pray for...a Quixote was a Christian, and Moses E. Herzog was no Christian, and this was the post-Quixotic, post-Copernican U.S.A." Ironically, Moses' pharasical ex-wife calls him a pharisee, and he replies: "Do you think that any Christian in the 20th century has the right to speak of Jewish Pharisees? From a Jewish standpoint, you know, this hasn't been one of your best periods."

Psychology has also proved irrelevant, for it reduces the moral question to the psychotic question. Even charity is looked upon as a perversion. Moses tells the dubious Edvig: "I hope you don't mind my saying that it (your psychology) reveals a lousy, cringing, grudging view of human nature. This is how I see your Protestant Freudianism."

Likewise, philosophy has provided false answers, with its systems of abstraction which fail to take into account humanity. Bellow accuses them of a fallacious concentration of on "how good dread is for you, how it saves you from distraction, and gives you your freedom and makes you authentic." They end up with Death:

God is no more. But Death is...And we live in a hedonistic world in which happiness is set up on a mechanical model. All you have to do is open your fly and grasp happiness. And so these other theorists introduce the tension of guilt and dread as a corrective. But human life is far subtler than any of these models, even these ingenious German models.

Philosophy offers a dreary view of human nature, promoting the "canned sauerkraut of Spengler's Prussian Socialism... Inauthenticity...Forlornness...The Wasteland outlook." There is no room left for sensitivity: "This generation thinks--and this is its thought of thoughts--that nothing faithful, vulnerable, fragile, can be durable or have any true power."

Society and politics have also attacked the self. Moses asks wonderingly what it means to be a man in urban changing society, transformed by society, under organized power, subject to tremendous controls, "in a society that was no community and which made the self negligible, which spent military billions against foreign enemies but would not pray for order at home." The destruction of the individual makes the mass man all the hungrier for real communion, and so "they return to the mass agitated...not as brethren, but

as degenerates. Experiencing a raging consumption of potato love." The divine image which is already so blurred in man is thus distorted a second time.

Feelings have become blunted and imaginations perverted --so far is America divorced from the real and instinctual. Extreme cases, apocalypses, fires, drownings, stranglings and the like are not enough for the comfortable, bored middle classes, who demand more radical excitement without any regard for truth. Sexual emancipation has brought sex out into the limelight and made it socially useful; public morality meanwhile has become equated with technology-- we obey Jesus by shipping machines to Bolivia. America has betrayed its responsibilities; Moses cries: "What a responsibility we bear, in this fat country of ours? Think what America could mean to the world. Then see what it is...." On the private level, seeking fulfillment through personal relationships is for women. Herzog bitterly notes that the manly ideal in America has become duty, use, politics in the Aristotelian sense. Modern culture with its topsy-turvy value system, provides no room for the personal.

Religion, psychology, philosophy, society, politics-- modern culture has failed. It has tried to pigeonhole experience into systems and categories that are too small. The "intellectual life" which sets up these categories is the real culprit. People think that explanation is a necessity of survival, but Moses answers: "If the unexplained life is not worth living, the explained life is unbearable, too."

The Hasidic tension of heart and head manifests itself here. Moses excoriates those intellectuals who build up imaginary systems and then hide in them so that they can hate the civilization that has produced them. Worse than that, intellectualism can lead to hypocrisy, justifying abuses of other men's rights:

I'm sure you know the views of Buber. It is wrong to turn a man (a subject) into a thing (an object). By means of a spiritual dialogue, the I-It relationship becomes an I-Thou relationship. God comes and goes in man's soul. Sometimes they come and go in each other's beds, too. You have dialogue with a man. You have intercourse with his wife.

Modern culture has tried to explain everything, but that dream is a delusion. The strange plots, notions and hallucinations which issue from the human mind are enough to make one believe in Providence. Understanding human nature, people think, will tell you what to do with it.

But Moses rejects this approach with one of Bellow's favorite themes--the incomprehensibility of matter and man. Reality is just too complex: "Herzog was all too aware of the layers upon layers of reality--loathesomeness, arrogance, deceit, and then--God help us all--truth as well." No system can comprehend it, and indeed, the dream of the human heart is that life will be fulfilled in some significant pattern: "Some incomprehensible way. Before death. Not irrationally, but incomprehensibly, fulfilled." This is as far as Bellow's secular humanism will allow him to take Herzog--fulfillment of self will be found in human life. Human nature is undefinable, but it has a goal.

The Reality Instructors, the Machiavellians of Augie March, the Tamkins of Seize the Day, all crowd in upon Herzog to press an identity on him. People like this think that things are true because they are nasty, and they espouse a brutal version of the American dream that leaves no place for sensitivity. It is no wonder that Moses, like Job, groans to his friends: "The more comfort you gave me, the closer I came to death's door."

Another, subtle form of imposition is sex. Ramona, a beautiful New York businesswoman, tempts Moses with pleasure--not simple pleasure but metaphysical transcendent pleasure, "pleasure that answered the riddle of human existence." The seduction scene is a parody on liturgy; Ramona is a priestess. Through sex they could experience a real Easter. Ramona offers him her body for high-minded reasons: "She quoted him Catullus and the great love poets of all times. And the classics of psychology. And finally the Mystical Body." Yet Moses cannot accept pleasure as an answer. If total explanation was a delusion, so is sex. The spirit wants more than sex, and Moses wants his goal to be more than a pilgrimage to sexual shrines.

But rejection is not the essence of Moses' change of heart. Acceptance is. He affirms radically that there is more to humanity than falseness and delusion, temptation and sin. Like Joseph of Dangling Man, he rejects alienation as an answer, for he realizes that he is a child of this mass and a brother to all the rest.

The state of mankind, he says, is one of struggle and tension. That is why he is writing letters--to force people to have a conscience, to "keep tight the tensions without which human beings can no longer be called human." False and true, good and evil in humanity are the inescapable conditions of its progress. Mankind is struggling forward in spite of itself:

Unified by horrible wars, instructed in our brutal stupidity by revolutions, by engineered famines directed by "ideologists...perhaps we, modern mankind (can it be!) have done the nearly impossible, namely, learned something....

Suffering is the inescapable result of progress amidst these tensions, but, Moses begins to see, everyone must suffer. It does no good to howl for justice when millions have died within the century without it.

Suffering cannot be an end in itself, except for a religious elite. For suffering commonly crushes man. Survival is more important than Nietzschean "ennobling pain." In true Hasidic spirit, Moses affirms suffering only as the vehicle to higher acceptance: "I am willing, without further exercise in pain, to open my heart. And this needs no doctrine or theology of suffering...I will never expound suffering for anyone or call to Hell to make us serious and truthful." Suffering opens people only upon themselves, and so it cannot be the answer to human existence. Rather the heart must open out.

Nor can physical death be the answer. Reading Kierkegaard's Sickness Unto Death, Moses says: "If existence is nausea, then death is uncertain relief." Bellow does not

know what lies beyond, and so he avows that the question of death offers the alternative of self-disintegration by our own wills to prove our freedom or of acknowledgment that man owes human life to this waking spell of existence, regardless of what comes after. He cannot see why one should accept ineffectuality and banishment to personal life and confusion.

The answer, which is really no answer at all, is that life is given, and must be accepted, and lived. While he could not stand back and observe himself at times, Herzog realizes that he possesses a self: "But there still remained the fact. I am Herzog. I have to be that man. There is no one else to do it." Moses has no arguments for his decision to live, except the intensity of his heart--his wish to live:

Something produces intensity, a holy feeling, as oranges produce orange, as grass green, as birds heat ...but his intensity, doesn't it mean anything? Is it an idiot joy that makes this animal the most peculiar animal of all, exclaim something; and he thinks this reaction to a sign, a proof, or eternity? And he has it in his breast: But I have no arguments to make about it. "Thou movest me." "But what do you want, Herzog?" But that's just it--not a solitary thing. I am pretty well satisfied to be, to be just as it is willed, and for as long as I may remain in occupancy.

Here Bellow achieves his wish to find the qualities of life which need no justification, no strained argumentation. He finds it in an intensity which may point to a sort of after-life, a transcendence. By his nature man strains to that transcendence.

Moses professes an uncertain belief. He thinks it may be childish "expecting to be loved for doing your bidden task." So he writes to God in a letter that acknowledges his

insignificance in the face of Transcendence:

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...."

Two things are of special interest here. For one thing, Herzog's life is acknowledged as an attempt to do God's will. Second, he has attempted to reach God without symbols, and whether he means that by through the things and affairs of the world or through some mystical union is open to question. A later passage suggests the mystical union idea: he reaches out to the loving sun, the Incomprehensible: "I want to send you the most loving wish I have in my heart." He then cries, "Dear God! Mercy! My God! Rachamim olenu...melekh maimis... Thou King of life and death...!"

This is the end of Moses' journey. Acceptance of life has meant reaching out to the Other. Life cannot be explained without that Other, who is the King of Life and Death. Man would be able to affirm neither life nor death without this king. The real question is answered--life is a gift. It is foolish not to accept it. And this is the basis of the brotherhood that Moses mentions as the goal of this life.

It is worth noting that this mystical reaching is entirely mental. Never does Herzog get out of himself. At the end of the novel he finds momentary repose, but nowhere does one see him living out his brotherhood. Both at start and finish he is quite alone.

Again, reaching out to the "Incomprehensible" has not

really provided an answer to the question of ordinary existence. The only answer that is supplied is to accept the unanswerable. Herzog affirms emphatically that his destiny lies in the choice of life, rather than death. Bellow himself admits this is the main theme of Herzog:

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.

Once having chosen this life, Herzog must also admit that he is not its source, i.e., that it can be explained only in relation to another. His heart is the unstrained, natural source of this knowledge. First, his heart told him that his destiny could not be fulfilled by total explanations of psychology, philosophy, religion, modern culture, nor by sex, not even by suffering. What Bellow seems to be saying here is that man has some sort of a natural inclination toward God, or at least toward the Other, which none of the accretions of modern culture can quite stifle. Man's heart, even in the modern age, will tell him what his head will not.

Finally, the acceptance of life is only a momentary repose. At the end of the novel Bellow is clear that Herzog will suffer again, and that the bitter cup will return. If it did not, Bellow would give lie to his own thesis--that the acceptance of life means acceptance as it is given, in a tension of good and bad.

FOOTNOTES

1. Podhoretz, op. cit., p. 227.
2. Malcolm Bradbury, "Saul Bellow's Herzog," 7 Critical Quarterly, 1965, p. 273.
3. Ibid. p. 278.
4. Ibid., p. 277.
5. Bellow, "The Art," p. 70.
6. Ibid., p. 68.
7. G. P. Elliot, "Hurtsog, Hairtsog, Heart's Hog," 199 Nation, 1964, p. 252.
8. Bellow, "The Art," p. 67.

CONCLUSION

As we insisted at the beginning of this analysis, Saul Bellow is not a theologian, nor does he intend to be. He is an accomplished literary artist, and his attitude to reality is that of the man attempting to see things as they are. Yet as we have mentioned, any literary image is inescapably involved with theological questions. Bellow's main concerns, in particular--freedom, love and identity--have involved him in a questioning that raises the classical problems of theology: man's destiny, man's relationship to God, the problem of love, freedom and determinism, the nature of man, the role of man's effort in salvation, etc.

Bellow's literary efforts represent a search in both the area of insight and in the area of value. His quest for insight has led him to consider the traditional problems of dogmatic theology--the nature of things and relationships between them. His search for values has led him to probe a question which is vital to moral theology--how to live the good life. In this analysis we will summarize and evaluate Bellow according to these two broad areas: insight and value, dogmatic and moral theology.

First we will treat the insights that Bellow presents about the nature of things and their relationships. Bellow's starting point is the self of men, as we have mentioned, and so we will treat in order what Bellow has to say about the nature of men, then man's destiny (under this the questions of freedom, chance, and determinism), then man's relationship

to other men, and finally man's relationship to God. His concern can be seen to follow, roughly, the four causes of man: what he is made up of (formal and material), where he is going (final), and where he came from (efficient).

First of all, a great concern for Bellow is the nature of man, and his work especially Seize the Day, indicates that a primary source of the modern malaise is man's refusal to accept that nature. His characters are always seeking their identity, asking who am I? They feel, like Joseph, that their identity must be something transcendent, something removed from the physical facts of everyday life and the determining influences that surround them. But Bellow is adamant in insisting that transcendence is to be achieved not in spite of man's nature, but because of that nature.

Human nature, Bellow says, is both spirit and body. The spirit is constantly seeking to burst its bonds, or to wake from its sleep (as in Henderson the Rain King). In Herzog we see the spirit of humanity as a whole struggling and writhing in an effort to be free. What it desires to be free from is limitation, and especially from the limitation of the body.

But Bellow is no Manichean; the spirit's straining for transcendence is doomed to failure if it does not take into account the body. Man's physical nature is paradoxically both his greatest limiting factor and the lever of true transcendence. Tommy Wilhelm finds out in the funeral parlor that discovery of his true humanity hinges upon his acceptance of

death. Acceptance of his death is the basis for the only transcendence possible to man--love, for it makes him realize that he is one with other men. Henderson tries to discover his self by identifying with an animal--the lion. He finds that man can find a suggestion of peace and harmony in learning to adjust to the rhythms of his animal nature. Before man can burst the bonds of his spirit's sleep he must come to terms with the instinctual physical side of nature. Even Henderson's flight into Africa suggests a flight from artificiality--an artificiality which is the price of a technological nature--subduing culture. Bellow's suggestion seems to go even further: when man finds his nature he also finds his place in the world. Behind this is the assumption that there is a basic cosmic order in which man has a position. Nature for Bellow is not chaos; it is a principle of order. But 20th century man has so divorced himself from nature in general, and especially his own physical nature, that he no longer feels his place in the world, and hence no longer knows who he is. Without a stable foundation, man has no basis for love. Thus Bellow's insistence on the return to physical nature at once witnesses to the break-up of an accepted Weltanschauung and cries out for a return to what is essential in man.

Yet Bellow maintains the tension in man between soul and body, between spirit and matter. Man, he insists, is a duality, and his paradoxical heroes witness to that duality. They speak of their reverence for the indiscriminate stuff of reality around them--Moses Herzog considers himself a prisoner

of perception--and yet much of their energy is spent in freeing themselves from the clutter of everyday life. Man is both immersed in matter, and other than matter. The circumstantial crush of everyday life can swamp the spirit, according to Bellow, and his heroes are hard put to live in the world without losing their minds. For Bellow, as for St. Thomas, imagination is the faculty that bridges the gap between spirit and matter. Much of modern man's difficulty in finding a way of life in the world is due to weakness of imagination. Yet the modern world seems to attack directly that faculty. Bellow insists on the power and possibility of the imagination to discover how man can live.¹ Man's destiny is the second great problem that Bellow raises. Broadly, each of his characters is trying to become a better man. Each hero, with the exception of Augie March, is involved in the throes of a severe spiritual crisis from which he hopes to emerge to find a new level of being and a new dimension of life. Ramona summarizes Herzog's longing when she tells him that he is a man who longs for grace.² Specifically, then, his characters are engaged in a quest for salvation.

Freedom is the essential condition of the search for salvation. At first Bellow tries pure freedom (in Dangling Man); then he shows freedom limited by responsibility (The Victim). Augie March explores the possibilities of freedom, while Wilhelm exemplifies the failure of freedom. Joseph discovers that freedom means not freedom from but freedom for; Asa finds that freedom is conditioned both by respon-

sibility and chance. Augie March wrestles with the problems of determinism by nature and environment and affirms that they are not serious problems in the quest of the self. But Tommy Wilhelm sadly acknowledges in his middle age that self realization by free choice is a possibility seldom actualized. The greatest obstacle to man's exercise of freedom, he finds, is the untruth and vanity of the pretender soul. Bellow is thus very clear in his realization of a basic flaw in human nature which radically hinders man's attempts to become what he should. Even Henderson hints at this when he encounters the snarling lion on the fatal lion hunt; at the center of nature is violence and death. With the first pet lion he had found peace, but with the second his lesson is completed. Man is both free and not free.

Besides the conditioning influences of chance, responsibility, nature, and environment, Bellow includes man's relationship to time and tradition. Herzog recognizes the value of his Jewish heritage after sleeping with his Oriental mistress. He cannot imagine why all that wisdom should be considered useless. Time, too, becomes important for Leventhal, as he scans his past for evidence of his fault. Man, insists Bellow, is in continuity with what has gone behind him. He cannot escape tradition and time by fiat. His freedom must be exercised in the light of the past.

Thus Bellow points a complex picture of man's destiny. He emphasizes especially man's efforts in the vineyard of life--we have already seen that God is not a factor in sal-

vation. Optimistically, he affirms the possibility of redemption, but realistically he delineates the precariousness of the struggle. The struggle itself may be man's definition, as Bellow implies in Seize the Day; for freedom is hindered by society, by time, and by nature. Yet Bellow maintains the possibility of freedom in a squeezing world. Even when there are no desirable alternatives man must choose.

A third and important question which Bellow treats is the nature of man's relationship to other men. He is consistent in saying that the relationship between men is that of brotherhood. Herzog cries out that you are an ingrate and a fool if you separate yourself from humanity; Joseph likewise rejects the stance of alienation, while Tommy Wilhelm experiences a sort of mystical communion with people in the subway scene. But Henderson is the only hero who makes a concrete effort toward brotherhood; he goes to Africa with a vague emotional ideal of service which is partially fulfilled when he picks up the statue of the rain goddess. Familial relationships are those which are most real to Bellow, even though his women, as we shall remark later, seem to be caricatures. Thus Bellow affirms humanitarianism, although he rarely exemplifies it. At the core of this relationship is love, but since this falls more under ethical behaviour we will treat it in the next section.

While Bellow treats the brotherhood of man, he stops short of the fatherhood of God, and this is the final great area of investigation for Bellow. In Dangling Man, we saw Bellow struggling to isolate the self, to free it from all

the accretions which society had placed upon it. In this novel he wanted nothing to do with God. Joseph was not so proud that he would say that God did not exist, but he could not admit him as a factor in the search. He felt that faith would pervert the mind that was making the search. In Herzog we find Bellow struggling with a new societal awareness of the burdens of the self. But this time the hero, while not using God as an easy answer, avows that life cannot be explained without him. If Herzog is an agnostic, at least he is more reverent than Joseph. His way has been prepared by Tommy Wilhelm and Henderson who discover the flaw of original sin at the heart of man's nature, and who show that man's dream of self-salvation is no more than an illusion. Thus Bellow moves from the position of Pelagianism to the realization that man is not enough; he moves from agnosticism to acknowledgment of God as the King of Life and Death. Man's powers are insufficient in the face of life's complexity--Bellow's strong sense of the mystery of things will not allow him to make man all-sufficient.

What Bellow contributes, then, to the area of insight is a vision notable for its ability to comprehend the complexity of modern life. His intricate cosmology presents the picture of an essentially ordered universe ruled over by a God, in which man, subject to inherent natural tension and conditioned by many factors, can still pursue in freedom the goal of redemption, which appears to him as self-identity, in brotherhood and service to other men.

A second major concern for Bellow is the area of ethical value, and here he is especially of interest for the moral theologian. How should a good man live in this world? is his question. In a mass society, where so much existence is drab and ordinary, what value can we give to life? What attitude should a man take toward life? What is man's responsibility? Finally, Bellow asks: how should a man love?

First of all, we will consider the question of the good life. In a sense, this is the over-lying theme of all his novels. All his characters are searching for goodness. Herzog suggests that the question of good living is the same as the question of ordinary living. What goodness can be found in drab, urban, hurrying, industrial American society? In Dangling Man, Joseph's artist friend finds refuge in his art, but Joseph asks glumly what the "man on the street" can do. Religion is dismissed because it has failed to come to the aid of the ordinary man. The answer that Bellow finds is love (which will be treated below). But a great part of the good life is man's attitude toward it.

For one thing, man must be open to life, as Allbee brings home so forcefully to the spiritually timid Leventhal. But man also must be humble toward life. He cannot attempt, like Herzog, to explain everything. Life has too much mystery. While Bellow suggests, by the very form of the monologue, which persists in some form or other throughout all his novels, that the crisis of modern man is increasingly internal, in an age which tends to drive the spirit underground and in which awareness of reality becomes more and

more complex, he nevertheless maintains that this internal crisis is one of the heart, not the head. Man knows enough, but he does not understand enough. Each Bellovian hero begins with the intention of analyzing his situation, and ends with an affirmation of wonder and a movement toward love. Modern man's monologue must open out into dialogue if man is to find his identity. Reason separates, but love unites.

What gives ordinary life value, and makes it the good life, Bellow suggests, is the power of love. The self, straining toward freedom, will never realize itself, as Joseph finds, in isolation. He discovers that freedom is for something, and later heroes like Herzog show that that something is other people. Yet the question of love, raised on almost every page, is never satisfactorily answered. There is contact with society, but it comes in the form of blows, as Henderson realizes when the block of wood hits him in the nose, or when Herzog has an accident with his rented car. Bellow never brings his heroes beyond their idealistic and vague theories of brotherhood and love. Note the self-enclosed endings of Bellow's novels; one hero capitulates to the regimentation of army life; another ends with an unanswered question. We find Augie standing alone in the cold French countryside, Wilhelm weeping in a funeral parlor, Henderson running around in the Arctic wastes, and Herzog reclining on a couch alone in his broken-down country estate. Bellow has not allowed them to escape their monologue; in fact, few of

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them do anything decisive. There is no real "Other" for Bellow's heroes, and an apt example of this is the God to which Herzog reaches out. He is a something, a "sun" rather than a someone.

Sexuality remains particularly unsatisfying in these novels; in fact, there is a divorce between sexuality and love. Bellow's heroes find love everywhere but with their wives. Wives either are weak and pale like a washed-out dress, like Joseph's Iva, or they are cruel, emasculating vixens, like Herzog's Madeleine. The only women who stand out are mistresses, and they are caricatures. Bellow seems to be incapable of representing a satisfactory relationship with a woman. Augie has a good deal of passion and even romance, but not love, even though he calls strong emotional feelings love. Bellow is guilty of ignoring the opportunity close at hand and concentrating on a vague, easy, and formless identification with the common soul of mankind which occurs in Tommy Wilhelm's subway emotion. Brotherhood is nothing if one cannot love one's wife. Ignoring the obvious "other" Bellow cannot find the other in society. As Norman Mailer comments: "he creates individuals and not relations between them, at least not yet."³ Bellow speaks out on American writers: "American novelists are not ungenerous, far from it, but as their idea of society is fairly shallow, their moral indignation is non-specific. What seems to be lacking is a firm sense of a common world, a coherent community, a genuine purpose in life."⁴ This perceptive comment pinpoints a difficulty in his own work. The good life to which his heroes aspire--the life of love--remains theoretical and ideal. Bellow is incapable of presenting an image of love

lived. Even Henderson leaves family responsibilities to achieve his ideal of service.

A final problem is the question of responsibility; when is a man culpable? Joseph had espoused the old French proverb: "To understand all is to forgive all." And so long as guilt could not be assigned in this world, neither could responsibility. But Leventhal finds out the concrete implications of responsibility when Allbee fastens to him like a leech and accuses him of wrongdoing. Leventhal had been marginally socially aware; he was ready to admit a general wrong. There was suffering and evil in the world, and so there must be wrongdoing. But finally he admits his responsibility to Leventhal. In a complex world, even innocent acts may produce a wrong, and freedom cannot be exercised in a vacuum. The consequences of actions go far beyond man's intentions, suggesting that man may be responsible, through "impossible" connections, for much of the evil that occurs in the world today. Herzog pushes this to its conclusion when he excoriates modern society for its lack of responsibility. America attempts to fulfill its moral obligations by shipping machinery to Bolivia, but this cold impersonal act is one which hardly satisfies the people's obligations. Responsibility must become personal; and here Bellow is suggesting at least the basis for a social conscience.

Bellow's search for moral value, then, can be seen as greatly important to the theologian. Bellow shows that

crucial questions for modern man are the perennial questions: how to live the good life, how to love, and how to exercise freedom in community. The answers he gives to these questions always remain tentative. Yet they are positive, and that is the basis for his value as a modern writer.

Saul Bellow's work has worth in that it begins the search for dialogue. The answer to the crisis of modern man is not the death that his contemporaries propose.

I seem to have asked in my books, How can one resist the controls of this vast society without turning into a nihilist, avoiding the absurdity of empty rebellion. I have asked, Are there other, more good-natured forms of resistance and rebellion?

The truth about man, he says, need not be punitive: "there may be truths on the side of life."⁴ Bellow represents a movement, not a solution, to these problems. It is a movement of hope toward the possibilities of redemption. Bellow does not say how man shall be redeemed; he merely affirms that it can be done.

The dogmatic insights into the nature of things and the ethical values which Bellow seeks to coalesce in his vision of hope. In a real sense, his heroes are eschatological. At the same time as they represent a rejection of current value systems, they embody the hope for some new meaning. Their unwished-for alienation has particular value as witness because of their total immersion in the processes of contemporary society and history. Neither rejection nor rebellion is their meat; they are not apocalyptic heroes. Bellow is noteworthy because he refuses to seek an answer outside history, but rather within it. The historical process is the arena of man's redemption, and while Bellow is wrong in

insisting that God can be of no help, he is entirely correct in emphasizing man's efforts as crucial in the redemption of the world. Bellow's heroes are modern pre-evangelists, rejecting what is false, and tilling the ground for the fullness of truth. What they suggest is that modern man will find his true identity only when he can find a correct value system by which to live. Bellow's groping in each direction, troubled as it is, maintains the possibility of finding that value system. This vision of hope is itself the beginning of redemption.

As we have mentioned before, Saul Bellow is in a real sense a preevangelist, showing the way again, like the Jewish prophet, for his brethren. The word that he gives is a word of hope--that man can find communion that will respect his freedom and yet give him his identity. The Gospel-according-to-Bellow can go no further than this muted affirmation, and yet as far as it goes it is a true redemption of the human condition. It points the way to the Gospel-according-to-Jesus, toward the vision of a human community founded on love and freedom, in which the full operative meanings of love and freedom bring man to a realization of his true identity as a son of God and brother to all men.

FOOTNOTES

1. His insistence on the comic nature of reality is another attempt to bridge that duality. By laughing man resolves the tension of matter and spirit without being torn apart from it.
2. By grace we mean, broadly, salvation, as it appears to Herzog's heroes--under the form of self-identity. The "sin" from which they try to save themselves is lack of identity.
3. Norman Mailer, "Norman Mailer versus Nine Writers," 9 Esquire, 1963, p. 68.
4. Cited in Tanner, op. cit., p. 109.

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