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Rice University

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RITE OF PASSAGE: THE QUEST OF THE HERO IN SAUL BELLOW'S NOVELS

by

Barbara A. Rader

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

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HOUSTON, TEXAS

MARCH, 1985
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Barbara A. Rader

1985
ABSTRACT

Rite of Passage: The Quest of the Hero in Saul Bellow's Novels

by

Barbara A. Rader

The protagonists in the seven Bellow novels examined in this thesis suffer from insufficient self-knowledge. Their aim is, in Jamesian terms, "to see," to gain insight which will enable them to reach an accommodation with self and world. These novels can be read as initiation novels because each protagonist experiences a rite of passage—from innocence or ignorance to knowledge, from inability to ability to cope with the circumstances of his life. But because American society lacks the tradition of a stable social structure and accepted values characteristic of European society, the quest of the protagonist in the Bellovian initiation novel is not for reconciliation with society but for inner harmony and discovery of values that transcend the discords of American society. In several early novels the rite of passage leads to these goals and to optimism for the future. But later protagonists find it harder to find personal peace. We see a progression from hope to skepticism, from free-wheeling comedy to humor tinged with acerbity.

What does the Bellow hero learn and how does he learn it? Through reflection and self-examination of his motives and actions, he learns to forge human communities based on love, to accept his limitations,
and to accept death as part of life. "Reality instructors" offer valuable or harmful advice; alter egos point the way to self-truth; and minor characters act as foils to demonstrate to him that the romantic cult of the self can lead to disaster. How and what the hero learns is also influenced by the setting, structure, language, and tone of the novels. The vividly realized urban world serves as a backdrop which illuminates and contrasts with the hero's inward journey. The structural pattern varies but in the best novels perfectly complements the hero's journey, and the language—from spare and solemn in Dangling Man, to expansive and vigorous in Augie March and Henderson the Rain King, to witty and acerbic in Herzog and Humboldt's Gift—reflects the mental state of the protagonist. Above all, Bellow's ironic tone serves as a corrective to the hero's vision.
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INTRODUCTION

Saul Bellow has written, "The individual in American fiction often comes through to us, especially among writers of 'Sensibility,' as a colonist who has been sent to a remote place, some Alaska of the soul. What he has to bring under cultivation, however, is a barren emptiness within himself."¹ This charge occupies the protagonists of Bellow's own novels. The central characters of his novels experience "barren emptiness" within themselves as well as cultural and social alienation. They suffer from lack of self-knowledge and a variety of personal and social conflicts. Their needs are twofold: to gain insight into the strengths and weaknesses, possibilities and limitations of their own character, and to face and come to terms with the circumstances of their lives. These circumstances include contemporary society—the technological, materialistic, urban world in which they live—and the demands of other people. The self-education of the protagonist proceeds on both a personal and a social level. On a personal level he must learn to live with his faults and accept his own mortality. On a social level he must learn to cope with the stresses imposed by contemporary urban life as well as by the variety of people who make claims on him and cause him suffering, and he must extend the hand of brotherhood and love to others.

Each novel serves as a vehicle to transport the protagonist through a rite of passage from innocence to knowledge, from inability to ability to cope with life. In this sense, regardless of the age of the protagonist, the novels dealt with in this thesis can be called
initiation novels. In his critical study of the contemporary American
initiation novel, Ihab Hassan defines the process of initiation as an
"ordeal, crisis, or encounter with experience. . . Its ideal aim is
knowledge, recognition, and confirmation in the world, to which the
actions of the initiate, however painful, must tend. It is, quite
simply, the viable mode of confronting adult realities."²

Charting a course of initiation, Bellow's novels follow Hassan's
statement that "Initiation entails reconciliation to time, endeavor in
history, the final acceptance of death. In the process of initiation,
dreams surrender to reality."³ The protagonist learns to accommodate.
In Bellow's novels he is not a traditional hero. Instead, Bellow takes
for each central character an ordinary man, one whose weaknesses and
idiosyncrasies project a humanness of character with which the reader
can readily identify.

The ordeal of the Bellow protagonist is inseparable from its
American cultural setting. That culture has been aptly described by
Richard Chase in his seminal study, The American Novel and Its
Tradition, as one of "alienation, contradiction, and disorder." Unlike
European society, with its long established social class structure and
codes of behavior, American society has no long-standing tradition of
stability, structure, or accepted values. These differences in culture
distinguish the American from the European initiation novel or
Bildungsroman. The purpose of the English initiation novel, for
example, whether it is the eighteenth-century Tom Jones or the
nineteenth-century Emma, is to educate the protagonist so that he or
she can become reconciled to society and assume his or her proper place
in it. According to Chase, the English novel "gives the impression of absorbing all extremes, all maladjustments and contradictions into a normative view of life." In the European Bildungsroman, the protagonist often discovers in the course of his personal enlightenment that society is corrupt. He either is swept up into that corruption too or tries to reform society. But the protagonist of the American initiation novel does not have either of these traditional experiences because there is no stable American society in relation to which he can complete his "rite of passage."

The American initiation novel reflects what Chase sees in the American novel as a "profound poetry of disorder," which is missing from the English novel. Chase states, "The imagination that has produced much of the best and most characteristic American fiction has been shaped by the contradictions and not by the harmonies of our culture." It is this radical disunity from which many of the best American novels, including Below's, draw their energy. Leslie Fiedler comments on the impact of the disunity and contradictions of American society on the writer:

The plight of the American writer is at best difficult; aware that the greatest books of our literature remain somehow boys' books, he seeks a way toward maturity. But between him and a mature relationship with his past lies our contempt for what is left behind, the discontinuity of our history. Perhaps it is impossible to attain a mature literature without a continuing tradition in the European sense; for it may be that no individual author alone and in a single lifetime can achieve an adult relationship to his culture and his vision of it. But we can, of course, never have such a tradition, only the disabling nostalgia for one.
The protagonists of the American initiation novel lament this discontinuity of our history and long for a social tradition which we lack. As James Fenimore Cooper (whom Bellow has read extensively and admires) complained, "There are no manners in America to observe."7

In the American initiation novel the protagonist travels the road from innocence to knowledge, from romance to realism, within the context of a world whose major components are, as Chase identifies, alienation, contradiction, and disorder. Some heroes and heroines, like those of Henry James, reject the American experience and seek their "rite of passage" in the steep traditions of European society. Others, like Nick Adams in Hemingway's stories, accept the challenge of a raw American culture and attempt to carve out an ethos. Still others, like Jake Barnes in Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises, find themselves lost in the disillusionment of Europe after the Great War.

Saul Bellow's novels follow in the tradition of the American initiation novel of Mark Twain, Theodore Dreiser, Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner. Running through the works of these writers is a common thread—the theme of innocence shattered by experience. In Bellow this thread is clearly visible. Robert Alter perceives "a stubborn core of innocence in all Bellow's heroes. Each is a kind of Huck Finn without a faithful Jim to guide him."8 Marcus Klein notes in the Bellow hero a romantic gesture of escape from burdens, "the need to rid himself of the weight of chaos." This characteristic of Bellow's heroes is "a gesture which in its extremity brings Bellow into touch with one of the definitive impulses of American character, into touch with at least all the classic
Redskins of American letters from Leatherstocking to Whitman to Mark Twain to Hemingway. The Bellow hero, like his American literary predecessors, seeks escape from the disunities of his culture. He has much in common with Huck Finn, the archetypal American initiate, whose values, like those of Bellow's protagonists, are at odds with those of the dominant culture. Like the Bellow hero, he seeks escape. His encounters with a proliferation of morally corrupt people educate him to the evil Twain sees in American society.

At the center of the tradition of the American initiation novel are the heroes and heroines of Henry James, who seek admittance to the inner sanctum of European society. These American "innocents abroad" discover in the course of their rite of passage from innocence to knowledge that their preconceptions have been fundamentally misguided. The life decisions they make based on these misconceptions lead inevitably to tragedy or, at the very least, to an unfulfilled life. Their illusions shattered, like Isabel Archer and Lambert Strether they become wiser but sadder for the experience.

Clyde Griffiths, the misguided youth of Dreiser's An American Tragedy, and Jay Gatsby, the would-be socialite of Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, search, like Augie March, for a special fate. Their romantic illusion drives them to seek out "a place in the sun." Neither immoral acts nor patronizing attitudes aid them in their task. The shattering of their romantic self-image leads not only to disillusionment but to tragedy.
Like Jay Gatsby and Clyde Griffiths, the Hemingway hero finds disillusionment at the end of his passage from innocence to knowledge. Nick Adams, like Huck Finn, feels betrayed by the evil he encounters. The Hemingway solution to the world of evil is to confront it with courage and derring-do. Hassan describes the goal of the Hemingway hero's initiation as "operational knowledge, the power of the aficionado to convert his tragic awareness of life into a highly skilled and ritualized mode of action—fishing, hunting, bull-fighting, etc. But the wound, the tragic awareness, is always there."10 Unlike the Hemingway hero, the Bellow protagonist must learn to accept his limited role.

In Faulkner's novels, the protagonists long to escape the burden of their heritage. The historical entanglements of the Compson family complicate the rite of passage of Quentin Compson in The Sound and the Fury. The heavy burden of Compson honor, as well as his own confusion over his innocence and guilt in relation to his sister Caddy, creates impassable obstacles to Quentin's transition from adolescence to adulthood. Stuck in time, he cannot move forward, nor can he retreat into the innocence of childhood.

Ike McCaslin experiences a more Hemingwayesque initiation in Faulkner's "The Old People." When he shoots the buck, Ike becomes a man. By wiping the hot blood of the animal across Ike's face, Sam Feathers initiates him into a purer society than that of his family and Southern society—that of the wilderness. In the woods, on a hunt, he and his comrades can escape from the "taint" of civilization into a world of simple needs, as Huck Finn does on the raft with Jim. In the
wilderness, time ceases to exist and Ike, having stepped out of time, feels whole and pure. But in "The Bear," Ike must come to terms with his family burden of incest and miscegenation. With Sam Feathers and the bear as role models, he learns humility and courage and finally is able to repudiate his inheritance. As Bellow's heroes must learn to respect and accept others in a spirit of brotherhood, so Ike accepts the sovereignty of the land and his own obligation "to hold the earth mutual and intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood."

What we discover from these and other examples of the American initiation novel is that none of its protagonists achieves a reconciliation with society. All reflect the individual's sense of isolation or alienation characteristic of the American experience. The sense of disillusionment which permeates the twentieth century has led to a new type of novel, very much American in its pursuit of personal rather than social resolutions. A. N. Kaul points out that "whereas European fiction of the mid-nineteenth century works out its themes predominantly in social terms, the contemporary American imagination concerns itself directly with the world of man's personal and metaphysical relations." And Hassan notes the introspective nature of the contemporary novel, which "redefines the identity of its central character and redirects his energies toward the virtues of love or self-discovery, virtues that are a good deal more personal than social."

The contemporary American novel is not interested in reconciliation, but its dilemmas are resolved or escaped through the transcendent experience of horror, heroism, love, or death. As a
consequence, the protagonist of the contemporary American initiation novel must turn inward for his education. Because he cannot expect a reconciliation with society, he seeks a personal transcendence over the condition of alienation, contradiction, and disorder he finds in American life. In Bellow's novels the heroes desire to effect a Whitmanesque affirmative tone of celebration or to experience an Emersonian transcendent moment. But the twentieth century impinges too much on them and short-circuits their romantic impulse. Marcus Klein explores the possibilities open to the Bellow hero: "He can escape from under the weight [of chaos] into harmony with natural laws vaguely realized as beneficent, or he can escape into himself, locate all value and reality in his person, or he can in various ways attempt to reconcile himself with external existence in all its chaos. And it is out of these three possibilities, the first two stretching toward the last, that the action and the total thematic construct of Bellow's novels have come."14 The aim of the hero is still, in Jamesian terms, "to see," but unlike a Jamesian novel the knowledge sought cannot be found solely through direct experience with society; it can only be discovered in the course of an inward journey of soul-searching.

This inward journey occupies most of the central figures in Saul Bellow's novels. Joseph keeps a journal, Herzog and Charlie Citrine apply a scalpel of self-scrutiny to their reflective self-examination, and Henderson treks to Africa to seek his "heart of darkness." The Bellow hero desires escape into a transcendent state of harmony, toward values that transcend society. To discover his "true self" he must learn these key lessons: the necessity of love and the acceptance of
death as part of life. His education travels the road from romance to realism, for he must reject the romantic extremes of overvaluation or undervaluation of the self if he is to reach an inner harmony and restore internal balance.

More than any of Bellow's other protagonists, Joseph in *Dangling Man* is the alienated man. As he dangles in a state of isolation, awaiting induction into the army, he turns inward in his quest for identity. He writes a journal as a substitute for establishing relationships with people. His attempts to gain a sense of identity from the external world have failed, and he slips into a "narcotic dullness" and faces the death of the self. Death is the central educational experience in the novel—the death of the self as symbolized by the many deaths in the novel. Finally, Joseph surrenders the shreds of his selfhood to the institution of the army. The death of the self in this novel offers no redemption or illumination. Joseph hits bottom, but it is unclear whether he will rise.

In *The Victim* Asa Leventhal is the prototypical outcast of Bellow's work because 1) he is alone while his wife is temporarily absent, 2) he is a Jew, and 3) he is a human being. His relationship with Kirby Allbee initiates him to brotherhood and the moral value of caring. Allbee, the mirror of Leventhal as victim, structures this inward journey of self-examination in which Leventhal faces his own guilt and learns the lessons of love and acceptance of death. His cathartic experience leads to personal redemption, restoration of community with his wife, and rebirth.
Augie March is the American Adam full of possibilities but unwilling to commit to any one role. His education destroys his romantic illusions as he journeys from wonder and innocence to skepticism. No matter the physical location, he cannot establish more than a momentary alignment of the "axial lines," the transcendent experience of stillness in the midst of chaos for which he, like Herzog, searches. This novel parodies the romantic quest of the bourgeois hero. Its structure is like that of Huckleberry Finn. As in this nineteenth-century novel, the characters Augie meets serve an instructional purpose. Interestingly, they and Augie move in reverse directions: as the "reality instructors" progress from real to romantic (e.g., Grandma Lausch to Thea to Basteshaw), Augie's romantic inclination moderates until, at the end, he is the realist in contrast to Basteshaw, the mad dreamer.

Like Joseph in Dangling Man, Tommy Wilhelm (in Seize the Day) suffers from an identity crisis. He has tried to construct a persona as Tommy Wilhelm the actor, but his quest for success and fame has failed. He cannot authenticate this "pretender soul." Now he desperately attempts to escape his burdens. In this reflective novel he must learn to reject both the romantic overvaluation and undervaluation of self if he is to find his true identity. He is aided in his education by an ironic trio of morally inferior characters—his father, Venice (the talent agent), and Tamkin (the philosopher/schnorrer). He learns that to reach his true soul, he must symbolically face his own death. In his catharsis and expiation, it is still not clear whether he will rise from the depths to which he has sunk.
A comic inversion of the picaresque quest, *Henderson the Rain King* is a romantic satire on the American quixotic self who, like Augie, demands a special fate. Eugene Henderson desires to shed the romantic cult of self, to say no longer, "I want! I want!" His journey takes him to the depths of his animal being; only there can he shed his selfhood and become initiated into the mysteries of life and death. Redemption occurs through love and through the power of the renovating imagination. This theme of imagination as the redeeming force in man's nature recurs in *Herzog* and in *Humboldt's Gift*. Henderson discovers that only through love and imagination can community be recreated. Through love and the instruction and example of Dahfu, Henderson creates a community with his wife Lily, Dahfu, and the boy on the plane.

The quest of Herzog, "that suffering joker," is to put his fragmented psyche together again. To do this he must take the inward journey of re-experiencing his life in order to understand his past and put it into perspective. More than any of Bellow's other novels, *Herzog* is a picaresque novel of the mind. All the reflections, ruminations, and unmailed letters move toward an expiation of mental glut and, finally, rest. Like Augie, Herzog must learn to reject the advice of reality instructors and to look within himself for truth. Fortunately he possesses wit, which aids him in his self-dissection and speeds his salvation.

In *Humboldt's Gift* Charlie Citrine learns from the experience of the failed poet Von Humboldt Fleisher that the only way for the artist to survive today is to view life as comic. Charlie journeys inward in
this novel to expiate the burdens of the past, specifically his guilt in ignoring his mentor in Humboldt's dying days. Because of Humboldt's spiritual as well as financial gift, Charlie is able to redeem himself, expiate his guilt, and bury the past as he reburies Humboldt's remains.

A key question must be asked of each of Bellow's novels: What does the Bellow hero learn and how does he learn it? To answer this question this thesis will examine the reflective process which the hero undertakes and his relationship to the other characters. Reality instructors may offer valuable or harmful advice; alter egos point the way to self-truth; and minor characters act as foils to demonstrate to the hero that the romantic cult of the self can lead to disaster.

How and what the Bellow hero learns is also influenced by the setting, structure, language, and tone of the novels. Ironically, Bellow masterfully paints the contemporary urban world in all its alternately gaudy and drab colors despite the fact that reconciliation of self and society is not the aim of the novels. With the exception of Henderson the Rain King, the vividly real backdrops of the novels weave a tapestry which illuminates and contrasts with the hero's inward journey. The structural pattern of the novels varies but in the best novels (Seize the Day, Herzog, and Humboldt's Gift) perfectly complements the hero's journey. The language—from spare and solemn in Dangling Man, to expansive and vigorous in Augie March and Henderson, to witty and acerbic in Herzog and Humboldt's Gift—reflects the mental state of the protagonist as he searches for inward harmony. Above all, Bellow's frequent comic and ironic tone serves as a refreshing corrective to the reader's, as well as the hero's, vision, for Bellow's
novels do not record merely the education of a character but offer a
vision for the reader as well.
INTRODUCTION: FOOTNOTES

1 Saul Bellow, "Some Notes on Recent American Fiction," Encounter 21 (November 1963), 25.


3 Ibid., p. 328.


5 Ibid.


7 Quoted in Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition, p. 158.


10 Hassan, Radical Innocence, p. 56.


13 Hassan, Radical Innocence, p. 22.

CHAPTER ONE

"A Chopped and Shredded Man": Joseph in Dangling Man

More than any of Bellow's other protagonists, Joseph in Dangling Man is the alienated man. As he dangles in a state of isolation and alienation, awaiting induction into the army, he turns inward in his quest for identity. He keeps a journal as a substitute for establishing relationships with people. There is not one person in his life to whom he feels comfortable confiding his problems. His attempts to gain a sense of identity from the external world have failed, and he slips into a "narcotic dullness" as he faces the death of the self.

Death is the central educational experience of the novel—the death of the self as symbolized by the many deaths in the novel. The death of the self in this novel offers no redemption or illumination. Joseph hits bottom but it is unclear whether he will rise. Finally, Joseph surrenders the shreds of his selfhood to the institution of the army. This capitulation is not a reconciliation with society.

Dangling Man poses the problem of an ordinary man caught in a world that for him has lost its locus. In limbo between freedom and commitment, Joseph suffers in his self-imposed isolation. Both the chaos of a world at war and the lack of a stable, stratified, traditional society whose rules and values would provide strength in this time of crisis contribute to his mental state. Lamenting the loss of the social and personal identity conferred upon the individual by society in earlier ages, Joseph writes in his journal:
[Today] we have been taught there is no limit to what a man can be. Satan and the Church, representing God, did battle over him. He, by reason of his choice, partially decided the outcome. But whether, after life, he went to hell or to heaven, his place among other men was given. It could not be contested. But, since, the stage has been reset and human beings only walk upon it, and under this revision, we have, instead, history to answer to. We were important enough then for our souls to be fought over. Now, each of us is responsible for his own salvation, which is in his greatness.\

As noted in the Introduction, unlike European societies American society is not based on a long-standing code of accepted values and offers no inherent place for the individual to claim. The adolescent cannot expect a reconciliation with society as his reward for completing a rite of passage. The structured society he seeks to enter has disintegrated, leaving him in a state of limbo. With no beliefs to shore against "the chaos I am forced to face" (82), Joseph is truly "a man condemned by a condemned age." Because he cannot expect a reconciliation with society, he seeks a personal transcendence over the condition of alienation, contradiction, and disorder which he finds in American life. His struggle to forge an identity must therefore be an internal one. Joseph must learn to navigate an inward journey on a choppy sea without assurance that his rite of passage will lead him to calm clear waters.

The origin of this classic novel of modern alienation can be traced to Beliow's first published story, "Two Morning Monologues," which appeared in Partisan Review three years before the publication of the novel. Part One of this very short story is the first-person narrative of an out-of-work young man. Like Joseph, the nameless narrator seeks
escape—from his family, his neighbors, his community, and, foremost, from his state of limbo. Despite the aimless freedom conferred upon him by his situation, he feels closed in. Lacking imagination, initiative, and funds, he does not know how to make constructive use of his time. Boredom sets in and for him, as for Joseph, "the chief difficulty is in disposing of the day. . . . What'll it be today, the library? museum? the courthouse? a convention?"3 What does it matter, he implies.

His problem, he admits, is a poorly developed sense of self. "I can't remember a time in my life when I didn't swallow before saying [my name]," he admits.4 Because freedom does not offer a solution to his problem, he wishes for its opposite, regimentation. If his had been one of the first draft numbers called, he speculates, he could have escaped the pressures of his father, whom he has disappointed by his inability to find a job. Perhaps, he feels, if he traded his father's control for that of the army, he might build a healthy sense of self-esteem, which he lacks.

In Radical Innocence, Ihab Hassan confirms that "the problem of the anti-hero is essentially one of identity. His search is for existential fulfillment, that is, for freedom and self-definition."5 But both Part One of "Two Morning Monologues" and Dangling Man leave unanswered a key question of whether one can attain a more satisfying sense of self if one relinquishes control over personal destiny or if one holds tight to the freedom available to a dangling man.

Although the young man in the story blames his father and the war for his present condition, Bellow hints as well at a cause less simple and more overwhelming—a general feeling of alienation and hopelessness
that pervades modern life. From his window seat on the elevated train, the young man looks up "to see what the sun is doing. . . . Not much hope for it, I remark to myself. If it outlives me it won't be for long." This apocalyptic vision casts a pall over any initiative he might take to improve his condition or his self-esteem. The world has gone awry, and how to cope with it is one of the lessons he and every Bellow hero must learn.

In this indifferent world of alienation, contradiction, and disorder, Joseph struggles to create an identity. This struggle takes the form of an internalized conflict. Bellow depicts this conflict through the use of a narrative without plotted dramatic action. This confessional in journal form suits Joseph's inward journey. Dangling Man, then, is the record of Joseph's self-education by reflection on his experiences and an agonizing dialogue between conflicting aspects of his character. The journal takes place over a period of four months, from winter solstice, the death of the year, to spring, which signals rebirth. This parallels Joseph's shedding of his "old self" and his ironic rebirth as a regimental man. But as the journal moves forward, it also moves backward in time as Joseph reflects on the events of a nine-month period of waiting and of gestation. This period of time culminates in the birth of his one action—his trip to the recruiting office to move up his draft number. Through reflection of past incidents interspersed with present events, Joseph's journal details his learning process during the months of hibernation as he waits, ever more impatiently, for his draft number to be called.

Joseph keeps a journal as a substitute for developing relationships
with people, for there is not one person in his life to whom he feels comfortable confiding his problems. By choice as well as by circumstance, he is a totally isolated, alienated man. As a Canadian, he is an alien in the United States, "and although a friendly alien, I could not be drafted without an investigation" (8). Thus he dangles both literally—waiting for induction—and emotionally—rejecting intimate relationships. He has distanced himself from his well-meaning wife, his family, and his friends. He is intolerant of others and is baffled by the long-standing devotion of his father-in-law to his foolish, chattering mother-in-law. Because he does not find his life meaningful, he cannot carry out meaningful relationships with others. His personal world and the extended world he lives in have left him "a chopped and shredded man" (109).

A would-be humanist who believes in the power of reason, he had been preparing essays on Diderot and other philosophers of the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason. But now, in his dangling condition, he no longer sees the world and his relation to it as based on reason, and has put his unfinished essays aside. He no longer believes in the future and so does not plan for it. His bleak outlook is reflected at the end of the first entry in his diary, in which the vocabulary of hanging—"dangle," "swinging," "cut down"—reflects his state of mind:

There is nothing to do but wait, or dangle, and grow more and more dispirited. It is perfectly clear to me that I am deteriorating, storing bitterness and spite which eat like acids at my endowment of generosity and good will. But the seven months' delay is only one of the sources of my harassment. Again, I sometimes think of it as the backdrop against which I can be seen swinging. It is still more. Before I can properly estimate
the damage it has done me I shall have to be cut down.

(9)

Within the confines of his room, Joseph has isolated himself physically, emotionally, and mentally. He has turned his freedom into prison and his life into what he calls a "narcotic dullness" (13). It may be no accident that Bellow named his protagonist after the biblical Joseph, for, like him, Bellow's Joseph finds himself in exile, although his exile is self-imposed. In his discussion of this novel in The Landscape of Nightmare, Jonathan Baumbach draws a comparison between the two Josephs: "Joseph, isolated from his brethren like his biblical counterpart, has no world. Similarly, the novel exists in no real world, only a peripheral one, limited by Joseph's abortive contacts outside himself." Because Joseph has isolated himself from the rest of the world, Bellow probes the reality of Joseph's mind more deeply than that of the world in which he lives. In part this is due to the confessional form of the journal, which reinforces the sense of isolation that the novel depicts. Bellow also underlines Joseph's incomplete identity by withholding from the reader knowledge of Joseph's last name. Without a surname, Joseph stands as a representative of modern alienated man.

Several critics have drawn comparisons between Dangling Man and earlier classic novels of alienation. John J. Clayton and Robert Alter cite affinities in spirit and form with Dostoevski's Notes from Underground, a confessional journal of a would-be intellectual who, like Joseph, is a "self-alienated moral masochist." Ihab Hassan finds in Dangling Man a large debt to Kafka. As in Kafka's novels, "The
world [Dangling Man] depicts is one in which man, seeking freedom, must finally deny it; in which the humanistic dictum 'toute comprendre, c'est tout pardonner' is made intelligible by the alliance of metaphysical absurdity with social regimentation; in which the flayed moral sense can only express itself by futile or nasty gestures.\textsuperscript{10} And Clayton makes a strong case for the influence of Sartre's Nausea on Dangling Man.\textsuperscript{11} It is true that both Roquentin and Joseph are isolated and barren of intimate relationships. They are no longer able to continue their intellectual studies of eighteenth-century figures because they lack coherence in their own lives that would enable them to produce a coherent history of their subjects. If we read Roquentin's journal we discover that he, like Joseph, admits, "I can no longer distinguish present from future. . . . I can no longer feel the slipping, the rustling of time."\textsuperscript{12} Like Roquentin, Joseph feels the value of his life "decreasing day by day" (110).

Fortunately, Bellow keeps his novel from veering toward romance by creating a protagonist who is no hero. Joseph suffers from character defects which often make him unsympathetic. Insensitive, intolerant, immature, and angry, Joseph shares no traits with the traditional romantic hero. Thus, by creating a realistic character, Bellow grounds in realism a novel that could easily have slipped into romance or allegory.

Joseph himself rejects the romantic escapades and derring-do of the romantic hero, specifically the Hemingway-type protagonist. To forge one's identity today, Joseph claims, it is fashionable to engage in dangerous sports, to "fly planes or fight bulls or catch tarpon," for
this is the "era of hardboileddom." But, Joseph, insists, "I am neither so corrupt nor so hardboiled that I can savor my life only when it is in danger of extinction" (7, 110). Joseph sees it as unfashionable, and a sign of weakness, to turn inward in search of a sense of identity by engaging in the reflective rather than the active life, but that is the avenue he chooses in his quest for identity and meaning.

Joseph's first journal entry sets up the conflict between action and inertia which characterizes both his internal struggle and the form of the novel. He notes that while the Hemingway character travels to inhospitable environments to test his courage, he himself rarely leaves his room. While one friend "rockets to Africa, and our friend Stillman travels in Brazil, I grow rooted to my chair" (10). Closed in by four walls, Joseph avoids the outer frenzy of urban life which characterizes Chicago. In a city full of strangers, however, even a room of stillness cannot provide peace to a man suffering inner conflict. Encounters with neighbors intrude to prick Joseph's skin, and his own frustration drives him into rages which punctuate the stillness of his world and constitute the main thread of the novel's action.

Joseph periodically explodes at those who thwart his needs, who treat him without the respect he feels is his due, or in whom he recognizes characteristics he dislikes in himself. A passive man, Joseph is moved to action when his frustration level reaches the point at which he no longer has rational control over himself. He admits, "I feel I am a sort of human grenade whose pin has been withdrawn" (98). He attacks the offender either verbally or physically, or if he feels the offender is too powerful, he attacks whoever is handiest. In the
end, he vents his anger on himself for his indecisiveness. After much frustration and suffering he takes the only major action of the novel: he requests the draft board to move up his draft number and thus bring to an end his dangling condition.

The motivation for Joseph's anger is summarized aptly by one critic: "Passivity, victimization, nonentity—modern qualities too real to let his subconscious rest—drive [Joseph] invariably into a rage; indeed, this is the main line of action though he is rarely conscious of it."\[13\] That he is not aware of the motivation for his action can be seen in his confrontation with Jimmy Burns, a former comrade from Joseph's days as a Communist Party member. Joseph's need to be recognized, to have his identity confirmed by another, surfaces in this early incident in which Burns refuses to acknowledge Joseph's greeting. This fuels Joseph's anger and he makes a public scene demanding recognition:

"Don't you know me? It seems to me that I know you very well. Answer me, don't you know who I am?"
"Yes, I know you," Burns said in a low voice.
"That's what I wanted to hear," I said. "I just wanted to be sure."

(25)

But Joseph does not understand what has motivated his outburst, and in retrospect he writes, "I did not, and still do not, know where this outbreak came from. I suspect that it originated in sheer disillusionment of mind" (25).
Although Joseph does not gain self-enlightenment from his repeated stormy behavior, he and Bellow leave all the clues necessary for the reader to understand the motivation for Joseph's outbursts. It is clear that Joseph cannot tolerate being treated as a nonentity by Jimmy Burns. He also cannot abide the reflection of himself that he sees in the disreputable actions of others. His rage extends to his teenage niece Etta and his alcoholic neighbor Vanaker because he sees in them elements of his own character that he does not admire. Like an adolescent, Joseph resorts to a power struggle with Etta over which music to play on a phonograph. His already weak sense of independence and self-esteem have just been shaken by a well-meant one-hundred-dollar Christmas present from his brother Amos, Etta's father, which, out of pride, Joseph rejects. Because Joseph feels inadequate in comparison to his successful brother and cannot vent his anger at him, he looses his frustration on Etta by taking her over his knee and spanking her. His recognition of her physical resemblance to him contributes to the intensity of his dissatisfaction with her and brings out in him an adolescent behavior matched only by her own.14

As time wears on, Joseph's anger toward the outside world which will not recognize him explodes more easily and with less provocation. Two situations fuel the final episode of Joseph's rage. A bank teller has refused to cash his wife Iva's paycheck for him because he does not have proper identification. And over the course of the last few months, since he has quit his job, he and Iva have gradually reversed roles: she is now the breadwinner and thus has a type of recognition that Joseph has lost. He is now the housekeeper, and not a very good one, he
acknowledges. In frustration at these circumstances, and unable to gain any satisfaction from either the bank or his wife, Joseph explodes at the nearest irritating person, his alcoholic neighbor Vanaker. Vanaker moves throughout the novel as a shadow of Joseph, reflecting Joseph's darker tendency toward self-destruction. It is fitting that the penultimate scene should be a confrontation between the two, after which both parties move out of the roominghouse and Joseph feels compelled to go to the recruiting office to accelerate his call-up.

Keith Opdahl summarizes the progressive nature of Joseph's anger: "By the end of the novel his increasingly frequent rages approximate the depravity he fears and his growing isolation is itself a form of the death he denies."15 Surrender to the army implies acceptance of the strong possibility of death. But Joseph's decision also brings great relief from his dangling condition. What, then, has brought Joseph to the position of being able to take this action and accept the possibility of death? If we examine the changes that occur in Joseph's perceptions as he reflects on his life throughout his inward journey, we can trace some of the elements that contribute to his self-education and his ultimate decision.

It is ironic that although Dangling Man is a novel of self-education, which would be expected to lead to greater independence and self-esteem, what Joseph gains is the strength to surrender the independent self. As in the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman, Joseph's sensibility progresses from innocence to knowledge, from idealism to skepticism. But whereas the Bildungsroman culminates with the protagonist developing character and a life of independence or taking
his rightful place in society, Joseph ironically concludes his education by surrendering the independence he could not achieve and accepting the yoke of regimentation which, perhaps tongue in cheek, he cheers.

Joseph begins as an idealist, a would-be humanist and admirer of Enlightenment philosophers. But he is hard-pressed to apply the eighteenth-century philosophy of reason to life in the apocalyptic twentieth century. Early in the novel he poses to himself a major philosophical question: "How should a good man live; what ought he to do?" (27). In response he proposes a "colony of the spirit," a utopian society to ward off "man's instinctive bloody rages" (27). This ideal community would ban cruelty, spite, and physical violence. But he discovers in the friends he had counted on for the realization of his vision only "craters of the spirit" (26), meanness, pettiness, and vengefulness. His utopian hopes are dashed first by his disillusionment with Communism, then further crushed by the behavior of his friends at the Servatius party. Here he discovers in his friend Morris Abt an unwarranted cruelty and vengeful action toward the hostess, Minna, who had turned down Morris's proposal in order to marry another man. For amusement Morris puts Minna under hypnosis, gaining a measure of control over her that he otherwise could not have had. He proceeds to humiliate her, which revolt's Joseph and gives his "colony of the spirit" a blow from which it will not recover.

The party also reinforces Joseph's sense of alienation. The partygoers are all isolated from each other in their private, unhappy worlds. Lines of communication are down and guests, including Iva,
drink to take the edge off their pain. The party is an eye-opening experience for Joseph. Henceforward he views human character with more cynicism and skepticism. After the party, "In the months that followed I began to discover one weakness after another in all I had built up around me" (39). Ironically, he does not recognize until much later his own affinity with Morris's traits; as his romantic hopes deteriorate, his frustration builds up and his outbursts of rage become more frequent.

What Joseph discovers with the blow to his romantic idea of a "colony of the spirit" is the gap between ideal construction and the real world. The purpose of the ideal construction is to ward off the chaos of existence, and Joseph labels these constructions "obsessive." Man constructs identities for himself and among the roles he has chosen to play Joseph chronicles

The God-man of the ancient cultures, the Humanistic full man, the courtly lover, the knight, the ecclesiastic, the despot, the ascetic, the millionaire, the manager. I could name hundreds of these ideal constructions, each with its assertions and symbols, each finding—in conduct, in God, in art, in money—its particular answer and each proclaiming: "This is the only possible way to meet chaos."

(93)

We meet in this and in subsequent Bellow novels almost all the preceding kinds of identity constructions. Some are more successful than others in warding off the chaos of contemporary life. In this novel we meet Amos, Joseph's brother, who has found in money the vehicle for navigating his world. A successful businessman, a millionaire and owner of a seat on the New York Stock Exchange, Amos
has found a way to make his life seem consequential. Joseph, however, looks down on this material aggrandizement as shallow.

Joseph's friend Morris is also "continually in need of being consequential" (58), but cannot find the right avenue. Abt, a parody of American individualism, seeks to be a master of all trades but ends up a government flunky. A chameleon-like intellectual with a sense of what he labels "Personal Destiny," Abt desires to be more than human. His need to be perfect dooms him to failure. And like Abt, Joseph's friend Alf Steidler also represents the modern floundering man. A romantic who tries to construct a dramatic life for himself, Steidler fails to achieve success in Hollywood but is "willing to pursue his ideal until his eyes burst from his head and his feet from his shoes" (93). He sponges off others and refuses to face up to his shortcomings. Both Abt and Steidler are versions of Joseph, failures at identity constructions, and alienated men.

The conflict between the need to assume a protective identity and the knowledge that to be human is to be flawed, weak, and mortal lies at the core of Bellow's fiction. It lodges in the hearts and minds of all of his protagonists, who must work out an acceptable solution to the central problem. All Bellow's heroes must learn to accept the nature of their humanity. It is the central lesson from which all other knowledge will spring. As Clayton puts it in comparing Bellow and Sartre:

Both Bellow and Sartre see that people, uneasy without a consistent, unified self, create roles and limited versions of reality which enable them to be secure amid the chaos of reality and in the face of death... . . An ideal construction is,
then, a created self and a created reality. . . . It is only at the expense of reality that a person can live by one of these ideal constructions. 16

Because one must reject reality in favor of illusion to enforce the success of an ideal construction, these constructions are self-destructive. Only by rejecting false self-images can one hope to cope with the vicissitudes of life. We can see this clearly in the case of the Christian Science woman who stands on street corners disseminating the literature of her faith. She tells Joseph that faith in the Christian Science doctrine and principles will save him from death in the war. But her own deathly pallor belies her words. Instead she emerges from Bellow's pen as a pitiable character out of touch with the times, an ironic mirror of the disintegration of belief in contemporary America.

Joseph's search for identity brings him to a paradox. He discovers that "the highest 'ideal construction' is the one that unlocks the imprisoning self" (102). That is, in order to find youself, you must give yourself away. But giving yourself away is different from throwing yourself away. Whether he feels he has given or thrown himself away in his submission to the army is unclear, and perhaps Joseph himself is also unsure. But Joseph does realize that in the search for freedom we often do not understand the difference between the two: "...what we really want is to stop living so exclusively and vainly for our own sake, impure and unknowing, turning inward and self-fastened" (102). By isolating himself and confiding only in his journal, Joseph has not found the road to freedom. What he has discovered is that freedom can be illusory. Although Western civilization teaches us that there is no
limit to what a person can be, Joseph finds that there is only limit and that "the greatest cruelty is to curtail expectations without taking life away completely" (98). His own expectations dashed, the temporary personal freedom he experiences is empty. In fact, freedom makes him realize his own self-imprisonment.

The search for identity, then, may be misconstrued as the search for freedom. Joseph discovers through his journal and his encounters with and observance of others that the desire for freedom is really the desire for community. But the community cannot be constructed, as Joseph envisioned in his "colony of the spirit." As all Bellow's protagonists finally learn, the imprisoning self can only be released by extending oneself to others. Although Joseph comes to this humanistic philosophy intellectually, he cannot bridge the gap between understanding and action. Because he has detached himself emotionally from others, he cannot complete his quest.

Those who do give of themselves to others gain a sense of self-sufficiency and a stable self-image. These characters contrast with Joseph and act in the novel as normative foils. Through them we can see how far off the normative path Joseph has strayed. The primary figure in this role is Joseph's long-suffering wife, Iva, who supports him financially and tolerates his rages and sulky, withdrawn behavior while making no demands on him. In contrast to her dreamer husband, who wishes she were more like the great Renaissance women he has read about, Iva is a pragmatist who does her best to get along with others and accept their shortcomings.

Like Iva, Joseph's friend Myron Adler is a realist who functions
successfully in the materialistic world. Adler surfaces several times in the novel to offer a normative corrective both to Joseph's irrational behavior and to the immoral actions of other characters. Even-tempered, good-natured, and sociable, Myron is a sharp contrast to Joseph. By extending himself several times to Joseph, Myron exhibits the virtue of brotherhood so central to Bellow's concept of community. Bellow wants the reader to see Myron as a moral counterpoint to some of the other characters, but Joseph refuses to see Myron this way. We learn something about Joseph's self-pity, thick-headed romanticism, and insensitivity to others from his description of Myron as "a successful young man, comfortable, respected, safe for the present from those craters of the spirit which I have lately looked into. Worst of all, Myron has learned, like so many others, to prize convenience. He has learned to be accommodating" (26). Of course, Joseph as idealistic adolescent has no use for those who make accommodations or act altruistically. He learns nothing from their view of reality—he resists it. Iva and Myron represent the humanistic, caring, moral norms which Joseph professes intellectually but is too immature and self-concerned to act upon.

Bellow shows us a successful adaptation to contemporary life through accommodation or adherence to universal values. But how can the nonconformist or creative person forge a satisfactory identity in today's world? Bellow gives us one character who succeeds in forging an identity and a community with others through the creative imagination—John-Pearl, Joseph's artist friend who has left Chicago for New York to make his mark. Although John-Pearl must earn his
living as an advertising artist so that he can be free to paint, he maintains his perspective on the materialistic world. Unlike his colleagues at the ad agency, he does not take his job seriously. For him the real world is not the illustrating of ads but "the world of art and thought." There is only one worthwhile sort of work, that of the imagination. Through the imagination, John-Pearl has "escaped a trap," as Joseph sees it, and has been able to translate his vision into art and create a world. "Those acts of the imagination save him," Joseph writes in his journal. Through his art, John-Pearl has created a self-image and a community with "the best part of mankind" (61), despite the conditions under which he must work and live. He may resent those who try to translate art into monetary terms but he can laugh it off because he knows that the serious business of life is the expression of his artistic vision.

Joseph's perspectives, however, are not as wide as John-Pearl's: "I, in this room, separate, alienated, distrustful, find in my purpose not an open world, but a closed, hopeless jail," he laments. "My perspectives end in the walls. Nothing of the future comes to me. Only the past, in its shabbiness and innocence" (61). Joseph admires John-Pearl but does not have enough drive and strength to emulate his route. Joseph seeks identity through his journal as John-Pearl does through his art, but Joseph's journal does not reach out to others. He cannot translate his vision of a "colony of the spirit" into action because he suffers from weakness of imagination and lacks a caring attitude toward others. What causes a character like Joseph to be isolated from humanity, according to A.N. Kaul, is "not physical
isolation but spiritual coldness, while art is based upon human sympathies and is thus an expression of one's otherwise unestablished relations with the community." Indeed, as a writer Bellow is himself a creator of a community with his readers. His novels convey his vision of the difficulty and the necessity of humanism in the contemporary world. John-Pearl, as Bellow's spokesman, prefigures artists and writers, like Herzog and Charlie Citrine, who wrestle with this problem in succeeding novels.

Iva, Myron, and John-Pearl serve as foils or normative characters, drawing our attention by contrast to Joseph's inadequacies and failures. Unlike Iva and Myron, Joseph has failed to integrate himself into the world at large. And unlike John-Pearl, Joseph lacks strength of imagination and will to pursue his intellectual and idealistic interests without adversity. On the other hand, Bellow creates characters who, like Joseph, also fail. Morris Abt, Alf Steidler, and especially Joseph's neighbor Vanaker serve as shadows or doubles of Joseph. All failures and alienated men, they reinforce for the reader Joseph's faults and failures.

Vanaker does not speak to us directly in the novel, but his actions speak for themselves and are monitored with growing annoyance by Joseph. A self-destructive man who drowns his sorrows in drink, Vanaker in his isolation makes tentative abortive attempts to communicate. He invites the blind landlady to the movies (a ludicrous and ironic action), coughs to draw attention to himself, leaves the door ajar when he uses the bathroom, steals socks and perfume from Joseph and Iva, and throws empty liquor bottles out the window where they pile up like
refuse from his wasted life. In a self-destructive alcoholic stupor he accidentally sets fire to his room and has to be dragged out. Vanaker is the first of a series of grotesques who people Bellow's novels. He is here to remind us of Joseph's base instincts, and like a shadow, his movements parallel Joseph's. Vanaker follows every point of emotional pitch in Joseph's life, like a chorus striking the note of discord Joseph feels.

Vanaker may be an unwanted double, but Joseph creates a helpful double or alter ego, the Spirit of Alternatives, to help him sort out his feelings. Because he retreats from relationships with others, Joseph creates his own "other" with whom he can carry on a dialogue. To help him in his quest for identity, he strikes up conversations with this devil's advocate or alter ego, whom he nicknames Tu As Raison Aussi. The job of the alter ego is to help Joseph face the truth about himself so that he can find a version of reality he can live with. Although he himself is floundering, his alter ego can exclaim, "I always know who I am" (89). Tu As Raison Aussi advises Joseph to look within himself, to trust his heart as well as his head. Only by accepting emotional truths can he know himself. Emotions, claims Tu As Raison Aussi, hold truths as important as those put forth by reason; hence the name of the alter ego. He reminds Joseph that he cannot shut out the world within the four walls of his room. In order to face the truth within, one must face outward reality.

Because Tu As Raison Aussi is a projection of Joseph, he cannot supply all the answers, but he does open up to Joseph new visions and ways of relating. Although Baumbach finds the use of the alter ego
device a further step in Joseph's "intellectual onanism" and spiritual
deterioration, other critics see him differently. Sarah Blacher Cohen
finds the Spirit of Alternatives beneficial, a "non-directive
therapist," and Frank McConnell describes the alter ego as a cynical,
warped ghost of the democratic skepticism of the Encyclopedists, whose
function is to force Joseph to realize the absurdity of his claims to a
separate identity.¹⁹

The dialogue between Joseph and Tu As Raison Aussi offers Joseph a
process of unfolding vision in which he learns to face painful truths
about himself by projecting them onto his alter ego. He learns that
although he has claimed to be guided by reason, in fact he suffers from
romantic illusions. The Spirit of Alternatives argues that to gain a
measure of truth about himself, Joseph must shed his old romantic self,
the self who blames others for his failures and misfortunes and who
reads himself and others through a framework of unrealistic
expectations. He must let go of his utopian romantic ideas and accept
the world as it is and himself as part of it, no matter how despicable
that world may seem at times. By facing these truths, Joseph can begin
to be honest with himself. This is a giant step in his education, for
only by accepting both the truth inside him and the reality around him
can he learn what it means to be human.

To Joseph, as to Bellow, the starkest truth, the most important
reality, that every human must face and accept is the truth of his own
mortality. To be fully human, Joseph must face the inevitability of his
own death. Until he does that, he cannot become part of humanity. Death
hovers over the novel. The atmosphere is suffused by the lingering
death of Joseph's landlady, Mrs. Kiefer. Her condition parallels Joseph's growing isolation and alienation as she lies isolated in her room, slipping away from life. That she lies dying of natural causes is a constant reminder to Joseph of the natural human life cycle. But there are three other types of death with which he must reckon. Early in the novel Joseph learns of the violent, unexpected death in action of his friend Jeff Forman, who had dreamed of becoming a war hero. The boy who had enlisted in the navy for excitement, who sought the romance of danger, has died in a plane crash in the Pacific. This incident warns Joseph of the danger of investing too much of himself in romantic ideas.

The third type of death, unexpected death due to natural causes, appears in the figure of a man fallen in the street. Joseph stops to aid him, loosening his collar to allow him to breathe more easily. A policeman arrives to help, and as his blue-uniformed figure bends over the victim, Joseph sees on the policeman's face the mirror of death. This in turn sparks the memory of his mother's death, and the loss he felt then. The fallen man struggling for breath is for Joseph "a prevision. Without warning, down. A stone, a girder, a bullet flashes against the head, the bone gives like glass from a cheap kiln; or a subtler enemy escapes the bonds of years; the blackness comes down; we lie, a great weight on our faces, straining toward the last breath which comes like the grating of gravel under a heavy tread" (77).

This feeling of death as suffocation and the fear it prompts prove two dreams. In the first, Joseph, already in the army, dreams of war dead lined up like sleeping innocents in cribs. A mysterious
guide asks him to escort one body home for burial. Joseph is reluctant to become involved in a personal way, again another instance both of his fear of intimate relationships and of his fear of death. In the second dream Joseph is a soldier in the North African campaign. It is his job to defuse grenade traps in a town the army has taken. As he approaches the first grenade, which is wired to the door of a house, his fear directs him to shoot at it from a distance rather than to approach it and cut the wires. His bullet misses its target. When he realizes that only the lucky accident of a missed shot has saved him from being blown up, he takes pincers in hand and cuts the wires. Thus again he learns that, like his dealings with people, the most successful approach is the one that appears to carry the greatest personal risk.

The fourth type of death we meet in the novel is Vanaker's flirtation with death. The drunken stupor into which he sinks every day is but a slow way of bringing about his own self-destruction. Like Vanaker, Joseph flirts with physical death—by requesting that his draft number be expedited—and with spiritual death—by withdrawing from meaningful human relationships. The deaths he witnesses in the novel prepare him for the possibility of his own death. With this recognition "the decision to surrender" to the army finally comes upon him. He finds it "impossible to resist any longer. I must give myself up. And I recognized that the breath of warm air was simultaneously a breath of relief..." (121).

Although Joseph finds relief in surrender, critics have argued about the meaning of that surrender to regimentation. Clayton argues
that Joseph's action is a move "from selfhood and toward union, not merely submission: toward giving as well as throwing himself away." He claims that "the approach of death is not purely negative. First, the metaphorical death is partly the death of the old self—of the egocentric individual who must die before Joseph can become human. Second, it is representative of the physical death Joseph must face. By approaching death, Joseph can be reconciled to humanity." 20

Opdahl holds a less optimistic view of the meaning of Joseph's surrender to the army. He sees Joseph's action as a choice of last resort. Joseph, he claims, gives himself to society and possible death because he cannot give himself to imagination and faith. 21 Opdahl's view is, I believe, borne out by the novel. Joseph's last words ironically belie the notion that his action is anything more than submission. As he gives up his quest for selfhood and accepts life under the yoke of authority—and we know from his past that he resists authority figures—he shouts hurrah for an end to the freedom he has failed to utilize. He cheers his failure to find an independent avenue to self-definition, and he salutes the very regimentation of body and spirit so repugnant to the imaginative thinker he has wished to become.

Joseph's action to capitulate can be contrasted with the action of Mrs. Bartlett, the nurse who has cared for the dying landlady. At the same time that Joseph releases himself from responsibility for his life, she too is released from responsibility, by the death of her patient. But as Joseph moves toward regimentation, loss of self, and possible death, Mrs. Bartlett resumes her own identity:
That evening, as we came out of the restaurant, we saw Mrs. Bartlett across the way. She had changed her white uniform for a silk dress and a short fur coat. Her hat was a strange affair with a flat top and a curtain or wimple that fell about her neck—a fashion that disappeared many years ago. We guessed that she was on her way to the movies after her long confinement with Mrs. Kiefer. Her shiny, long, black pocketbook was clamped under her doubled arm; she walked in a heavy-hipped, energetic stride toward the brightly lit avenue.

(123)

This description is worth quoting because it shows the reader that after she has played her role as nurse, Mrs. Bartlett is able to slip easily back into her own identity. The distinctive clothing she wears gives her character a coloration and definition which she puts aside in her nurse's whites but does not seem to lose. She has done her job but has not been devastated by her patient's death. Death is a condition of her job that she has learned to accept, but it has not dulled her zest for life. She dons her clothes and her individuality, and emerges from her confinement to enjoy her freedom.

As Mrs. Bartlett sheds her uniform, Joseph prepares to don his. In counterpoint to Mrs. Bartlett, who happily rejoins the world and expects to enjoy the freedom of an evening's entertainment, Joseph slips on the yoke of regimentation. Without great conviction, he voices the hope that the army will make a man of him, something he has not been able to do on his own. In juxtaposing these two situations, Bellow offers the possibility that adjustments such as Mrs. Bartlett's can be made. The novel thus pulls in two directions at once.

After requesting his call-up, Joseph reflects on one last aspect of
his life. Like a dying man who sees his life flash before his eyes in
an instant, Joseph returns to the scene of his childhood, his father's
home. He looks around his boyhood room and envisions that thirty years
ago it was not there: "Birds flew through this space. It may be gone
fifty years hence." On the verge of the greatest risk he has ever
taken, he sees that the constructs of life, such as the house, are
transitory. His sense of identity and trust in reality fade, for the
objects of this world are transitory. Belief in the permanence of the
world man has constructed "is actually very dangerous, very
treacherous," he believes. Like the young man's apocalyptic view of the
future in "Two Morning Monologues," Joseph's vision further reduces his
sense of consequence and increases his feeling of alienation. Looking
at his room, he begins to distrust "the very objects of common sense."
His grasp of reality fades, putting "the very facts of simple existence
in doubt" (126).

His trip to his boyhood home is also a farewell to childhood and
adolescence, the completion of a phase of his initiation into manhood.
His decision to leave immediately for the army implies an acceptance of
impermanence, decay, and death. But in his pessimism, he still has not
intuitively grasped the key lesson Bellow has taken pains to teach the
reader—that the only permanence in life is a sense of belonging to
humanity. Alone, Joseph admits, "I have not survived well." Bellow has
shown us, through the failures of Joseph and others, as well as the
successes of some of the characters, that a sense of identity can be
gained only by active involvement with others. Joseph's lame attempt at
this is to join the army, but it is questionable whether he will find
community in regimentation.

If Joseph's education is not complete, the reader at least has had an introductory lesson in Bellow's philosophical concerns and methods of presentation. The reader has the benefit not only of Joseph's developing vision but of Bellow's correctives to that vision, which he presents by drawing on the ideal reader's moral norms in judging Joseph and the other characters. The character doubles—Abt, Steidler, and Vanaker—who lack of concern for others mirrors Joseph's own, reinforce our perspective of Joseph. The reader also gains insight into Joseph through theme and variation of plot. Again and again Joseph's alienation and status as a non-entity are reinforced—by the maid's lack of respect, the incident in the restaurant, the refusal of the bank to cash Iva's check.

Bellow uses the device of irony to educate the reader about Joseph. Just as Joseph uses irony to expose the folly of others, he in turn falls victim to Bellow's irony, which exposes his own folly. This type of irony produces collaboration between author and reader in which, as Wayne Booth describes in The Rhetoric of Fiction, "the speaker [or first-person narrator] is himself the butt of the ironic point. The author and reader are secretly in collusion, behind the speaker's back, agreeing upon the standard by which he is found wanting." Thus the author and reader share a perspective that Joseph does not have. They form a community which excludes Joseph, a final ironic twist on Joseph's plight.

What, then, has Joseph learned during the course of the experience recounted in this novel? During this period of gestation, he has
reflected and digested his experiences and attitudes and has made some progress in uncovering truths about himself. He has learned that personal suffering can lead to greater self-knowledge. He has learned that identity constructions cannot ward off the pain of the world and that he must shed his romantic ideas and accept the reality of life with all its imperfections. As he examines his relationships with others and his expectations of them, he has become more honest with himself. And foremost, he has prepared himself for death and acknowledged the impermanence and transitory quality of life.

But Joseph has not learned to create a community with others. Submission to the army is not an act of communion but an act of self-abnegation. Joseph has not gained a sense of self-esteem nor has he succeeded in his quest for identity. He suffers from weakness of imagination which leaves him unable to make use of his freedom. And he has not learned how to meet "suffering and humiliation... with grace, without meanness" (45). It will be the task of Bellow's more fully developed protagonists to grapple with these difficult problems.

_Dangling Man_ is not only the tale of Joseph's initiation, it is Bellow's initiation novel as well. With its classic, tightly patterned structure, Bellow's first foray into the novel genre demonstrates his ability to write a "well-made" piece of fiction. Bellow has admitted that this novel and his next novel, _The Victim_, were his initiation pieces, set out to prove that he could write a novel in the style of the European masters. These novels, he states, "tested my credentials... They were my M.A. and Ph.D. [written] to prove I could do the dancing bear routine." 23 Although both novels do meet the technical
standards of an earlier era, their concerns are not antiquated. Both are grounded in the reality of contemporary times and address issues of concern to contemporary people. Joseph's initiation may not lead to the rapprochement with society achieved by Emma in Jane Austen's novel, nor lead him to defy society as does Julien Sorel in *The Red and the Black*. Because American society is amorphous and without stratification, Joseph's education does not lead him to an established place in society. But his plight lays the groundwork for further exploration of the inward journeys the Bellow protagonist must take to reconcile himself to his world.
CHAPTER ONE: FOOTNOTES

1 Saul Bellow, Dangling Man (1944; rpt., Bard, 1975), p. 59. Future references will appear in parentheses in the text.

2 Hassan, Radical Innocence, p. 295.

3 Saul Bellow, "Two Morning Monologues," Partisan Review 8 (1941), 233.

4 Ibid., p. 231.

5 Hassan, Radical Innocence, p. 31.

6 Bellow, "Two Morning Monologues," p. 234.

7 This idea was put forth by Robert Alter in After the Tradition, p. 99.


10 Hassan, Radical Innocence, p. 294.

11 Clayton, Saul Bellow, pp. 57-59.


14 By punishing her, then, he is also punishing himself. Because her behavior mirrors his own, in spanking her he can be said to spank his own narcissistic image. See Irving Malin's discussion of mirror images in Bellow in "Seven Images," Irving Malin, ed., Saul Bellow and the Critics (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p. 169.


16 Clayton, Saul Bellow, pp. 77-78.


Clayton, Saul Bellow, pp. 118-19.

Opdahl, The Novels of Saul Bellow, p. 48.


CHAPTER TWO

His Brother's Keeper: Asa Leventhal in *The Victim*

Like *Dangling Man*, *The Victim* is a novel of self-discovery and self-education. The protagonist, Asa Leventhal, must learn to deal with the anomalies and contradictions of American life. Although the initiate in the American novel gains insight into himself and his world, this insight will not enable him, as it does his European counterpart, to affirm the values of a stable society. Because American society lacks a tradition of stability, the hero cannot aspire to resume a "proper" place in it. Indeed, there is no "proper" place for him to assume. The education of the Bellow protagonist leads instead to a greater self-understanding that will enable him to deal with the disorder of his world and to create communities between individuals which, based on humanistic values, serve as an alternative to the chaos of the greater society in which he lives.

In *The Victim* Asa Leventhal comes to grips with painful truths about himself that he would rather not face. He learns, through soul-searching and his relationship with Kirby Allbee, to accept responsibility for the unintended consequences of his actions, to deal with the guilt he feels about those actions, and to perform his duty to others with a sense of caring he did not possess before. This painful rite of passage leads him to an understanding of the moral value of brotherhood. His deepening relationship with Allbee, his interviews with others in search of perspective on his actions, and his continuous self-examination of his motives all contribute to his self-education.
Parallel crises in his life double his opportunities for self-knowledge and force him to dig deeper into himself for resources of strength to meet the crises he faces.

The novel moves from the surface of Leventhal's psyche to its depths before returning to the surface again. The novel can also be graphed by picturing Leventhal and Allbee as two divergent points that gradually converge, only to diverge again sharply. Allbee, the mirror of Leventhal as victim, plays the role of catalyst for this inward journey of self-examination. As Leventhal identifies increasingly with Allbee, he loses rational control, becomes the victim of his own irrational fears, and misreads others' actions and intentions. The crisis builds to a crescendo, or catharsis, at which Leventhal finally expels Allbee from his home and his heart and retakes control of his life and his future, a better and perhaps a wiser man. Along Leventhal's route to self-knowledge, "reality instructors" offer him realistic appraisals of his problems and act as norms against which the reader can monitor Leventhal's exaggerated fears and perceptions.

As in Dangling Man, The Victim opens on an isolated man. In the midst of the teeming, summer-sweaty city of New York, Asa Leventhal must face personal and family crises alone. Like Joseph, Leventhal is estranged from his wife, although only temporarily, while she visits her mother, whereas Joseph has deliberately estranged himself emotionally from his wife. Nevertheless, both men must face a crisis without the love and support that their wives would offer. As a result of their trials, Joseph and Leventhal become more honest with themselves. By projecting painful truths about themselves onto an alter
ego, both men are able to examine their motives and their relationships with others. Joseph learns that in order to live he must love; he must also accept death as part of life. Leventhal learns to accept life with all its imperfections, and through adversity he discovers the self-knowledge he needs in order to deal realistically with his life. Both men learn the key lesson that no one can blame another for his own failures.

Both novels, then, offer instruction in reality. The difference is that _The Victim_ ends on a more affirmative note. Leventhal's trials provide the test from which he emerges with a more realistic view of himself and his relationships to others. He regains control of his life and rejoins humanity without surrendering to another human being or institution. Joseph, on the other hand, asserts himself only to surrender to the demands of society's institutions.

Although both _The Victim_ and _Dangling Man_ are reflective novels, in which the protagonists examine and re-examine their motives and actions, _The Victim_ develops as much through dramatic action as through rumination. Physically the novel moves around Manhattan and over the ferry to Staten Island as Leventhal travels from one trial to another. In addition to relying more heavily on plot development in this novel, Bellow discards the static journal form, which suited _Dangling Man_, for a third-person narrative. By employing a more traditional narrative voice, and drawing together dramatic action, psychological portraiture, and infusion of atmosphere to create a tightly structured but dynamically projected novel, Bellow exercises considerable novelististic skill. He succeeds in establishing a critical tension in the novel by
interweaving two narratives which reflect and illuminate each other. The reader can see how Leventhal's deepening identification with Allbee causes him to lose his grip on reality and misread the attitudes of his brother, sister-in-law, and her mother toward him. The strain of the pressures brought to bear on him by his nephew's illness in turn depletes the reserves of strength he needs to deal rationally and capably with Allbee's demands on him.

In comparing Bellow's first two novels, Richard Rupp finds The Victim more claustrophobic than Dangling Man. Indeed, several critics have commented on the irony that the novel's realistic setting succeeds in creating a claustrophobic fantasy atmosphere. Baumbach notes that the oppressive atmosphere of the New York summer "suggests Leventhal's spiritual malaise. . . . Bellow makes the atmosphere a reflector of Leventhal's interior suffocation." Ralph Freedman's essay, "Saul Bellow: The Illusion of Environment," notes that by absenting Leventhal's wife, Bellow creates a "fantasy atmosphere." This altered, unstable environment reflects Leventhal's attitude toward himself and others. To expand Freedman's point we might conclude that Leventhal's isolation creates an oppressive atmosphere that exacerbates his irrational reactions. Freedman sees this change as "almost mythical in its proportions."

Robert Alter suggests that The Victim reaches back to the realm of the folktale. Allbee plays the role of the dybbuk figure, "appearing and reappearing like the spirit of one dead, refusing to be exorcised in his insistence on the complicity shared by him and his enemy-brother." Despite its realistic setting, Alter sees the novel as
a moral fable [in which] Leventhal's Jewishness is not so much a given fact of personal history as a symbol of a general moral state: it is every man's susceptibility to victimhood, his dangerous but inescapable need always to be responsible for the implications of his actions, his befuddlement when confronted with the impermeable moral otherness of another human being.4

The novel as moral fable is reinforced by the first epigraph, from* Thousand and One Nights:*

It is related, O auspicious King, that there was a merchant of the merchants who had much wealth, and business in various cities. Now on a day he mounted horse and went forth to recover monies in certain towns, and the heat oppressed him; so he sat beneath a tree and, putting his hand into his saddle-bags, he took thence some broken bread and dried dates and began to break fast. When he had ended eating the dates he threw away the stones with force and lo! an Ifrit appeared, huge of stature and brandishing a drawn sword, wherewith he approached the merchant and said, "Stand up that I may slay thee even as thou slewest my son!" Asked the merchant, "How have I slain thy son?" and he answered, "When thou atest dates and threwest away the stones they struck my son full in the breast as he was walking by, so that he died forthwith."

With the choice of this epigraph Bellow tells us that there are no superfluous actions. Man's responsibility to man extends even to the unintended results of his actions. Every action he takes must be weighed by its possible effect on others. The pits heaved away by the merchant can be compared to a pebble tossed into a pond—its splash reverberates in concentric circles far beyond the point of impact. So do Leventhal's actions echo after him. As he discovers painfully, his behavior during his job interview in Rudiger's office, though not intended to reflect on Allbee, who had given him the introduction, results in Allbee's being
fired. Alíbee loses not only his job but his wife, his dignity, and nearly his life.

A second pole of the narrative is prefigured by the second epigraph, from DeQuincey's *The Pains of Opium*:

> Be that as it may, now it was that upon the rocking waters of the ocean the human face began to reveal itself; the sea appeared paved with innumerable faces, upturned to the heavens; imploring, wrathful, despairing; faces that surged upward by thousands, by myriads, by generations... .

In DeQuincey's scenario the human condition is pitiful. In the sea of life we turn our faces heavenward in search of meaning and, like Job, for the answers to questions we cannot answer ourselves. If the first epigraph stresses each person's responsibility to the other, the chain of brotherhood it is immoral to break, the second epigraph again stresses the communality of human beings, as well as their helplessness in the face of forces they cannot understand or control. During the course of this novel an innocent child dies and a man questions the trials he must face alone. In the end we are left with the question, "What's your idea of who runs things?" Ultimate answers, as DeQuincey indicates, are not forthcoming. Although we can gain self-knowledge, Bellow suggests, we cannot necessarily gain knowledge of the greater mysteries of life.

Opdahl and Clayton have noted the startling resemblance between the plot of *The Victim* and that of Dostoevski's *The Eternal Husband*. Both Leventhal and the hero of Dostoevski's novel acquire a double, someone who surfaces from the past to serve as a projection of the hero's guilt. The hero tries to free himself from this encumbrance but finds
release only after the double has unsuccessfully tried to kill him. Although there appear to be many plot similarities between these two novels, thematically The Victim is very much a contemporary American novel. Leventhal's quest is more for self-knowledge than for freedom; he must confront truths about himself that he has repressed.

Hassan sees Leventhal as typical of the protagonists of contemporary American novels who fit the image of the "converging figures of the initiate and the victim." This dual image represents, according to Hassan, the dominant image of the modern self in contemporary American literature. As victim, Asa Leventhal is the prototypical outcast of Bellow's fiction for three reasons: 1) he is alone, 2) he is a Jew, and 3) he is a flawed but well-meaning human being. Leventhal sees himself as both outcast and victim. Like Joseph in Dangling Man, he is mentally and emotionally isolated from anyone who can share his burdens. He longs for community, for a visitor to his lonely apartment. Bellow sets the scene of Leventhal's trial by stripping him of meaningful family connections and community supports. His wife Mary's absence has broken the threads of his crucial community. His brother Max's absence has placed a tremendous burden on him, for he must assume responsibility for Max's family, whom he barely knows. With all his emotional supports pulled out from under him, Leventhal must look within himself to solve the problems set up for him and weather alone the internal and external storm. He must struggle to win the trust of his Italian sister-in-law Elena and her older son Philip during the illness of the younger son Mickey.

As a Jew, Leventhal feels ostracized from the non-Jewish world.
Unlike his gentile friend Williston, he has no assured social place. Williston would not have been afraid of Rudiger's abuse at the job interview. As a majority member of American society, Williston would have been unruffled. To Leventhal, "There was always a place for someone like him, there or elsewhere. And another man's words and looks could never convert him into his own worst enemy." Leventhal is painfully sensitive to the way in which non-Jews treat him and fears retribution for his actions. He misreads Williston, whom he accuses incorrectly of believing that he caused Allbee to lose his job "on purpose, to get even, . . . not only because I'm terrible personally, but because I'm a Jew" (106).

Leventhal's sensitivity to anti-Semitism is matched only by his fears of blacklisting and insanity. Fear of blacklisting can be seen as a natural outgrowth of Leventhal's fear of anti-Semitism and its two-pronged weapon, persecution and ostracism. After his job interview with Rudiger, he fears that Rudiger will blacklist him from getting any job in his field. He later projects this fear onto Allbee. Learning that Allbee could not get another editorial job after being fired by Rudiger, Leventhal apprehensively asks Williston if Allbee was blacklisted, and not satisfied with Williston's evasive answer, later asks Allbee himself. It becomes clear that alcohol, not blacklisting, is responsible for Allbee's poor employment record. Blacklisting per se exists in this novel only in Leventhal's mind. It is understandable, though, that during the "witch-hunting" postwar years in which this novel takes place, such fears of an already fearful man would not be unusual.
Leventhal also fears becoming insane. Without his wife Mary's stabilizing influence, he succumbs to the irrational fear that he is becoming "mad-looking," and that he will die insane as his father told him his mother had. Mary often reminded him that he had only his father's word for this claim: "The only proof there is of anything wrong with your mother is that she married that father of yours," Mary would say to calm his fears (230). Leventhal's fear of insanity stems from his recognition that as he becomes more deeply involved with Allbee, he becomes more irrational. He feels himself losing control over situations in which he becomes enmeshed and over his own reactions and behavior.

Leventhal feels that he is a victim—of Allbee's persecution, of his brother's neglect, and of anti-Semitism. But he is also the initiate, as Hassan points out. As initiate, Leventhal must learn a key lesson, to bear the moral burden of another. Although he dislikes Allbee, he learns "to accept Allbee's humanity while rejecting his cosmology." This he does by extending compassion while withholding moral judgments. By casting off the self-imposed burden of moral rectitude, he can acquire what Clayton calls "an open heart." By identifying with others, he can learn to accept the flaws in his own nature, the "otherness" in himself. This is a crucial step in the process of joining the human community. By recognizing the imperfection of his own nature, he can then accept his own guilt for his errors without projecting it onto others. Thus he can give up his self-created role of innocent victim. And by rejecting victimhood, he can acquire dignity, the pivotal component in the "humanness" of human nature,
according to Schlossberg, Bellow's philosophical spokesman in this novel.

Marcus Klein suggests "nobility" as a word interchangeable with "dignity," "... nobility, a word much favored by Bellow and meaning the coalescence of selflessness and selfhood." This coalescence, or balance, is a key position for which Bellow's protagonists quest. In recognizing his own dignity and that of others, Leventhal "strikes an existential balance between what he owes himself and what he owes to others," according to M. Gilbert Porter.

The last, but most difficult, lesson Leventhal must learn is to move from an attitude of duty to one of love in his relationships with others. To do this he must end his emotional detachment from them. The novel traces Leventhal's emotional and psychological convergence with Allbee. At the height of their intimacy Leventhal feels "a strange, close consciousness of Allbee, of his face and body, a feeling of intimate nearness, ... [a] curious emotion of closeness..." (144). It is as if he has become enveloped by the other, and "the feeling of closeness seemed to have superseded and made faint all other feelings" (145). In the parallel story line, Leventhal must also end his emotional detachment from his brother, whom he reproaches for his abdication of parental responsibility during time of crisis. He must learn to accept, without resentment, his brother's responsibility as his own.

The novel moves, then, from divergence to convergence. Every step closer that Leventhal takes toward Allbee is like a camera lens widening on himself as subject. As he takes in more of Allbee, his
image on the other side of the camera opening, he plumbs deeper into 
his own psyche. Baumbach puts it succinctly:

All of Bellow's novels, with the possible exception of Augie March, deal with the sufferer, the 
seismographic recorder of world guilt who, 
confronted by a guilt-distorted correlative of 
himself, seeks within the bounds of his own hell 
the means to his heaven. Leventhal is redeemed 
through succumbing to the temptations of his devil; 
he crosses the threshold of hell, descends to its 
deepest parts, and heroically, for Leventhal is 
finally a hero, comes back again, better if not 
greatly wiser.12

Only by what Baumbach calls a "spiritual shock treatment," a test of 
his elemental mettle, can Leventhal emerge stronger and better able to 
put his life in order again.

Leventhal's education proceeds on twin fronts, which Bellow 
judiciously weaves together to create interlocking tensions within his 
protagonist. The novel opens with two burdens about to be thrust upon 
Leventhal—burdens that he would like to cast off. His sister-in-law 
calls him to Staten Island to share the burden of dealing with the 
grave illness of her son Mickey, while her husband, Leventhal's brother 
Max, is working in Galveston, Texas. Her cries, hysterical and 
"terrible" on the phone to Leventhal, are like the "imploring" faces of 
the masses in the epigraph from DeQuincey. Her reason reduced to 
hysteria by fear for her son, she is in need of a firm rational hand, 
which Asa willingly provides. He accepts this duty although he resents 
having to act as a surrogate for his absent brother.

On his return to his lonely Manhattan apartment, Leventhal longs 
for a visitor. Ironically, the next person to step into his life does
not relieve his loneliness but causes him to look into his past and his motives with an introspection that further isolates him. Out in the park for a walk, he is accosted by Allbee. Their meeting takes on an almost foreordained quality. Although Leventhal was merely out for some fresh air, Allbee thinks he has come in response to a note Allbee left for him in his mailbox requesting a meeting in the park that night. When Leventhal insists that he did not receive the note, Allbee accuses him of pretending:

"Why should I pretend?" said Leventhal excitedly. "What reason have I got to pretend? I don't know what letter you're talking about. 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?"

"By blood? No, no... heavens!" Allbee laughed.

(34)

Allbee's answer hints, if ironically, at the notion that all men are brothers, although, as we discover, Allbee sees the brotherhood as a Cain and Abel relationship in which he plays the innocent victim. The vociferousness of his disclaimer of a blood relationship between them also serves to remind us of the gap between Leventhal as Jew and Allbee as patrician white Anglo-Saxon Protestant. From this point on, Allbee insinuates himself into Leventhal's life like a worm into an apple. He probes Leventhal's conscience with knife-like scrutiny for signs of guilt and heaves the burden of his downtrodden condition at Leventhal's feet.

After his initial confrontation with Allbee in the park, Leventhal feels compassion for him. He sees Allbee as bent out of rational shape by his misfortunes. Alcohol has dulled Allbee's reason and left him an
emotional wretch "haunted in his mind by wrongs or faults of his own which he turned into wrongs against himself" (42). Leventhal imagines himself in Allbee's place, forced to pass his nights in flea-bitten flophouses:

He had seen such places. He could smell the carbolic disinfectant. And if it were his flesh on those sheets, his lips drinking that coffee, his back and thighs in that winter sun, his eyes looking at the boards of the floor...?

(68)

Leventhal feels drawn to identify both emotionally and physically with Allbee, yet at the same time he resists Allbee's intrusion into his life. Knowing Allbee is climbing the stairs to his apartment, he wishes he could run out the door and cross the roof to escape him. Allbee enters without knocking, violating Leventhal's sanctity, and proceeds to accuse him of ruining his life, even of causing his wife's fatal accident. From this point on, Allbee encroaches on Leventhal's life, both in his persistent unexpected presence and in Leventhal's growing obsession with him.

Bellow establishes early the tension between the two and the attraction/repulsion Leventhal feels toward intimacy with Allbee. Even though Leventhal finds Allbee's accusations outrageous, his conscience is pricked. He begins to turn both inward, to self-examination of his motives, and outward, to seek corroboration of his innocence by others, in order to assuage the rising guilt he feels. He appeals to his friend Harkavy "to confirm the absurdity, the madness of the accusations" (82). Harkavy, as voice of reason and a prime reality instructor in the novel, points out that Leventhal is overreacting to Allbee and urges
common sense on him. Harkavy rejects Leventhal's theory that Rudiger and Allbee planned for his job interview to be a fiasco in order to make a fool of him. Although Harkavy's assessment of Allbee as "disturbed in his mind" is correct, this description can also be applied to Leventhal. His mental balance begins to waver under Allbee's pressure, he twists even the motives of well-meaning friends like Harkavy and Williston, and he begins to question his own motives, of whose purity he was previously so sure.

Allbee's self-destructive behavior and hostility toward Leventhal begin to wear Leventhal down. This uncomfortable proximity to Allbee makes him "so conscious of Allbee, so certain he was being scrutinized, that he was able to see himself as if through a strange pair of eyes: the side of his face, the palpitation in his throat, the seams of his skin, the shape of his body and of his feet in their white shoes" (99). He experiences this physicality by projecting his senses onto Allbee. Like a double, he can see through Allbee's eyes:

Changed this way into his own observer, he was able to see Allbee, too, and imagined himself standing so near behind him that he could see the weave of his coat, his raggedly overgrown neck, the bulge of his cheek, the color of the blood in his ear; he could even evoke the odor of his hair and skin. The acuteness and intimacy of it astounded him, oppressed and intoxicated him.

(99)

His attraction/repulsion to Allbee obsesses him. As his sense of himself as a separate identity begins to slip away, he tries to resist the temptation to counter "absurdity with absurdity and madness with madness" (100). But his attempt to maintain rational control fails.
This physical intimacy, the sense of being under Allbee's skin, leads him to an intuitive truth—that he must accept some of the blame for Allbee's condition. The balance shifts from his desire to escape the burden Allbee has placed on him to the realization that he must share responsibility for Allbee's present state.

A crisis in Mickey's condition parallels the crisis Leventhal anticipates with Allbee. His conflicting needs—to escape Allbee and to identify with him—have sapped his strength. He senses that "the showdown is coming" for both Mickey and Allbee:

But what he meant by this preoccupying "showdown" was a crisis which would bring an end to his resistance to something he had no right to resist. Illness, madness, and death were forcing him to confront his fault. He had used every means, and principally indifference and neglect, to avoid acknowledging it and he still did not know what it was. But that was owing to the way he had arranged not to know. He had done a great deal to make things easier for himself, toning down, softening, looking aside. But the more he tried to subdue whatever it was that he resisted, the more it raged, and the moment was coming when his strength to resist would be at an end. He was nearly exhausted now.

This is the psychological midpoint of the novel, the moment when Leventhal acknowledges his identification with Allbee and his responsibility for Allbee's condition. This realization anticipates their physical convergence in the next scene, in which Allbee moves into Leventhal's apartment. Allbee, pleading to be taken in, admits that he is "not entirely under control" (143). Neither is Leventhal, although he struggles to maintain a critical distance from Allbee even while he feels himself slipping into emotional synchronicity with him.
Leventhal feels Allbee projected onto him like a second skin. Both recognize this intimacy, this sensory identification which becomes, in Freedman's judgment, "hysterical." The oppression this relationship brings to Leventhal expresses itself in an anxiety dream in which Leventhal, carrying a heavy suitcase, misses a train. Although he cannot rid himself of this burden of responsibilities symbolized by the suitcase, he experiences at the end of the dream a Whitmanesque moment of awareness—transcendental in its nature—that all people are part of one another. This intuition mirrors a feeling of "recognition in Allbee's eyes which he could not doubt was the double of something in his own" (151). In Malin's view, it is as if Allbee "holds Asa's secret desires for punishment and guilt, reflecting them as the stranger reflects Joseph's own death wish." Because his rational controls have collapsed, Leventhal is able to experience truth intuitively. He realizes that "the truth must be something we understand at once, without an introduction or explanation, but so common and familiar that we don't always realize it's around us" (151). This awareness is a key element in Leventhal's education. He discovers that all he has learned through his trials he already knew—that his education is more a reawakening than a discovery of something new. Ironically, it is Allbee who points out to him what he must learn—to accept truths about himself which he was reluctant to face: "I know what goes on inside me. I'll let you in on something. There isn't a man living who doesn't. All this business, 'Know thyself!' Everybody knows but nobody wants to admit" (199).

Emotionally drained, Leventhal begins to reverse positions with
Allbee. Gradually he takes on Allbee's response to stress, becoming increasingly irrational and riddled by feelings of persecution, while Allbee makes more demands on him, including the demand of a job interview with Leventhal's boss. Finally, like Allbee, he drinks to escape the pressures, and passes out on Harkavy's sofa, just as Allbee had passed out on his.

At his lowest ebb, Leventhal realizes he must extricate himself from this unhealthy situation. Drawing on a hidden reserve of strength, he rejects any further physical intimacy—refuses Allbee's curious request to touch his hair—and begins to emerge from the emotional morass into which he has fallen. The "terrible physical intimacy, which Bellow renders in terms of sheer nausea," according to Fiedler, has emotionally exhausted him. He feels impotent to lift this "great tiring weight" from his shoulders.

Only the discovery of Allbee in his bed with a woman allows Leventhal to regain his strength and break free of Allbee's clutches. This final violation of his sanctity provides the cathartic experience Leventhal needs to restore his sanity. After he chases the pair out, he cleanses his apartment of all traces of Allbee. The housecleaning serves to cleanse his mind as well, restoring his perspective and his sense of humor.

At this point Leventhal has diverged from Allbee and is free of his influence. Allbee's suicide attempt, in which he almost succeeds in asphyxiating both of them, is actually an anticlimax. Leventhal is now sure of himself, stronger, and emotionally independent of Allbee. Although he is angry with Allbee, he no longer fears him. He has
regained control of himself. Although most critics see this incident as the catharsis of the action, the catharsis has already occurred and this incident merely reinforces Leventhal's returning psychological independence from Allbee. Leventhal does not save Allbee so much as throw off his interference once again.

In the parallel story involving his family, Leventhal accepts the role of his brother's keeper as well. But his irrational behavior brought on by his relationship with Allbee also affects his dealings with his family. He misinterprets the attitude of his sister-in-law and her mother toward him, thinking that they blame him for Mickey's death. He then oversteps the bounds of brotherhood and meddles in his brother Max's affairs, as Allbee did in his life. Fortunately Max is not swayed by his brother's misperceptions and gently helps him to restore his perspective.

This convergence-divergence pattern in the relationships in the novel illustrates the need for balance noted by Porter earlier. Klein puts aptly the lesson Leventhal must learn:

Asa Leventhal must balance what he owes a man who is at once his persecutor, his victim, and also his companion in this universe against what he owes himself. He discovers that he has a moral obligation in each direction—and that the issue is not only a moral one. Life is a battle in which each engagement suggests the necessity of disengagements and vice versa.17

Leventhal must learn to balance his obligation to others against his obligation to himself. This is a hard lesson to apply in contemporary society. Bellow's spokesman in the novel, the homespun philosopher Schlossberg, claims, "It's bad to be less than human and it's bad to be
more than human. . . . More than human, can you have any use for life? Less than human, you don't either" (121). Those who try to be more than human—the romantics—end up being less than human. Those who run away from responsibility also are less than human. Asa Leventhal learns the hard way to face up to the responsibilities imposed on him. But he disagrees with Schlossberg's definition of "less than human." In his compassion he sees as human too those who are afraid of responsibility. This compassion he has gained as a direct result of his experience as keeper to his brother and to Allbee.

What is not pointed out explicitly by any of the characters, nor by the critics, is the danger involved in accepting these responsibilities. The parallel plot lines, in which the relationships of Leventhal to Allbee and to Max develop as mirror images of each other, point up the danger of identifying so completely with another that one destroys the other's independence. This concern is further developed in Bellow's next novel, The Adventures of Augie March, but even here Bellow indicates that one must strike a balance in one's relationships to others. To violate the bounds of another, to foist one's outlook on another, is as wrong as to allow oneself to be swallowed up by another. Allbee suffocated Leventhal by attempting to merge with him; Leventhal should not have allowed himself to become "the other." Leventhal also should not have tried to foist his paranoia on Max. Here Bellow draws a fine line between taking responsibility for another and meddling.

Schlossberg's philosophy, which many critics have cited as the key to this novel, is less important here than it becomes later in
Henderson the Rain King and Seize the Day. The point of this novel is not whether you are more or less than human but whether your relationships are appropriately balanced. If you overpower another person, he may lose control of his own life. If you do not make some attempt to take responsibility when others need you, you are not living up to your familial, communal, or human responsibilities. (This concern is voiced again in Henderson the Rain King, Mr. Sammler's Planet, and Humboldt's Gift.) To be human, Leventhal discovers, is to care about another, but not to violate the other's sanctity as an individual.

Leventhal also learns to strike a balance between the intuitive and the rational approach to truth. Like Schlossberg, who preaches integration of the whole self (the rational and the intuitive), Leventhal comes to see that to live to his fullest capacity he must accept the value of the intuitive as well as the rational truth. The moment of awareness in his dream in which he approaches communion with other souls convinces him to place his trust in his intuition. Yet the communion with Allbee at the expense of rational checks forces him to realize that he must maintain a delicate balance between reason and intuition.

Nudging Leventhal to these realizations, like tugs leading a ship to safe harbor, are the reality instructors Bellow employs. Harkavy, Williston, Mary, Max, and Schlossberg offer guidance, a balanced view, and good advice on both Leventhal's journey down to the pits with Allbee and on his way up again. Harkavy points out Leventhal's paranoia and urges him to break free of Allbee. Williston provides compassion as well as a fair-minded, unbiased view of the claims of both Leventhal
and Allbee. Reminders of Mary's love act as a lifeline for Leventhal to grasp in his most extreme moments. Max corrects, with love, Leventhal's misconceptions about Elena and her mother and comes as close as anyone in the novel to providing the ideal compassionate relationship Leventhal needs. Schlossberg has been hailed by critics as the major spokesman for Bellow's ideas, but in the novel he protrudes like a stick figure mouthing platitudes. Poorly integrated as a character, he has no intrinsic connection to the plot, and the chance meetings Bellow arranges for him with Leventhal seem contrived and artificial. Nevertheless, he leaves Leventhal and the reader with guidelines for human relationships against which the relationships in this and later novels can be measured.

The last chapter, which functions as an epilogue, revisits Leventhal and Allbee several years later as they meet by chance at a theater. Allbee has not changed his attitudes—he accuses a cab driver of trying to milk him by taking a circuitous route, and his apology to Leventhal for his past behavior is punctuated by thinly veiled hostile remarks. Leventhal, though, has mellowed. He has a good job and he and Mary are expecting a child. Leventhal's trials have enabled him to make peace with himself, and Mary's pregnancy offers hope for the future and a sense of continuity. If we look back to the first epigraph Bellow has selected for this novel, we can see that because Leventhal has learned to accept responsibility for his actions and to extend himself in acts of brotherhood, he is now able to live a fruitful life. Allbee claims to recognize his responsibility to Leventhal, but his bitterness belies that. He still sees himself as a victim, although he claims to
have come to terms with a world which, he agrees, "wasn't made exactly for me... Approximately made for me will have to be good enough" (255–56). He no longer feels he can gain control of his destiny, and he sees himself as just a passenger on a train with no hope of being a conductor.

Images of trains recur throughout the novel. At the beginning Leventhal barely squeezes through the closing doors of the subway. Later he dreams of missing his train. Malin points out that Leventhal searches for a transfer on his journey to self-knowledge but that there is none. He must learn to accept life's journey in the world as it is—a world with flaws and inconsistencies not tailored to the needs of any one person. As noted in the Introduction, American society is marked not by unities but by disunity, contradiction, and disharmony. At the end of the journey the protagonist will not become integrated with society, as would the hero of a European novel. He will, instead, learn to accept the anomalies of the American experience. He must also accept his limited knowledge of the greater mysteries of life. Transcendental moments are too few and too short—all he really has is his capacity for being a decent human being.

Bellow leaves the reader with a question. As Allbee races away from the theater, Leventhal calls after him, "Wait a minute, what's your idea of who runs things?" (256). It is unclear whether Leventhal is expressing old fears of anti-Semitism or blacklisting, or whether the question is metaphysical in nature. Bellow offers no answers, but the reader can relate this question to the epigraph from DeQuincey, which raises the same question. As I noted earlier, Bellow suggests that
although we cannot gain knowledge of anything beyond our mortal experience, we can gain a sense of community with our fellow human beings by accepting them as they are and not projecting onto them blame for our own failures.

These lessons Leventhal has learned in the course of his experiences in this novel. He has gained the self-knowledge he needs to lead a productive and satisfying life. The epilogue makes clear that he has experienced a kind of rebirth. His hopes for the future are concrete and meaningful, whereas Allbee is still floundering. If we compare the end of Dangling Man to that of The Victim, we can see that whereas Leventhal's future is bright, Joseph's is vague, couched in surrender to the army and clouded by threat of death in the war. The Victim, however, despite its effective integration of dramatic action, psychological development, and atmosphere, lacks the finesse of Dangling Man. Bellow relies too heavily on chance encounter to structure the dramatic action. The epilogue seems tacked on, and Schlossberg, Bellow's spokesman, stands on the sidelines of the action like an Old Testament figure chastising his frailier fellow creatures.

These novels, taken as a pair, mark Bellow's auspicious debut as a novelist. In an interview with Gordon Harper in 1965, Bellow looked back at his efforts in his first two novels:

I think that when I wrote those early books I was timid. I still felt the incredible effrontery of announcing myself to the world (in part I mean the WASP world) as a writer and an artist. I had to touch a great many bases, demonstrate my abilities, pay my respects to formal requirements. In short, I was afraid to let myself go... .My first two books were 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* I accepted a Flaubertian standard. Not a bad standard, to be sure, but one which, in the end, I found repressive—repressive because of the circumstances of my life and because of my upbringing in Chicago as the son of immigrants. I could not, with such an instrument as I developed in the first two books, express a variety of things I knew intimately. These books, though useful, did not give me a form in which I felt comfortable. A writer should be able to express himself easily, naturally, copiously in a form which frees his mind, his energies. Why should he hobble himself with formalities? With a borrowed sensibility? With the desire to be "correct"?19

The desire to break free of a hobbling style compelled Bellow to find his own voice. His next novel, *The Adventures of Augie March*, celebrates not only the coming of age of an American adolescent, but the emergence of Bellow's unique style. Augie's boisterous, yet poignant adventures in search of a life he can believe in turn the education of Joseph and Asa Leventhal to comic fare that reveals from another vantage point Bellow's understanding of human nature and displays for the first time his wit and his virtuoso skill as a player on the instrument of the American language.
CHAPTER TWO: FOOTNOTES


8. Rupp, *Celebration in Postwar American Fiction*, p. 188.


CHAPTER THREE

"Columbus of Those Near-at-Hand":

The Adventures of Augie March

The Adventures of Augie March breaks the mold of the well-made Flaubertian novel into which Bellow tried to fit his first two novels and takes an imaginative leap into the mainstream of American literature. Bellow's third novel turns to comic fare the somber, restrained approach with which Dangling Men and The Victim deal with the modern condition of alienation and isolation. With its expansive form, breezy style, and exuberant language, Augie March explodes with a dynamism, energy, and zeal akin to those of the pioneers and immigrants who sought on the untamed plains of the Midwest and the teeming streets of the cities the fulfillment of their American dream of freedom and success.

Thematically, The Adventures of Augie March follows the literary tradition of the American romantic quest novel. In the romantic quest novel, the hero searches for an elusive ideal beyond his grasp. In Moby-Dick Ahab seeks metaphysical knowledge by pursuing the white whale. Huckleberry Finn, rejecting the corrupt nature of the society in which he lives, seeks escape and finds along the way communion and brotherhood with an escaped black slave. But this community is possible only in isolation from society. In The Great Gatsby Jay Gatsby seeks the illusory qualities he associates with the affluent, exclusionary world of East Egg. All these romantic quests fail because they are based on unrealistic expectations which cannot be met in the real world.
Unlike Melville, Twain, and Fitzgerald, Bellow no longer believes that the romantic quest of the hero can be taken seriously. Augie March is a novel of the Depression, touched by history—by war and the collapse of the American dream. Bellow finds that history has altered the concept of the romantic hero, so that for the writer parody is all that is left. "The earnestness of a Proust towards himself would seem old-fashioned today," he claims.\(^1\) Elsewhere he elaborates, "The Romantic heroes of powerful will, the Rastignacs and Raskolnikovs, are gone."\(^2\) Buffeted by the upheaval of the modern world, the contemporary hero, according to Bellow, can only be comic, like Leopold Bloom. As he sees it, "It is obvious that modern comedy has to do with the disintegrating outline of the worthy and humane Self, the bourgeois hero of an earlier age. . . . The First World War dealt a blow to his prestige from which it never recovered."\(^3\)

The Bellow hero, then, dreams not of Horatio Alger success but of personal peace. Because the romantic quest of the bourgeois hero can no longer be taken seriously, Bellow parodies it, in the character of Augie's brother Simon, in order to record the education of Augie as modern hero. Augie March, Bellow's American Adam long on possibility but short on fulfillment, must learn to cope with a world in which traditional values have collapsed, only to be replaced by disillusionment, contradiction, and alienation. His initiation proceeds through a series of adventures rather than through a single prolonged crisis, like Joseph's, or a series of baptisms by fire, like Asa Leventhal's, but each experience along the way contributes to his rite of passage to maturity. The times have altered the possibilities open
to the initiate: "Undeniably," Bellow states, "the human being is not what he commonly thought a century ago. The question nevertheless remains. He is something. What is he?"  

To determine what Augie is it would be helpful to trace his literary heritage. A good place to start is Chase’s *The American Novel and Its Tradition*. Chase points out that unlike the European *Bildungsroman*, which generally concludes with the reconciliation of protagonist and society, the American initiation novel "pictures life in a context of unresolved contradictions—contradictions which, for better or for worse, are not absorbed, reconciled, or transcended."  

Chase here describes the nineteenth-century novel, but this sense of alienation and disorder grows stronger in the twentieth century. Of the modern American novel Hassan sees "alienation of self from society [as its] basic assumption." In the postmodern world Hassan finds that "society no longer lends itself to an assured definition. The breakdown of coherent theories about society leaves the novel without a mirror to the pattern it seeks to create."  

Augie's adventures reflect both the tradition of American literature revealed by Chase and the postmodern condition noted by Hassan. His adventures lead him not to a niche in society, but to the awareness that there is no niche right for him. Of necessity, then, his quest for self-discovery leads him to seek a personal transcendence over the disorder and contradiction he discovers in American life. His aim is, in Jamesian terms, "to see," but the vision he seeks is transcendental, not social. Thus, although Augie's adventures take him far and wide and expose him to a variety of people, his journey to
self-knowledge, like that of his predecessors Joseph and Leventhal, is essentially inward. His experiences with the "Machiavellians" he meets fuel him for a two-pronged journey to discovery of self and world. Seeking the elusive axial lines of "truth, love, peace, bounty, usefulness, harmony,"7 he rejects the values represented by the roles offered to him because, like an ill-fitting suit of clothes, they are designed to suit the giver, not the receiver.

In this parody of the American romantic quest novel, Bellow follows closely the criteria for the nineteenth-century romance of the "young man from the provinces" outlined by Lionel Trilling in his introduction to Henry James's The Princess Casamassima. Blessed with "poverty, pride, and intelligence," the hero, like Augie,

need not come from the provinces in literal fact, his social class may constitute his province. But a provincial birth and rearing suggest the simplicity and the high hopes he begins with—he starts with a great demand upon life and great wonder about its complexity and promise. He may be of good family but he must be poor. He is intelligent, or at least aware, but not at all shrewd in worldly matters. He must have acquired a certain amount of education, should have learned something about life from books, although not the truth.8

Several critics have drawn comparisons between Huckleberry Finn, the quintessential nineteenth-century American initiation novel, and Augie March.9 Both portray adolescents whose experiences with morally corrupt people help them to gain independence and a realistic attitude about the world. Both are novels of moral protest, presenting a protagonist at odds with the dominant values of his culture. And both condemn the corrupting influence of money. (When Anna Coblin expounds,
"Money makes you meshuggah" [270], she speaks for both Bellow and Twain.) Huck and Augie pursue what Peter Coventry in his introduction to Huckleberry Finn calls the "spontaneous morality of the heart,"10 a morality based on human sympathy. In order to follow this instinct, Huck and Augie reject socially acceptable relationships for those that are morally superior but socially unacceptable (e.g. Huck chooses not to turn Jim in to the authorities, and Augie chooses to help Mimi Villars, knowing full well it may cost him his chance to marry Lucy Magnus).

Klein sees Augie as "Huck confined to a city populated by endless duplications of the King, the Duke, and Colonel Sellers. . . . What the Mississippi and the Territory could do for Huck, Augie must do for himself. His only territory is his personality, which he must keep free."11 Thus, where Huckleberry Finn presents an alternative social construct to the existing social order, Augie March finds none—only parodies of alternative constructs. The raft on which Huck and Jim construct a microcosmic community based on human sympathy and friendship is parodied by Augie's disastrous experience in the lifeboat with Basteshaw. After the breakup of the March family, nowhere in the novel does Bellow offer us an alternative community based on these virtues. He offers us only parody, in the form of Simon's relationship with the Magnuses and Augie's with Thea.

Augie March parodies not only the American romantic quest novel but the eighteenth-century picaresque novel. But unlike the hero's adventures in the eighteenth-century European novel, Augie's excursions do not have as their end the affirmation of community found in such
novels as *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews*. Identities are not confirmed nor families reconstructed in *Augie March*. What Bellow borrows from the older picaresque novel is, as Alter describes, "a central emphasis on the endless and vivid variety of experience." But unlike the traditional picaresque hero who "seeks experience for its own sake," for Augie "experience is rather a means to an end—it is the medium for his relentless struggle to discover himself."12

As picaro, Augie is an outsider, a man of adventure and travel whose needs conflict with the needs of those who represent the diversity of American society. Augie seeks escape from the confines of all those who would impose their own pattern on his life. As Alter notes in another essay, Augie, like the picaro, represents "another possibility of escape in his ability to be anything while refusing to be one thing in particular."13 But Augie is not a picaresque hero because the picaresque hero is fully formed from the outset and does not change with the incidents in the novel. The character of the picaresque hero does not mature as Augie does in the course of his adventures. As Alter and Tony Tanner note, the picaresque form merely masks the true nature of this novel, that of a contemporary *Bildungsroman*.14

Like the hero of the romantic quest novel, Augie represents the adolescent as initiate, but as Hassan points out, the initiation of the adolescent in contemporary American fiction "leads not to communion—because social forms have broken down—but to estrangement and disenchantment."15 Each successive encounter with the Machiavellians in his life leaves Augie further disenchanted. Naive,
innocent, and trusting at the beginning of his adventures, Augie eventually learns from his experiences to be skeptical of the motives of others.

In his search for a "good enough fate," he embarks on a series of unplanned, often pointless journeys. Unwittingly, the movements he makes inhibit his search for the stillness of the axial lines, the elusive moment where his inner self feels a oneness with the world. As the Bellow hero learns, most successfully in Herzog, reflection, not action, proves to be the magic catalyst that transports him to self-understanding and self-acceptance.

The journey is not only a picaresque device, but as Kaul notes about the nineteenth-century novel, "American fiction assumes typically the pattern of a journey. . .[which represents] the individual's alienation from the established social order and his reaching out toward community relationships and values."16 Augie rejects the morally inferior roles society has to offer him and seeks to form a new community. But unlike Huck and Jim, who find a morally superior communion on the raft, Augie achieves no affirmation of community. He returns to Chicago after escaping the police for transporting illegal immigrants over the Canadian border, only to discover that "Grandma" Lausch, the hub of his family community, has died. His first community, his family, disintegrates and he cannot replace it with another.

Augie March can be read then as a series of attempts to form, hold on to, or patch up communities. One by one Augie's family members are shunted off to institutions: over Augie's objections Simon places their retarded brother Georgie and then Mama in institutions, and Grandma's
absent sons put her in a nursing home. Freedman points out in reference to this novel that the institution is "a decisive social force which counteracts normal social affiliation...[it is] the epitome of displacement to which the decline of the family might lead." This sense of displacement exacerbates Augie’s search for inner harmony, because as his nuclear community disintegrates and the real world will not meet his needs, he must turn inward to find the place where the axial lines cross. His successive attempts to form communities with others fail because he is not willing to live life on their terms. He either extricates himself—from his relationships with the Renlings and Thea—or he is ousted—by Simon, who fears that his own standing with the Magnus family will be compromised by employing a brother who rejects the values by which they live.

Augie’s journeys and his attempts to form communities are in part directed by the times in which he lives. Like Mr. Sammler’s Planet, Humboldt’s Gift, and The Dean’s December, Augie March is shaped by the conditions of those times. Although Dangling Man and The Victim touch on contemporary conditions, Joseph’s and Leventhal’s contacts with the greater world around them are tangential. Augie, however, is swept up in the tides of history. His experiences reflect the upheaval of social and economic conditions in the 1930s. He floats through the major movements of United States history—the Depression, World War Two, and the chaos of the immediate postwar years. Like so many others during those displaced times, he feels a sense of rootlessness: "It was not only for me that being moored wasn’t permitted; there was general motion, as of people driven from angles and corners into the open, by
places being valueless and inhospitable to them" (178). A drifter, he is part of a "wanderer population without any special Jerusalem or Kiev in mind, or relics to kiss, or any idea of putting off sins, but only the hope their chances might be better in the next town" (185).

The image of drifting in a lifeboat recurs as a motif for the condition of Augie's life. The lifeboat takes a circular rather than a linear course, as does the novel. As readers we begin at the end, with Augie's retrospective pronouncement that his education is now complete. "I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, free style, and will make the record in my own way," a brazen Augie proudly proclaims in the first sentence of the narrative (1). What is the most important lesson he has learned? That a man's character is his fate and that no attempt—by himself or others—to alter it will succeed. In other words, he has finally succeeded in resolving the paradox he voices toward the end of his adventures: "I have always tried to become what I am" (54).

In retrospective voice, Augie takes the reader on a circular tour of his life, from his early "larky" days as a naive, romantic optimist to his pronouncement at the end, "Why, I am a sort of Columbus of those near-at-hand" (599), an explorer who, drifting through the uncharted seas of life in search of a "good enough fate," discovers something far more important—his own identity. But because life is a comedy to Bellow, he piques us with the reminder that one person's dream may be another person's nightmare. Mexico, the locale of Augie's most painful misadventures, is to his French maid Jacqueline her life's dream. Thinking of Jacqueline's dream makes Augie laugh: "That's the
animal ridens in me, the laughing creature, forever rising up" (599). Like Augie, Jacqueline refuses to lead "a disappointed life." Bellow points out here that hope springs eternal, but as Augie tells us at the beginning of his narrative, to lead a happy life you must accept yourself as you are and then learn how to deal with the contradictions and dislocations served up by the contemporary world.

Although Augie may be characterized as a "traveling victim"—of his own and of others' errors of vision and judgment—one might call his mishaps a comedy of errors. Like the picaresque hero, no real tragedy befalls him, and the reader senses that all Augie's misfortunes will not irrevocably shatter his optimistic outlook. Incidents and characters in this novel are ultimately comic. Augie's adversaries and reality instructors appear in the garish colors of grotesques for the purpose of parody. Bellow as puppeteer dramatizes for his reading audience the comic nature of his characters, all of whom are obsessed by a dominant idea which they attempt to foist on Augie.

Augie's role in the novel is to try on, like a new suit of clothes, and then reject, those roles proposed by the reality instructors he encounters. As Clayton points out, the aim of the reality instructors is to protect their own vision, and like the spider to the fly, they entice Augie in order to entrap him in a web of their own design. In the course of his adventures, Augie tries on a variety of roles and occupations. Chase succinctly categorizes them as "a student, a petty thief, adopted son, tramp, lover, apprentice to assorted people and trades, a would-be intellectual in the purlieus of the University of Chicago, a supposititious Trotskyite, an eagle tamer, a merchant seaman."
Augie's education begins at the knee of "Grandma" Lausch, the family boarder-cum-matriarch who plants the seeds of ambition in him for a "good enough fate" and offers him her lifetime supply of tactics for survival in the outside world. His brother Simon learns from Grandma to be shrewd, feisty, and ruthless, but Grandma's lessons are lost on Augie. Soft-hearted like his mother, he never does learn to play the dog-eat-dog game that would lead to financial success in Depression times. Although he makes no conscious effort to learn anything from Mama, he absorbs from this simple soul his most enduring characteristic—the ability to love, unadorned by selfish need. For Augie is a good-hearted soul, which often gets him into his worst scrapes. But Grandma also teaches the brothers a lesson that in the long run only Augie learns. She tells them:

"I have done as much as I could to give you a little education and an honest upbringing, even tried to make gentlemen of you. But you must know who you are, and not get unreal ideas. So I tell you that you better do for yourself first what the world will do for you without kindness."

(56)

The early chapters center on Grandma, one of Bellow's most powerfully realized characterizations. With her stories of the aristocratic life she left in Russia, her determination that the March boys should better themselves, and her schemes for deceiving the welfare agency, she dominates Augie's life. We learn little of Augie in these early chapters because, as he tells us, he is as yet undeveloped. Like Locke's tabula rasa, he is unformed: "All the influences were lined up waiting for me. I was born and there they were to form me,
which is why I tell you more of them than of myself" (46). In these early chapters Augie acts as observer, on the sidelines of other people's lives.

His search "to become what I am" begins portentously in his thirteenth year, not coincidentally the age at which the Jewish boy celebrates his bar mitzvah, the ceremony in which he is welcomed as a man into the religious community. For Augie there is no bar mitzvah; indeed, Judaism—a stabilizing force that offers the individual a sense of identity and continuity in a disordered world—is pointedly absent from this novel. Without the supports of a structured value system, Augie must proclaim alone his desire for manhood and for a role that will both define and enhance his self-image.

In his search for a role to which he can commit himself, he passes through the lives of a varied cast of characters—failures, losers, and dreamers—all of whom are obsessed by a dominant idea of how to mold their lives in these chaotic times. From each of these mentors Augie learns something about himself and about the world. But most of the knowledge he gains is negative—that is, he learns what he does not want from his experiences with them.

His idea of a good enough fate changes as he becomes wiser. At the beginning his goal is vague, fueled by his first employer Einhorn's promise of a "world of possibilities" waiting for him. He does not know what he wants, only that he does not want to lead, like his mother, a disappointed life. Because he is attractive and malleable, he is desirable to others, who try to fit him into their life plan. It is only by rejecting these plans that Augie begins to define what it is that he wants for himself.
Einhorn, an American success story and "the first superior man I knew" (65), gives Augie his start on life's adventure as his helper—and his legs. Augie admires Einhorn for making the most of his life despite his handicap. Einhorn acts as surrogate parent, remonstrating with Augie for allowing himself to be talked into participating in a robbery. Here Augie's character begins to take form. Einhorn offers him a piece of insight about himself for which he is grateful:

"You've got opposition in you. You don't slide through everything. You just make it look so."
This was the first time that anyone had told me anything like the truth about myself. I felt it powerfully. That, as he said, I did have opposition in me, and a great desire to offer resistance and to say, "No!" which was as clear as could be, as definite a feeling as a pang of hunger.

What Einhorn has given him is a piece of his identity, something "definite" he can hang on to, even though, ironically, opposition is a negative trait. Opposition as something in which he clothes himself becomes, therefore, a cherished attribute. It is important to remember, however, that opposition, while maintaining Augie's freedom, prohibits the kind of attachment and community affiliation he seeks. This central paradox Augie does not resolve.

Through example, Einhorn teaches him to "make strength from disadvantages" (204). When his fortune plummets with the Crash of 1929, Einhorn picks up the pieces and builds it again. Ironically he also gives Augie the key to book learning with his present of a damaged set of the Harvard Classics. With a hunger he didn't know he had, Augie
devours the words of the great philosophers. Those words of wisdom of past ages help to give some order to Augie's disordered world, and he peppers his narrative with classical references and allusions, constantly drawing comparisons between that world and his own in an effort to find continuity between them.

From his friend Padilla, who introduces him to the practice of stealing textbooks to sell to university students, he acquires a love of learning. Books, he discovers, make him feel part of the world and offer him a vision of reality that his limited experiences have not conveyed: "So suppose I wasn't created to read a great declaration, or to boss a palatinate, or send off a message to Avignon, and so on, I could see, so there nevertheless was a share for me in all that happened" (216). Books transport him from his gritty reality, but this transcendence, he realizes, is only momentary. The schism between his intellectual triumphs and his daily reality remains.

Books fuel his dream of a good enough fate, but it is his experiences that shift his vision. With a vague initial desire not to lead a disappointed life, he tests out the experience of money and position as a worthwhile fate. The Renlings offer him a secure niche in their well-ordered Chamber of Commerce world of business, good clothes, and the "right" people. At first Augie is full of "social enthusiasms," and tries to fit into the slot they offer him, but when "Mrs. Renling's construction around me was near complete," Augie bolts, realizing that their offer of adoption "wasn't a good enough fate for me. . . . Why should I turn into one of those people who don't know who they themselves were?" (168). The opposition Einhorn recognized in Augie
helps him to resist what one critic calls the Renlings' "attempt to
destroy Augie's familial past by adopting him." 20

In a parallel set of circumstances, his brother Simon opts for the
world of money and position offered by the Magnus family in return for
his marriage to the Magnuses' daughter Charlotte. Simon discovers,
however, that he has sold himself too cheaply—he has traded his soul
for the veneer of stability and solidity afforded by money. Under the
veneer he suffers in the loveless marriage into which he has locked
himself, a role Augie clearly sees as emotionally destructive. All the
finery with which Simon clothes himself cannot assuage the inner
torment he endures. From Simon's experience Augie learns not to sell
himself for money and power, and to hold out for a love relationship.

Yet Augie finds love elusive. The first object of his affections,
Esther Fenchel, rejects him. Lucy Magnus drops him after she learns he
has helped his friend Mimi Villars to get an abortion. When Esther's
sister Thea proposes that he accompany her to Mexico to train an eagle
to hunt, he succumbs to her magnetism and his own need for love. In a
repetition of his earlier experiences with the Renlings and Simon,
Augie is dressed by Thea for his role, this time as an adventurer.
Outfitted like a sportsman, Augie finds himself totally in her sway. He
admits, "I was never before so taken up with a single human being. I
followed her sense wherever it went" (352).

Augie falls into an emotional commitment to Thea on the rebound
from yet another attempt to find a worthwhile job to which he can make
a commitment. Mimi Villars has arranged a job for him as a union
organizer for the local branch of the CIO. At this job Augie finds
himself caught in the midst of the CIO's effort to sign away members of the AFL. As grievance investigator, he listens to workers' job complaints, signs them into the union, but then cannot get the union to look into their grievances. Frustrated by the realization that the CIO is not out to help workers but only to become a more powerful union than the AFL, he resigns. From this employment experience he learns that it is not in his nature to be a leader of men: "I just didn't have the calling to be a union man or in politics" (346). Causes, he realizes, are less important to him than personal relationships. His experiences on both sides of the working world, as Simon's right-hand man in management and on the side of labor in the CIO, have left him disillusioned and in greater need than ever of something to believe in.

In this morass he falls an easy prey to the romantic Thea. In counterpoint to the politically minded leaders of the CIO, Thea is totally uninterested in the world around her. Blocking out all outside influences, she draws Augie into her romantic web with such an intensity that he drops the pride, dignity, and self-protective mantle in which he has garbed himself. Realizing that in serving Thea's romantic inclinations he must relinquish his liberty, he nevertheless lets himself fall under her spell. After rejecting money, power, and politics, he makes of love—and Thea as the object of his love—his new dominant idea.

Despite her romantically clouded vision, Thea sees Augie's nature clearly and points it out to him: "You want people to pour love on you, and you soak it up and swallow it. You can't get enough. And when another woman runs after you, you'll go with her. You're so happy when
somebody begs you to oblige. You can't stand up under flattery" (354). Augie accepts this assessment and agrees to accompany her to Mexico and to "accept her version of everything" (353). A warped Hemingway hero, Thea holds the conviction "that there must be something better than what people call reality" (353). While Augie experiences in the wilds of Mexico a momentary oneness with nature in which the "social sugars" (socially dictated behavior) dissolve and the elusive axial lines momentarily cross for him, Thea sees in nature an adversary to be conquered. By pitting herself against the creatures of the wild, she seeks to reinforce her romantic idea of herself as master of the natural world. Where Augie takes a passive role in hopes of experiencing a personal transcendence, Thea takes an aggressive role in order to tame nature to her vision. Cowardice angers her, and the eagle's fear of a lizard who has bitten him throws her into a rage. With vengeance she abandons him because he does not live up to her idea of fierceness.

Thea's irrational behavior brings to the surface Augie's dormant rational impulses. This is a major step in his self-education. At this point Augie and Thea reverse roles, and Augie takes over the role of reality instructor. He takes responsibility for the eagle and, in this act, for himself as well. Bellow repeats the motif of the lifeboat here as Augie tells us: "The eagle was left to my care; I exercised and handled him alone on the patio, like one man who rows a large lifeboat by himself" (397). At last Augie has taken a positive step in assuming responsibility for his future, rather than following someone else's lead or, when that becomes intolerable, escaping.
From the negative example of Thea, Augie takes another step in reconciling his inner world with the reality of the outer world. Thea tries to make the world fit her vision; she aims for the ideal, which Augie now realizes is unattainable. Unable to stand "faulty humanity" (423), Thea demands to be more than human, and so fails. Bellow's warning via Schlossberg in The Victim reasserts its validity here again: "More than human, can you have any use for life? Less than human, you don't either" (The Victim, 121). Augie philosophizes that life is a mixed bag:

I had the idea that you don't take so wide a stand that it makes a human life impossible, nor try to bring together irreconcilables that destroy you, but try out what of human you can live with first. And if the highest should come in that empty overheated tavern with its flies and the hot radio buzzing between the plays and plugged beer from Sox Park, what are you supposed to do but take the mixture and say imperfection is always the condition as found; all great beauty by scratched eyeballs will always see scratched. (291)

Thea's inability to accept that humanity is flawed teaches Augie that the only way to avoid a disappointed life is to accept others for what they are. This is the Bellow hero's most difficult lesson, one which Joseph fails to learn and Leventhal masters only after much travail.

Even though Augie sees through Thea's romantic misconceptions, he cannot entirely dismiss them. Flattered by a new woman, Stella, he succumbs to her charms as well. Dissatisfied with himself, he flounders in Mexico and meets Sylvester, an old friend from Chicago who has also spent his life looking for something to believe in. The character of
Sylvestor parodies that of Augie, enabling us to see Augie in perspective. Among the roles Sylvestor has played have been "the one-time owner of the Star Theatre, the engineering student from Armour Tech, the ex-husband of Mimi Villars' sister, the former subway employee" (418), and now a Communist and Trotsky's bodyguard in Mexico. Like Augie he has floundered through the Depression years, tried on many identities, and failed at each. In his new job as Trotsky's bodyguard we can assume he will fail too, for Trotsky was later assassinated in Mexico.

Depressed by his latest failure to hitch his wagon to a star, Augie returns to Chicago to revisit his past in hopes of discovering a better path to his future. He has tried to conform to society (Simon's world), to reform it (the CIO), and to reject it (with Thea), and has found all of these approaches inadequate. On his return to Chicago he sees his family as prisoners in their respective institutions. Mama wastes away in a home for the blind, Georgie has accepted his limited fate as a shoemaker in an institution for the retarded and prefers the security of the fenced-in grounds to the attractions of freedom beyond the gates, and Simon inhabits a prison of his own making. Money and power have not compensated for Simon's loveless marriage, nor have they brought the satisfactions he expected. Stultifying in the role he has chosen, he once again tries to foist this life on Augie. But Augie is more determined than ever not to give up his freedom—he has seen what the narrowing of choices can do to others.
Two friends he revisits—Clem and Padilla—advise him to choose a career or to train for one in college, advice Augie rejects out of hand. Padilla insists that Augie sets unattainable expectations, and Clem accuses him of being "ambitious in general...not concrete enough" (483). "What I guess about you," he tells Augie, "is that you have a nobility syndrome. You can't adjust to the reality situation" (484). Clem himself has carved a comfortable niche as a psychologist to those who suffer the modern ailment of lack of identity. In a world of contradiction and disorder, Clem offers vocational counseling to those who, like Augie, cannot make career commitments on their own, a profession he sees as a good "racket" for the future.

From the colorful Armenian Mintouchian, who pops into the narrative like a character in a picaresque novel, Augie receives some of his best advice. Contradicting the advice of Clem and Padilla who urge him to pursue a dominant idea, Mintouchian proclaims, "It is better to die what you are than to live a stranger forever" (542). Do not create a false image of yourself, but be honest and open, he urges Augie. Recognize that as much as your character is determined by fate, your fate is also directed by your character. Bellow clothes his Turkish-bath soothsayer in a coat of irony, however. Mintouchian is not as open and honest as he preaches—he keeps a secret lover. Because to Bellow life is a comedy, he grounds Mintouchian, as well as his other teachers and philosophers, in feet of clay.

Among the other friends and acquaintances whose lives Augie touches Bellow paints a palette of grotesques, exaggerated versions of people obsessed by a ruling idea. These motley characters parody Augie or act
as foils for him. Against them the reader can take Augie's measure. We meet Arthur Einhorn, son of Augie's first mentor, a philosopher whose head is perpetually in the clouds and whose feet rarely touch the soil of reality. Robey, the stammering historian who wants Augie to research a book for him on the history of human happiness among the rich, counterpoints Simon and parodies Augie's own unfocused ideas. And Griswold, a shipmate of Augie's in the Merchant Marines and "former undertaker and also zoot-suiters and cat" (552), serves as a black comic version of Augie. He offers Augie a poem in jive which expresses his hopes and parodies Augie's own aspirations:

How much, you ask me, do I suffer.
Now, baby, listen, I am not a good bluffer.
My ambitions and aspirations don't leave me no rest;
I am born with a high mind and aim for the best.

(552)

The final, and most important, grotesque Augie meets is Basteshaw, the ship's carpenter with whom he is cast adrift in a lifeboat after their ship is hit by a torpedo. Once again in this novel drifting follows disaster. Adrift on an empty sea, their lifeboat has only one oar. This causes them to move in a circular pattern, which is analogous to both Augie's life and the circular pattern of the novel. The lifeboat may also be seen as a metaphor for modern life in which the individual cannot steer or control his course.

Like Ishmael, Augie is saved from shipwreck, but unlike Huck Finn, he has no Jim. Basteshaw, one of Bellow's wildest eccentrics, only preaches the brotherhood that Augie practices. In his lunacy he has a scheme to save mankind by discovering through scientific research the
origin of boredom. When boredom is eliminated, he claims, real freedom will begin and people will be able to reach their potential and fulfill their dreams. Basteshaw's personal dream is to live as vigorously and corruptly as a Renaissance cardinal. Augie rejects Basteshaw's pipe dreams and his offer of a job as research assistant, and insists for the first time in his life that he already has a course of life charted for himself. He longs to return to Stella, whom he married before he shipped out.

The confrontation between Basteshaw and Augie brings out Augie's hard-won maturity, as well as the conflict between romance and realism. Here Augie acts the role of reality instructor to Basteshaw's romantic. Basteshaw, who insists he speaks the only truth, is the last in a line of progressively romantic teachers, a far cry from the hard-nosed realist Grandma Lausch, whose advice opens the novel. In the course of the novel the reality instructors and Augie have gradually changed places. As the reality instructors progress from real to romantic, Augie's romantic orientation moderates until, at the end, he is the realist and the Machiavellian Basteshaw is the dreamer. Basteshaw, who suffers from the Superman syndrome Schlossberg warns of in The Victim, would have been responsible for their death if Augie had not interfered with his hare-brained scheme for sitting out the war on the Canary Islands. In order to escape the imprisoning role Basteshaw has cast for him, Augie has had to take action to overrule him, the first time he has exerted such strength of character.
Unfortunately the novel does not end with such conviction. Seeking the elusive axial lines, Augie discovers that only in stillness, not in striving, can he recapture the transcendence he seeks. Lying on a couch, like Herzog in his hammock, he experiences a Whitmanesque transcendence. The axial lines bring him "into focus," regenerate him, and suffuse him with "joy." A strong feeling of love erases his fear of the chaos of the world around him and his inability to control his destiny. But the axial lines cross too infrequently in his life. The need for personal transcendence over the "noise and grates, distortion, chatter, distraction, effort, superfluity" (506) of contemporary life marks the Bellow hero, and because the transcendent experience eludes him, he must find a way to accommodate himself to the world around him. One critic offers a different insight into Augie's relationship to the axial lines: "If Augie keeps his bearings through all the conflicting realities that people like to impose on him, it is because he is in touch with 'the axial lines of life,' an intuitive knowledge expressed in unabashed traditional abstractions—'Truth, love, bounty, usefulness, harmony.'"21 Looked at from this point of view, the axial lines are crossed firmly in Augie's psyche.

In truth, Augie has educated himself through his adventures. He has become more accepting of himself, maintained his integrity, gained a valuable sense of reality, and at last made a serious commitment—to marriage. He has always had a commitment to family and friends, but in marrying Stella, he makes a commitment to the future. From the comedy of errors that is his life and from the other failures and dreamers he meets, he learns that he cannot humanize the world to suit his vision.
He has learned to cope with an uncaring world and a society whose major characteristics are disorder and unresolved contradiction. This world does not promote the practical realization of his hopes and dreams. His search for a transcendental experience, the crossing of the axial lines, substitutes for this failed vision.

While holding out hope for a transcendent experience, Augie plants his feet firmly on terra firma. This choice is never so clear as when he overrules Basteshaw to make sure that they are rescued. Yet Augie and his adventures are ultimately comic. Through humor and the use of parody, Bellow reminds us that history no longer permits us to take the romantic quest seriously. We must laugh at ourselves if we are to survive intact. Porter describes the crucial lesson Augie has learned: "Instead of a worthwhile fate, what Augie discovers is a worthwhile attitude with which to deal with fate: a persistent optimism strengthened by laughter, the animal ridens in him."22

An optimist, Augie, like Leventhal, is also a humanist. Brotherhood and love come easier to Augie than to Leventhal, but both experience the fulfillment that they can bring. Bellow illustrates this with a dream. While in the lifeboat with Basteshaw, Augie dreams that in the city he comes across an old woman panhandler. She cajoles some coins from him, then offers to treat him to a beer. He declines but is touched by her kindness and compassion: "In kindness, I touched her on the crown of her old head and a great thrill passed through me from it. 'Why, old woman,' I said, 'you've got the hair of an angel!' 'Why shouldn't I have,' she said gently, 'like other daughters of men?"' (566). By extending the hand of brotherhood toward her, Augie
experiences what he often calls a "shared fate," and discovers in her simple humanity a transcendent quality. Augie here moves one step further than Leventhal, who refuses to let Allbee touch his hair and establish the intimacy of physical contact. Joseph, of course, withdraws from intimate contact and cannot create even a tentative community with others. Unlike Augie, who enlists in the Merchant Marines for patriotic reasons (even going so far as to submit to a hernia operation in order to be accepted), Joseph's submission to the army is an act of self-abnegation. Augie may flounder in his freedom, but he does not suffer the weakness of imagination which hampers Joseph from making the most of his freedom.

In keeping with the comic nature of the novel, Bellow concludes Augie March with irony and humor. Augie and Stella do not live happily ever after: Stella will not agree to return to the United States, raise a family, and run a school, Augie's latest dream. As devoted to her as she is to herself, Augie agrees to live in Europe so that Stella can pursue her acting career. He takes a job exporting illicit European goods for Mintouchian, a replay of several of his previous occupations. Living in war-torn Europe, he has no real home. The plot ends as it began—open-ended, like the picaresque novel. As "Columbus of those near-at-hand," Augie is a wanderer who, like the maid Jacqueline, still entertains the hope of a better future, no matter what hand nature has dealt him. Like Jacqueline, Augie remains the eternal optimist, tempered by his experiences, self-educated "free style" as he boasts in the first sentence of his narrative, but never bowed. The upbeat end brings us full circle to the point at which Augie's narrative begins its comic trajectory.
Three years after the publication of *Augie March*, Bellow brought out his next novel, so unlike its immediate predecessor that one would hardly associate them in vision or execution as literary creations of the same writer. In contrast to the expansive attitude and "world of possibilities" that characterize the vision and structure of *Augie March*, Bellow translates the depressed nature of Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day* into a terse, brief, tightly structured narrative that reverts in style to the Flaubertian mode of his first two novels.
CHAPTER THREE: FOOTNOTES

4. Ibid., p. 69.
12. Alter, After the Tradition, p. 103.
15. Hassan, Radical Innocence, p. 59.
18. Clayton, Saul Bellow, p. 86.

20 Rupp, Celebration in Postwar American Fiction, p. 198.


22 Porter, Whence the Power, p. 186.
CHAPTER FOUR

"A Day of Reckoning": Tommy Wilhelm in Seize the Day

Unlike Augie March, who survives the vicissitudes of life armed with laughter and an optimistic outlook, Tommy Wilhelm, the protagonist of Seize the Day, wields no such weapons. A self-pitying pessimist whose suffering countenance reveals no sense of humor, Tommy is psychologically and physically suffocating from the burdens of his life. Both he and Augie seek escape from the confines imposed on them by others, but while Augie entertains hopes for a more fulfilling life, Tommy cannot see beyond his burning need to extricate himself from his travail.

Tommy's and Augie's situations are similar. Neither has found a secure niche in society. Stripped of meaningful family connections, each flounders, unable to construct an alternate community based on human sympathy and love that would act as a buffer zone between himself and the destructive world in which he lives.

Both, however, possess the unique attribute of opposition. Like Augie, who rejects the roles into which others seek to mold him, Tommy opposes his parents' choice of career for him, obstinately rejects the advice of Maurice Venice, the talent agent who warns him against trying for a career as a film actor, and disregards his father's advice that he not get involved with Tamkin, the shady psychologist/investor. He leaves his wife because playing the role she demands has made him ill, and he petulantly quits his job because his boss has narrowed its scope in order to take a son-in-law into the business. Tommy's opposition, in
contrast to Augie's, is not based on an intuitive sense of what is good for him. Each choice drags him deeper into the pit of failure. Each instance of opposition also prevents him, as it does Augie, from establishing the attachment and affiliation he so desperately needs.

Unlike Augie, whose life is ruled by what Hassan terms "luck and grace," Tommy's life "is ruled by error and ill-fortune." Both Tommy and Augie live in a world of Machiavellians, and both commit errors, "but the difference, which is again the difference between the tragic and comic grammar of destiny, is that while the errors of Tommy define his situation, those of Augie simply multiply his choices." As Tommy's errors mount, they limit the freedom he has tried to cultivate, slowly oppressing him until he literally chokes and gasps for breath.

Like Augie and Basteshaw, who drift in a lifeboat with one oar, on the verge of drowning in the open sea, Tommy is also on the verge of drowning, in a sea of his own problems. While Augie takes charge of his circumstances and sees to it that he and Basteshaw are rescued, Tommy loses his emotional foothold and gives himself over to a paroxysm of tears. One critic sees in the opposing attitudes of Augie and Tommy a generalization about the American experience: "If Augie celebrates freedom, hope, and becoming, Tommy celebrates weakness, defeat, and mortality. Taken together the two characters embody the range of American experience."

Another major difference between Augie and Tommy is that Augie learns an important lesson in reality which Tommy does not. Through his experiences and his observations of others' errors of vision, Augie learns that he cannot mold the world to fit his vision. As critic Allen
Guttmann puts it in his study The Jewish Writer in America. "Augie March, knowing that greatness was a complex fate, settled for less, but Tommy continues to rush, more and more frantically up and down the closed corridor of his life." Tommy will not accept a diminished job, a less than satisfactory marriage, and, most important, his failure to become a "success."

For this novel is ultimately about Tommy's failure to fulfill the American dream of success. Seize the Day, like Arthur Miller's play Death of a Salesman, punctures holes in the hot-air balloon of illusions about success. Success in American terms is, of course, measured in money. And money as a goal permeates this novel. It is no accident that "The Gonzaga Manuscripts," one of three short stories originally published with Seize the Day, turns on the European conception that Americans are interested more in money than in the loftier things in life.

We see in Seize the Day, as in Dangling Man, The Victim, and The Adventures of Augie March, that because American society, unlike the European, lacks a hierarchical social structure and tradition of established values, the protagonist of the American novel cannot set as his goal reconciliation with or accommodation to society. This leaves him in a position of alienation, a dangling man. This concept of modern man as alienated has grown stronger as the American novel has traversed the twentieth century. Lacking a sense of identity conferred by society, Tommy, in order to compensate, has set his goal on establishing a self-image, or identity construction, to see him through. Forging a sense of importance about himself can most
effectively be done, he feels, by achieving monetary and career success.

Tommy attempts to forge identity constructions but fails at each effort. Rejecting his father's efforts to steer him into a career in medicine, he leaves college on the pipe dream of becoming an actor. Forsaking his real name, Wilhelm Adler, for the more American-sounding Tommy Wilhelm does not change his self-image, however: "Wilhelm had always a great longing to be Tommy. He had never, however, succeeded in feeling like Tommy, and in his soul had always remained Wilky." Discarding his name in a bid for freedom, he disregards his true self. This abdication in the long run loses him not only the freedom he would have retained by remaining true to himself, but his father's love as well.

Tommy entertains dreams of becoming something more than he is, and longs "to be freed from the narrow life of the average" (27). His goals, however, are unrealistic. He drops out of college to try his luck in Hollywood despite the admonition of Venice that he hasn't got the right voice for films. His pride prevents him from accepting a more limited role than he had been playing at the Rojax Corporation, thus leaving him with no job or income. He fails at a last-ditch effort to recoup his financial losses by gambling everything in the commodities market, that most risky of all investment markets, and even in this abdicates control over his last dollars to the eccentric Tamkin. With neat irony, as the futures market in rye and lard plunges, so does Tommy's own future, which hangs by a thread from this slender hope.
As a character, Tommy has his genesis in Alf Steidler, the modern floundering man in _Dangling Man_. Friend of Joseph, Steidler goes to Hollywood to make his fame as an actor but fails and ends up sponging off others and refusing to face up to his shortcomings. Tommy, like Steidler, tries to create a false image of himself. This attempt, undercut by his abdication of responsibility to himself in giving up control over his last few hundred dollars, reminds us of Schlossberg's advice to Leventhal in _The Victim_: "More than human, can you have any use for life? Less than human, you don't either" (_The Victim_, 121). In this novel, Tommy skitters between both extremes, leaving a vacuum in the middle where his true self should exercise its vitality. To Bellow, either course leads ultimately to disaster. The conflict between the need to assume a protective identity and the knowledge that to be human is to be flawed, weak, and mortal, lies at the core of Bellow's fiction. All Bellow's protagonists must work out a solution to this problem and accept the true nature of their humanity.

Like Joseph in _Dangling Man_, Tommy has lost sight of his true nature. Dangling between a false conception of himself and abdication of control over his life, he is "a chopped and shredded man" (_Dangling Man_, 109). His father, his estranged wife Margaret, and Tamkin abuse him. Like Joseph, he has been unable to establish an identity construction with which to navigate the chaos of the contemporary world, and the freedom he has struggled to achieve has turned into an emotional, psychological prison.
Both Joseph and Tommy discover that the desire for freedom is really the desire for community, but neither is able to form a community with another. Both are outcasts, alienated from family and society, isolated from anyone who might share their burdens. Having quit their jobs, they flounder in the prison of their self-imposed freedom. Joseph's frustration turns to rage, loss of control in which he lashes out at others. Tommy's frustration turns inward, strangling, choking, building up the tension until it explodes in a flood of tears. What neither one learns is that the imprisoning self can only be released by giving oneself to others. Leventhal learns this, makes a commitment to his brother's family, and experiences intimacy with Allbee. Augie March gives generously of himself to family and friends, but Tommy cannot. In Bellow's novels, then, those who can give of themselves to others gain self-sufficiency, internal stability, and dignity, the quality which Schlossberg terms the "humanness" of human nature. The key lesson that Joseph and Tommy have not learned in the course of their experiences is that the only permanence in life is a sense of belonging to humanity.

As in his previous novels, Bellow paints his protagonist against a background of an urban world in which it is natural for the individual to feel isolated. The city itself promotes isolation, makes simple communication nearly impossible. The chaos of New York, "the end of the world, with its complexity and machinery, bricks and tubes, wires and stones, holes and heights," retards communication. "Every other man spoke a language entirely his own, which he had figured out by private thinking" (91). Tommy thinks of how difficult it is in the Tower of
Babel that is New York to communicate the simple need of a glass of water:

If you wanted to talk about a glass of water, you had to start back with God creating the heavens and earth; the apple; Abraham; Moses and Jesus; Rome; the Middle Ages; gunpowder; the Revolution; back to Newton; up to Einstein; then war and Lenin and Hitler. After reviewing this and getting it all straight again you could proceed to talk about a glass of water. "I'm fainting, please get me a little water." You were lucky even then to make yourself understood. And this happened over and over and over with everyone you met. You had to translate and translate, explain and explain, back and forth, and it was the punishment of hell itself not to understand or be understood, not to know the crazy from the sane, the wise from the fools, the young from the old or the sick from the well. The fathers were not fathers and the sons no sons. You had to talk with yourself in the daytime and reason with yourself at night. Who else was there to talk to in a city like New York?

(91)

The city strains the humanness of human beings with its crowds, vandalism, even its parking regulations. Bellow's view of the city is magnified in "Looking for Mr. Green," a short story published with Seize the Day. Here the city, desolate, decaying, mirrors the lives of its citizens. Chaotic, its energy undirected, the city whirls through cycles of growth and decay which impart to its dwellers a feeling of uneasiness and loss of control. The city's faltering organization "set free a huge energy, an escaped, unattached, unregulated power from the giant raw place. Not only must people feel it but...they were compelled to match it. In their very bodies."5 The equilibrium that Augie experiences in relating to nature in Mexico and that Herzog finds in his retreat in the Berkshires has gone. Tommy no longer keeps rooms
in Roxbury, where, with his lover Olive, he experienced relief from urban stress. Just as there is no accommodation with society, there is, for Tommy, no resolution in pastoral idyl.

_Seventy the Day_ captures the urban distress of _The Victim_, but as Freedman notes, on a different social and economic level. Pretense coats the tongues of the inhabitants and the milieu in which they live: Dr. Adler falsely boasts to others of Tommy's success, Tamkin dangles false promises like airy balloons above Tommy's head to manipulate him, and the Hotel Gloriana, with its coterie of declining elderly people, belies its name.

Tommy, isolated from the millions around him, resembles those "faces, upturned to the heavens; imploring, wrathful, despairing" in the quote from DeQuincey's _The Pains of Opium_ which serves as an epigraph for _The Victim_. Like Leventhal, he sees himself as a manipulated man, a victim of the machinations of his father, his wife, his boss, and Tamkin. A loser in life, career, and relationships, he seeks desperately to rid himself of the burdens weighing him down. But his quest for escape, while a romantic gesture, is also, as Opdahl suggests, a "quest for therapy, in the question invariably asked by the protagonist: what is wrong with me? How may I rid myself of this burden?" For the burden he really needs to shake off is not the pressures of others but the false front, the identity construction, he has tried to create to deal with the vicissitudes of life. This mask, which Tamkin calls the pretender soul, "takes away the energy of the true soul and makes it feeble, like a parasite" (78). Like the sea of helpless faces in _The Pains of Opium_, the pretender soul, having
suffocated the true soul, exists in "a kind of purgatory," Tamkin explains. "You walk on the bodies. They are all around. I can hear them. cry de profundis and wring their hands" (78).

Tommy's mission, then, although he does not recognize it, is to discard the burden of the pretender soul, the false image which, like the tuxedoed corpse in the funeral parlor, represents the inertia of death. The corpse, according to Clayton, represents "the ultimate image of frozen unreality, of a created image. . .Bellow implies that to be more than human, to be beyond mortality and pain, is to be dead."8 In order for his true self to emerge, vital, energetic, and able to deal with his life, Tommy must recognize that the image he has tried to project has been false. He must discard the platitudes on which he has based his actions and motivations—that happiness and peace of mind are a direct result of creating a successful identity construction, that sloughing responsibility brings heady freedom, and that money is the key to establishing self-esteem.

Like Bellow's first three novels, Seize the Day charts the painful education of the protagonist. Tommy's journey to self-awareness is one of reflection rather than action. With Aristotelian exactness, the action is limited to the day on which Tommy, his emotions rising as his despair deepens, loses the remnants of his self-control and experiences an emotional catharsis.

Bellow has organized this novel with what can best be described as musical unity. From first page to last the novel plays upon a deftly composed theme and variation in seven movements. A perfectly orchestrated piece, tightly organized by scene and motif, the movement
of the novel, like a seamless dirge, spins a downward spiral. With an unobtrusive voice very close to that of Tommy, the narrator begins Scene One with Tommy's descent in the elevator of the Hoel Gloriana, a descent symbolic of his emotional descent to the depths of his psyche during what he calls his "day of reckoning" (92). Each chapter begins on an up note, or at least on an even emotional keel, but spirals downward psychologically and literally, until, in Chapter Seven, after Tommy has descended to the steam room in the bowels of the hotel to plead with his father one last time to take up his burden, he stumbles out and bursts into tears at the funeral of a stranger. Tommy's emotional pitch is echoed in the movement of the commodities market. The drop in rye and lard, wiping out Tommy's last $700, operates in tandem with his final emotional plummet.

Like the first movement of Peter and the Wolf, Chapter One melodically introduces all the characters and the roles they play. Through Tommy's reflections as he loiters at the newstand summoning the courage to confront his father in the dining room, the tune of each character is played. Tommy, we learn, is concerned about maintaining the appearance of a successful man, even though he is down on his luck. Tamkin, though disavowing "money fever," suffers from that very ailment and spends his days trying to turn an easy buck on the futures market. Dr. Adler, Tommy feels, is ashamed of him because he has lost his status. Even Maurice Venice, the second-rate talent scout cum panderer who serves in the novel as a parody of Tommy's failure, saw Tommy as a loser. And Rubin, the newstand dealer "who knew, and knew and knew" (10), previews Tommy's relationship with his father. Rubin communicates
with Tommy on only a superficial level, so that he does not have to acknowledge Tommy's troubles. This refusal to share the loss of another introduces the key theme of brotherhood that marks each of Bellow's novels. Neatly, in the last chapter Tommy performs the act that Rubin refuses—he shares the loss of another.

A microcosm of the novel, Chapter One sets up the conflicts that will be resolved or restated in the last chapter and introduces the images and motifs which, like melodies, express those conflicts throughout the novel. In the first paragraph we learn that Tommy, concerned about maintaining the appearance of a successful man, needs to conceal his mounting anxiety. Words and images of disguise predominate:

When it came to concealing his troubles, Tommy Wilhelm was not less capable than the next fellow. So at least he thought, and there was a certain amount of evidence to back him up. He had once been an actor—no, not quite, an extra—and he knew what acting should be. Also, he was smoking a cigar, and when a man is smoking a cigar, wearing a hat, he has an advantage; it is harder to find out how he feels. He came from the twenty-third floor down to the lobby on the mezzanine to collect his mail before breakfast, and he believed—he hoped—that he looked passably well: doing all right.

(7)

The need for concealment never does abate. Even when his emotional control collapses at the funeral parlor and his loud cries of grief draw the mourners' attention, he makes an effort at concealment, "hidden in the center of the crowd by the great and happy oblivion of tears" (128).
We learn from Tommy's reflections in Chapter One that he already has much self-awareness. He realizes that he is a failure, that he needs to take responsibility for his own life and cease depending on others to patch things up for him after he has erred. About his relationship to his father he recognizes, "It's time I stopped feeling like a kid toward him, a small son" (16). After continued rejection by his father, he later realizes that he will have to change his way of thinking: "And why, Wilhelm further asked, should [Father] or anybody else pity me; or why should I be pitied sooner than another fellow? It is my childish mind that thinks people are ready to give it just because you need it" (102). At this point he has matured enough to reverse his self-conception from that of son to that of father to his own two sons.

Tommy reflects, in the first chapter, on his many foolish errors. He recognizes that his decisions to change his name and run off to Hollywood, to marry Margaret, and to sign over his last funds to Tamkin were mistakes, but he is too weak-willed to do anything but bemoan his fate. He is, as Clayton notes, his own worst enemy. He seeks escape from his failure by trying to elicit sympathy from his father, his wife, and finally from God, whom he implores to "let me do something better with myself" (30). What he does not realize is that any reversal in his condition must come from within, from self-initiated action.

Tommy seeks forgiveness from his father. In later scenes Dr. Adler, when confronted with Tommy's pleas, will not be moved, and in the end, it is Tommy who must forgive himself. But at the start of his day he knows what he must do: "You had to forgive. First, to forgive yourself,
and then general forgiveness" (30). Later, in the subway, he experiences a rush of brotherly love for all warped and grotesque human beings, including himself. By extending himself in a moment of human solidarity, he can, like the Ancient Mariner, love himself as well, and so expiate his guilt.

This chapter introduces three recurring images that illustrate Tommy's condition. These images express Tommy's problem in terms of physical symptoms. The first is a physical weight on his back, "the peculiar burden of his existence [which] lay upon him like an accretion, a load, a hump" (44). This weight bears down upon him, sapping his energy, his "strength warped almost into deformity" (20). His father refuses to "carry" him by paying his rent, and he feels he is riding on Tamkin's back in a condition of dependence, but finally realizes that he is the one providing support to Tamkin: "I was the man beneath; Tamkin was on my back. . . ." (115).

Water as a destructive element is a key motif in the novel. Images of drowning and choking abound to describe the psychosomatic symptoms of Tommy's emotional condition. In Chapter One Tommy sees himself as Milton's Lycidas, "Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor" (17). Like a man under water who must hold his breath in order not to drown, Tommy feels choked up, about to burst. His father's suggestion that swimming, which he calls "hydrotherapy," will calm him down is anathema to Tommy. At the end, he loosens his emotional constraints and the flood of tears bursts through and drowns him. Whether the waters are purgative has been debated by many critics, but Clayton makes a case for the motif of water as a restorative agent by quoting the rest of the passage from Lycidas from which Bellow has taken the above line:
Lycidas your sorrow is not dead,
Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor
So sinks the day star in the ocean bed
And yet anon repairs his drooping head. . . .
So Lycidas sunk low but mounted high. . . .

The third, and most central, motif to this thesis is the image of vision. The quote from Lycidas reminds us that although Milton was physically blind, he was a man of great vision. Tommy's major problem, like that of Bellow's other protagonists, is his lack of clear vision. Bellow takes pains to describe his characters' clearheadedness or obtuseness in physical terms of clear sight or blindness. Rubin, who determines to be obtuse, "had poor eyes. They may not have been actually weak but they were poor in expression, with lacy lids that furled down at the corners" (9). The elderly investor Rappaport "was nearly blind" but shrewd and adept at self-preservation. Although "his eyes were smoky and faded," his vision of the world is remarkably clear (93). Tamkin's eyes are described as "deadly brown, heavy, impenetrable" to Tommy (80), who falls under their "hypnotic power." Indeed, Tommy "felt that Tamkin tried to make his eyes deliberately conspicuous, with studied art, and that he brought forth his hypnotic effect by exertion" (168).

Tommy's vision is clouded. Like Henry James's heroes and heroines, his major task is to learn "to see," to perceive the truth about himself and others. Before he recognizes this need, he attempts to persuade others to his vision. He tries to convince his father to see his position sympathetically, but Bellow's deft switch to Dr. Adler's perspective in Chapter Two, like a musical variation on the central
theme, allows us to see Tommy briefly through his father's eyes, which renders Tommy less sympathetic and keeps his pathos from becoming bathos. And Tommy pleads with Margaret to see that she is destroying him: "You must realize you're killing me. You can't be as blind as all that. Thou shalt not kill! Don't you remember that?" (122).

Tommy possesses hindsight, and chastizes himself for his mistakes, but lacks foresight. His cloudy vision clears several times, however, during the course of the day. He at last perceives that he must stop playing child to his father, and that it is he who is carrying Tamkin, not vice versa. In the subway he has a momentary transcendental vision of brotherly love, like Leventhal's moment of intimacy with Allbee and Augie's dream of the woman panhandler. As one critic puts it, "Tommy's vision of love in the subway is a strumming of the axial lines." But this vision is so fleeting it leaves no residual light. Bellow parodies this vision in Tamkin's vague and pretentious poem. With typical Bellovian irony, the charlatan Tamkin offers his author's advice couched in a vehicle redolent of romantic claptrap. In imitation Wordsworthian imagery, he urges Tommy to open his eyes, for his greatness is yet to come. If he will only accept himself with all his shortcomings, he will discover "joy—beauty—what ecstasy" (82). Wordsworthian trails of glory can be recaptured, Tamkin argues. As Clayton interprets the poem, "Opening [your eyes], you will become a child again and without striving you will reach 'eternity.' Seizing the present moment is equivalent to seizing the eternal." Ironically, at the end, when Tommy opens his eyes, it is to release tears. His "blind, wet eyes" (128) participate here in the catharsis of his
psyche. Whether his vision will clear enough after this incident for him to navigate his course successfully is, however, unclear.

The three images of weight, water, and vision, like musical moments, recur throughout the dirge that is this novel. All three are played together at the finale, fused into the notes of the funeral dirge which echoes Tommy's sobs:

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

(128)

Bellow tightly weaves all the elements of the novel toward this end. Tommy's desire for escape from burdens, his reflections which allow the reader to enter his consciousness, and his confrontations with his father, Tamkin, Rappaport, and Margaret, all accelerate the pace of his inward journey to catharsis and constitute the movement of the novel.

Tommy's inward journey leads him to greater self-insight and maturity. But how do these changes occur? Hassan sees the change in Tommy as fourfold, passing through the stages of humiliation, knowledge, love, and reconciliation. Certainly Tommy begins his journey in a state of humiliation. He feels victimized by his father, his wife, and his former boss, but none of them affect him as much as his own shame at his ineffectiveness. Although he is a risk-taker, his vision has been clouded by romantic notions, and he has never had the common sense to weigh the risks rationally and choose those that
offered the possibility of paying off. Disgusted, he sees himself as a "fair-haired hippopotamus" (10). Because he is weak, he resorts to pills, gin, gorging, and endless baseball games in an attempt to escape responsibility for his life. Fighting self-knowledge all the way, he insists to his father, "I can't learn" (109). Yet he does learn, at least enough to see himself more clearly than he did before this day. He has decided to face himself on this "day of reckoning... a day, he thought, on which, willing or not, he would take a good close look at the truth" (104).

His education proceeds on two fronts—reflection on the past and the closing of his last two escape hatches. His father's final words, that he wishes Tommy were dead, and Tamkin's disappearance after losing Tommy's money, leave him with the ultimate responsibility for his own future. In Bellow's inimitably realistic manner, both Dr. Adler and Tamkin, as they fail Tommy on one hand, offer sage advice on the other. Dr. Adler reminds Tommy that he has warned him against getting involved with a charlatan like Tamkin. Face practical reality, he argues; cut down on drugs, don't let Margaret walk all over you, and don't lean on me, he advises him. Tamkin urges Tommy to forget the past. Reality exists only in "the present moment. The past is no good to us. The future is full of anxiety. Only the present moment is real—the here-and-now. Seize the day" (73). Another of Bellow's truth-spouting grotesques, Tamkin, with his Svengalian hypnotic power, has been described by Cohen as an imitation zaddik, or saint-mystic, whom Bellow treats with comic irony by having Tamkin bastardize his legitimate thoughts.14
In his ambiguity, Tamkin, whom Chase has called "one of Bellow's most glorious creations," is a fully fleshed, three-dimensional character. By painting him as a comedian of ideas who spouts wisdom in one breath while ignoring his own advice with the next, Bellow creates the reality in which he believes. To Bellow, the world, like Tamkin, is full of ambiguity, and ultimately a comedy. Even Tommy finds Tamkin amazing: "How can he be such a jerk, and even perhaps an operator, a swindler, and understand so well what gives?" (107-08).

Inevitably, a key lesson Tommy must learn is to accept that the world is ambiguous, that flaws and virtues often go hand in hand. In recognizing this, he can then accept himself. By sloughing off his pretense, the false images, he can, as Clayton claims, fill "his need . . . to live in the here-and-now, the world that is; to be not someone else's ideal image but simply human." Stripping off the pretense with which he has tried to hide his failures, he can release the energy he needs to get on with his life.

Early in the day he realizes that he must learn to accept himself as he is, without pretense. He recalls a line of poetry, "Love that well which thou must leave ere long," and thinks first that "it referred to his father, but then he understood that it was for himself, rather. He should love that well" (16). His father frequently reminds him of his sins, for which he refuses to forgive Tommy. If his father will not forgive him, Tommy knows that he must forgive himself. He recalls Tamkin's advice not to allow suffering to be his only comfort. Forgiveness denied him by Margaret and his father he finally supplies for himself at the funeral of a fellow Jew. The water of his tears,
while drowning him in a "great and happy oblivion," cleanses him as well. In this paroxysm, he sheds the defenses of his pretender soul and strips himself of all "words. . .reason, coherence" (127). Although a stranger at the funeral, he identifies with all humanity in his outpouring of feeling, experiencing what he has intellectually realized earlier, that "there is a larger body [of humanity] and from this you cannot be separated" (91).

The funeral scene echoes a frequent Bellow theme expressed as early as Dangling Man: that one must accept the inevitability of one's own death in order to fulfill one's life. The dead man, gray-haired though not old, could be Tommy, or it could be his father, who is preoccupied with the idea of his own death. Tommy's tears, while for himself, may also be the last wrenching psychological separation from his father, whose oppression, according to Opdahl, has suffocated Tommy to the point that Tommy has wished his father dead.17

With his defenses stripped away, Tommy can face reality. But does he? The last scene of the novel does not offer a clear resolution. Does Tommy's catharsis indicate a fresh start or a dead end? Every critic who has written on this novel has ventured an opinion, ranging from Opdahl, who sees Tommy's drowning in his tears as a suicide, the culmination of his masochism, and Mark Schechner, who sees Tommy's tears as a weak response to his need to wring his father's neck, to Porter, Clayton, and Rupp, who see the last scene as a symbolic death and rebirth. Freedman even sees Tommy's catharsis as a moment of self-transcendence, and Malin interprets the scene in which Tommy views the corpse as an epiphany.18
Given Bellow's scrupulous effort to portray life in all its ambiguity, it is not surprising that this novel ends without resolution. Tommy has found neither reconciliation with society nor resolution of his contradictions in pastoral idyl. A dangling man, without nourishing human connections, Tommy has only himself from which to draw strength to cope with an unfeeling world. His romantic quest for success has failed and his world, like that of Bellow's other protagonists, is one of disillusionment, contradiction, and alienation.

The question the reader must ask is whether Tommy has learned enough on his "day of reckoning" to make a future for himself. Has he gained the self-awareness achieved in varying degrees by Joseph, Leventhal, and Augie that will enable him to cope with life? The last few pages do not, in my opinion, offer substance to the "rebirth" theory put forward by some critics. Even as he is breaking down, Tommy is still searching for someone to take up his burdens. He knows he can no longer depend on his father and Tamkin, and in his hysteria, he looks for mercy to his absent lover Olive: "And Olive? My dear! Why, why, why—you must protect me against that devil [Father] who wants my life" (127). As "the great knot of ill and grief in his throat" loosens he finds the only escape he can manage—"the great and happy oblivion of tears." "Past words, past reason, coherence," he cannot think, nor can he feel his pain. Through "blind, wet eyes" he cannot see. He can only feel the elemental notes of the organ music infusing his soul as he "sank" (i.e. drowned) in the tears of escape, "the consummation of his heart's ultimate need" (all quotes from 127-28). This need, as Tommy has felt it throughout his day, is to escape responsibility for
his errors, to escape from those who have hurt him and from the pain he suffers. In oblivion, taken over by wracking sobs, he experiences at last that relief.

In this novel Bellow touches bottom. Like Lycidas, "Sunk... beneath the wat'ry floor," there is nowhere to go but up. Tommy Wilhelm is Bellow's most pessimistic creation of contemporary man, too simpering to deal with the world in which he lives. It is no wonder that for his next novel Bellow rebounds from the gritty realism of urban drama and weak-willed protagonist to the romantic fantasy, Henderson the Rain King, and its booming-voiced lover of life, Eugene Henderson.
CHAPTER FOUR: FOOTNOTES


9. Ibid., p. 69.

10. Ibid., p. 133.


17. Opdahl, "'Stillness in the Midst of Chaos,'" p. 27.

18. Opdahl, *The Novels of Saul Bellow*, p. 197; Mark Schechner, "Down in the Mouth with Saul Bellow," *American Review* 23 (October 1975), 48; M. Gilbert Porter, "The Scene as Image: A Reading of *Seize the
CHAPTER FIVE
"Grun-tu-molani" ["I Want to Live"]: Henderson the Rain King

In creating the character of Eugene Henderson, Bellow shifts 180 degrees from the characterization of Tommy Wilhelm. No simpering, whimpering, self-pitying rabbit is Henderson, no passive schlemiel waiting for his luck to change. Unlike Tommy, who looks to others to solve his problems for him, Henderson takes action, initiates his quest for a more meaningful life. A booming-voiced bear of a man, Henderson exudes natural vitality and zest for living. Energy emanates from his entire being, but he does not know how to channel it. A tremendous desire to escape his stifling life and environment drives him to Africa because, as he tells the reader, "I wouldn't agree to the death of my soul." By experiencing a more primitive culture he hopes to come to terms with the forces (both internal and external) that are slowly crippling him. He needs to "burst the spirit's sleep" and redefine "Captain Henderson, Purple Heart, veteran of North Africa, Sicily, Monte Cassino, etc., a giant shadow, a man of flesh and blood, a restless seeker, pitiful and rude, a stubborn old lush with broken bridgework, threatening death and suicide" (168-69).

Both Tommy Wilhelm and Eugene Henderson are at the end of their rope, desperate for escape from the intolerable condition of their lives. Both have refuted the expectations of their fathers, but feel that in the roles they have chosen they have failed. Each feels inadequate in relation to his father, and suffers real or imagined
ejection by him. The financial positions of Tommy and Henderson are directly opposite, but money or lack of it is not at the root of their difficulties. Unlike Augie March, who learns that the world cannot fit his vision, that he must adapt to life as it is, Tommy refuses to accept this conclusion. Henderson suffers from Tommy's egocentrism—"I want, I want, I want, oh, I want," he chants (14)—but unlike Tommy, who wants to be more than he is, Henderson's aim is to escape from this crushing desire. Both must learn Schlossberg's advice in The Victim—to be human, one must not overvalue nor undervalue the self. Each must learn to accept his own human condition—flawed and mortal—and to seize the day. Each longs for escape from feelings of failure, from false identity constructions, and from the necessity of coming to terms with his own mortality. Only by plumbing the depths of his being, stripping off the pretender soul, and recognizing his elemental nature, can he begin to restructure his life into a more meaningful pattern. Tommy and Henderson learn that this change must come from within. Tommy reaches the depth of his being (and his nadir) in the funeral parlor; Henderson strips to his primal self in the lion's den, disgorging all his emotional ailments in "primal scream" therapy.

In both novels the climactic scene of self-revelation occurs as the protagonist faces the death of another—the double or brother—with whom he identifies. The death of the double enables him to face his own death yet still recover to rebuild his life. Although it is not clear whether Tommy will be able to restructure his life, Henderson's experience enables him to regroup his forces so that he can live a more
productive life. Recognizing that life is ambiguous, that human nature
begets flaws as well as virtues, Henderson can then accept his father's
feelings as well as his own, and exchange the role of son for that of
"father" to the orphaned boy. His final revelation, that "whatever
gains I made were always due to love and nothing else" (284), enables
him to break out of his prison of self-servitude to pursue his
long-desired career of service to mankind. In the chaotic postwar
world, only love can forge the communities vital to the survival of the
human being. Because he comes to trust and love the Wariri king Dahfu,
Henderson learns this lesson. At the conclusion of the novel,
Henderson's future, unlike Tommy Wilhelm's, shines brightly.

The character of Eugene Henderson has its genesis in the last scene
of *Seize the Day*. As Tommy tears out of the Hotel Gloriana, rejected by
his father and emotionally pummeled by his ex-wife, he emerges to a
Broadway street scene: "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—I labor, I spend, I strive, I design, I love, I
cling, I uphold, I give way, I envy, I long, I scorn, I die, I hide, I
want" (*Seize the Day* 124–25). This I-centered self is what Henderson is
desperate to escape. In discussing *Moby-Dick*, Chase states: "Solipsism,
hypnotic self-regard, imprisonment within the self—these themes have
absorbed American novelists."² Henderson shares this preoccupation
particular to the American imagination. Knowing that he cannot
restructure his life amid the multitude of his possessions and
emotional handicaps—"my parents, my wives, my girls, my children, my farm, my animals, my habits, my money, my music lessons, my drunkenness, my prejudices, my brutality, my teeth, my face, my soul" (7)—he runs off to Africa, hoping to strip himself of these burdens and to reach his own heart of darkness by experiencing the Dark Continent.

Despite the outward trappings of action, however, Henderson's journey toward self-understanding and maturity is inward. Like Bellow's other protagonists, Henderson traverses an internal landscape fraught with conflict and contradiction. And like his fictional predecessors Henderson begins his journey in a condition of alienation and displacement. Guilty at inheriting the mantle of his dead brother Dick, and uncomfortable with the burden that his family's social position has placed on him, Henderson can find no comfortable niche within the confines of his social station. Although he and Augie March start from opposite ends of the economic and social spectrum, each travels a similar road in quest of inner harmony to compensate for feelings of displacement. In search of a transcendental vision or revelation to help him reorganize his priorities, ultimately each discovers that only in stillness, not in striving, can he touch, momentarily, the vision of inner harmony he seeks. As he lies quietly on a couch or feels at one with nature in Mexico, Augie experiences the crossing of the elusive axial lines. In the pink light of dawn in Africa, Henderson recaptures the transcendent Wordsworthian vision that has eluded him since a childhood experience with his father in which they watched the same pink-tinted sky in the Adirondacks (86–88). Pressing his nose to the
wall of the African hut to absorb all he can of the pink light of dawn, "I felt the world sway under me... Some powerful magnificence not human... seemed under me." The experience is synesthetic: "I can hear the voices of objects and colors" (87). Like a revelation, this vision strengthens his firmness of purpose and belief in himself.

Like Augie March, Henderson the Rain King parodies the romantic quest novel. The bourgeois romantic quest can no longer be taken seriously, Bellow claims, because history has altered the concept of the romantic hero (see Chapter 3, p. 72). The breakdown of coherent theories of society is clearly evident in the character of Eugene Henderson, who rejects the upper-crust, exclusive world which is no longer viable for dealing with life in the postwar world. Henderson mourns the loss of the pioneering spirit that shaped America. "All the major tasks and the big conquests were done before my time," he laments (233). Young people have two choices now, he claims—to turn inward toward self-examination in hopes of discovering how to make life more meaningful, or to go off to exotic lands in search of meaning they cannot find at home in their own culture. He tells his native guide Romilayu, "It's the destiny of my generation of Americans to go out in the world and try to find the wisdom of life" (233). But where early twentieth-century novelists like Conrad, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald took seriously the romantic quest of the hero for a "special fate," the American postmodern novel reflects the condition of alienation, contradiction of values, and disorder of the contemporary world. Henderson describes this contemporary environment in terms of junk. Like his elderly neighbor Miss Lenox, he sees himself surrounded by
endless leftover useless bits and pieces of lives that are no longer productive. "My life is a pawn shop," he tells us, a roller coaster, a meaningless, repetitive ride going nowhere, like the ride he takes with Smolak the bear for the entertainment of visitors to the amusement park. As Bellow's recent critic Malcolm Bradbury explains about this novel, "Society is again a lunatic contemporary prison, creating a dislocated or debased image of the self."3

This dislocation takes the physical form of displacement or abandonment. Henderson the Rain King is populated by displaced or abandoned people. Henderson has physically displaced his deceased brother Dick as heir to the family fortune but feels emotionally displaced by this circumstance, as well as abandoned by his father. Henderson's daughter Ricey finds an abandoned black baby whom she brings home to nurture. Henderson abandons Lily, if only temporarily, while he treks off to Africa, and is himself abandoned by King Dahfu when Dahfu is killed by the lion. Finally, Henderson befriends an orphaned boy from Persia en route to a new home in the United States.

Henderson is preoccupied with the prevalence of displacement and abandonment in contemporary life. "Nobody truly occupies a station in life any more," he laments. "There are mostly people who feel that they occupy the place that belongs to another by rights. There are displaced persons everywhere," he observes (32). The rebel son, Henderson has dispossessed himself of his home and his heritage because his wartime experiences with death and the bizarre accidental death of his brother have shaken his belief in finding meaning in his staid way of life. He must find some way to expiate his guilt for surviving both these
disasters and for the responsibility he feels for the death of his housekeeper, Miss Lenox, who has dropped dead on his kitchen floor during one of his frequent rages. In his world, death is a constant, hovering presence. He goes to Africa not only to put his life in order but because if he does not discover a way to live a meaningful life, "Death will annihilate [me] and nothing will remain and there will be nothing left but junk" (37).

To learn to accept that death is part of life and that his mortality need not hinder him from living life to its fullest, he embarks on his inward journey of self-examination to his own heart of darkness couched in the romantic trappings of a journey to Conrad's heart of darkness. Just as the rebellion of Eugene Henderson reflects the breakdown of coherent theories of society, this novel also reflects, in its use of romance, the inadequacy of the realistic novel to express the breakdown of such coherent theories about society. Because the realistic novel can no longer mirror society, new types of novels developed to deal with the disintegration of traditional society. Contemporary novelists have turned back to romance in order to deal with subjects that cannot be handled realistically, but even romance as a vehicle cannot be used in the somber, moralistic manner of Melville's _Moby-Dick_ or Hawthorne's _The Scarlet Letter_. These earlier novels developed from value systems that have disintegrated over the last century. As Hassan points out, in a world in which chance and absurdity rule human actions, and in which there are no accepted norms of feeling and conduct to which the hero may appeal, the pattern of fiction is ironic, a parody of the hero's quest for meaning in his
life. Contemporary romance thus necessarily operates by self-parody. Alter sees Henderson the Rain King as "a composite parody of all the memorable twentieth-century literature of personal or mythic quest into dark regions—Conrad's voyage into the heart of African darkness, Hemingway's safaris through the green lion-breeding hills of that same continent, D. H. Lawrence's pilgrimage to Mexican hinterlands where plumed serpents and other suitably phallic creatures throbbed with the intensity of primordial life-force."

Bellow is a master of parody. In this novel we meet Dahfu, king of the Wariris, who, lounging on his sofa surrounded by his sexually voracious harem, is a parody of an exotic ruler. Henderson as Rain King, Bellow never lets us forget, is always played for parody, his green silk bloomers incongruous over his stained Jockey shorts. Every serious statement by Henderson is deflated by parody, witness his insistence that he has always been in touch with "reality":

I have always argued that Lily neither knows nor likes reality. Me? I love the old bitch just the way she is and I like to think I am always prepared for even the very worst she has to show me. I am a true adorer of life, and if I can't reach as high as the face of it, I plant my kiss somewhere lower down.

(127-28)

Bellow states about this novel, "Obliged to choose between complaint and comedy, I choose comedy, as more energetic, wiser, and manlier." Irony continually deflates the romance of the novel, and Bellow is in absolute control of its effects. He works against
stereotype, refuting the reader's expectations of romance and pastoral idyl. Twists, turns, and obverse effects abound: King Dahfu is delighted to receive Henderson, whom he amusingly calls his "first civilized visitor" (132); the non-Edenic Wariris are as skilled at political deception and police tactics as the bosses of any American metropolis; and as one critic has suggested, Henderson's relationship to Dahfu "satirizes the disciple's dependence on the symbolic teacher by which the Bildungsroman is defined." 7 Through irony Bellow keeps the reader from turning this anti-romantic comedy into myth. As Clayton points out, Bellow intends for the reader to laugh at Henderson's quest. Although a number of critics have delved seriously into the symbolism of *Henderson the Rain King*, Clayton, in my opinion, correctly concludes that the symbolism is a "put-on", noting that the patterns out of Freud, Jung, and Frazer's *The Golden Bough* are meant as parody. 8

*Henderson the Rain King*, like *Augie March*, also borrows from the picaresque novel. As *Tom Jones* ends with the hero's identity revealed, so Henderson's adventures lead him to self-knowledge and identity. And like Tom Jones, Henderson's ability to survive his adventures is never in doubt. The comic form precludes damage to the hero. It is no accident that Henderson chooses to call himself Ishmael (who survives), not Ahab (who is consumed by the megalomania of his quest). Thus, by crossing the picaresque novel with the romantic quest and satirizing both through judicious use of humor and irony, Bellow lays claim to Alter's praise of him as "a master of the art of crossbreeding narrative genres." 9
Bellow borrows the form of *Henderson the Rain King* from the quintessential picaresque novel, *Tristram Shandy*. A first-person narrative like its eighteenth-century counterpart, *Henderson the Rain King* plays with fictional form in the early chapters. Opening with the resolution to explain the reason for his trip to Africa, Henderson rejects several beginnings for his narrative as unsuitable. He becomes so involved with background material which, as in *Tristram Shandy*, he relates primarily by free-association, hopping backward and forward in time, that he does not answer the question posed in the first sentence of the novel, "What made me take this trip to Africa?" (7), until three-quarters of the way through the narrative (see 233). (This reminds us of Tristram, who cannot seem to get to the starting point of his autobiography, his birth, for the first half of the narrative.) This technique has the effect of weaving a mantle of reality about the character of Henderson because the reader is immediately drawn into his mind, where he must muddle through to sort out Henderson's ravings and digressions. This also helps to keep the romance from predominating over Henderson's quest for self-truth. Romance, then, becomes merely a vehicle for the exploration of reality, and the two exist in a balance of literary tension.

After Henderson's initial uncertainty as to how to relate his tale, he takes hold of the narrative and the adventures develop in a more linear manner. This linear development is under greater control than the narrative of *Augie March*. As Bellow told an interviewer, "I had to tame and restrain the style I developed in *Augie March* in order to write *Henderson*..." 10 As the story picks up speed, it becomes a good adventure yarn of the what-happens-next variety.
We meet Henderson looking for a quote he once read, "The forgiveness of sins is perpetual and righteousness first is not required" (7). Filled with guilt about displacing his brother, seeking forgiveness from his dead father, unable to control his life, self-destructive, accident-prone, suffering, trying to fill the void inside him with drink, and threatening suicide, Henderson hardly fills the bill as a comic character. Yet Bellow deflates each tragedy-tinged characteristic and event with irony, parody, and humor built into the character of his protagonist. While reeling off his list of complaints, Henderson also laughs at himself, demonstrating his essentially comic consciousness as he exaggerates his problems. Here Henderson differs sharply from the simpering Tommy Wilhelm. As several Bellow critics have noted, Henderson is Bellow's most affirmative hero,\textsuperscript{11} and Tanner describes Henderson as "a semi-burlesque synthesis of the great questing, exploring, yearning aspirants of the Western imagination—Ahab crossed with Tarzan."\textsuperscript{12}

To the reader, Henderson first takes shape through his booming voice, all that is left of the questing spirit of the nineteenth-century American pioneers. With his voice Henderson establishes an intimate relationship with the reader from the outset. Direct, forceful, and exuberant, he invites the reader directly into his mind. The question which opens the novel, "What made me take this trip to Africa?" is addressed not only to the reader, in Henderson's attempt "to make sense to you people," but to himself, for once he can answer this question, he can get his life in order so that the Tommy Wilhelm-like "pressure in the chest" and the fever he develops in Africa will disappear (7).
Henderson's voice conveys his vitality, as well as his innocence and naivety. Continuous self-mockery of his questing spirit sets the comic tone of the narrative and keeps it from veering off into romance. With tongue in cheek, he muses on what answer to give to the Arnewi queen, Willitale, who has posed to him the perfectly ordinary questions of who he is and where he comes from:

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, seeking the voice of angels. Who had to burst the spirit's sleep, or else. So what could I tell this old queen in a lion skin and raincoat (for she had buttoned herself up in it)? That I had ruined the original piece of goods issued to me and was traveling to find a remedy? Or that I had read somewhere that the forgiveness of sin was perpetual but with typical carelessness had lost the book? (67)

Under the guise of self-mockery lie some very real problems which Henderson is desperate to solve. The voice ringing "I want, I want" consumes him. Nothing he does will bring relief from its plaguing whine. If only he could stop making so many self-concerned noises, perhaps, he thinks, he might hear a bird sing (239). He needs to learn that others are not motivated solely in reaction to him. Early in the novel, when he enters the Arnewi village, a young girl approaches him and bursts into tears. Only later does he learn that she was mourning the death of her cow. He must learn the lesson that a child learns when he becomes aware that he is not the center of anyone else's universe. To adapt his inner world and expectations to the indifferent world around him looms up as a huge task.
Riddled with guilt and self-doubt, Henderson must learn to accept himself with his shortcomings before he can accept that others fall short of his expectations. This discrepancy between expectation and actuality causes suffering. He must realize that although "I am monstrously proud of my suffering. . . I thought there was nobody in the world that could suffer quite like me" (255), suffering is not "the only reliable burster of the spirit's sleep. . . There is a rumor of long standing that love also does it" (68). Love is the key lesson Henderson and the other Bellow protagonists must learn. Learning to accept and love others as they are brings a sense of community.

Like Augie March this novel can be read as an attempt on Henderson's part to form meaningful communities. If we look at his personal history we see that his relationships have been unsatisfactory. His relationship with his father fell far short of his expectations. He felt that his father would have preferred him to drown rather than his brother Dick. Henderson's attempt to find solace for this and to reach a communion with his dead father by playing his father's violin also fails.

His first marriage was a disaster because his wife, Frances, a dilettante intellectual like the infamous Madeleine in Bellow's next novel, Herzog, mocks his goal of becoming a doctor: "After Frances laughed at my dream of a medical career I never discussed another thing with her" (16). His second wife, Lily, as impulsive and vibrant as he, offers him an emotional intimacy which he is not ready to reciprocate: "You tear me to pieces," he rants at her during their trip to France. He then packs her off to Paris while he escapes in the opposite
direction to the south of France. There he visits an aquarium and sees
an octopus imprisoned in a glass tank:

The eyes [of the octopus] spoke to me coldly. But
even more speaking, even more cold, was the soft
head with its speckles, and the Brownian motion in
those speckles, a cosmic coldness in which I felt I
was dying. The tentacles throbbed and motioned
through the glass, the bubbles sped upward and I
thought, "This is my last day. Death is giving me
notice."

(20)

Like the octopus, he feels imprisoned, cold and alone, barred by a
transparent barrier like the glass of the tank from committing himself
to a meaningful human relationship.

His self-imprisonment impels him to break out. The death of Miss
Lenox, coupled with winter, which sings of cold and death, propels him
on his course to Africa. There he hopes to lose not only the physical
trappings of his life which weigh him down, but his emotional
baggage—his guilt—as well.

In Africa he swiftly drops all but three reminders of
civilization—his stained Jockey shorts, his broken bridgework, and his
guide Romilayu. Although an African, Romilayu is a practicing Christian
who upholds traditional Western moral values. As Sancho Panza to
Henderson's more flamboyant Don Quixote, Romilayu straddles two
worlds—the world of the jungle, from which he possesses sharply honed
survival skills, and the Western world, represented by the jeep he
covets. Ironically, this "uncivilized" man turns out to be a staunch
espouser of the virtues we label civilized—loyalty, devotion, trust,
and Christian charity. In an inimitably imaginative twist, Bellow
assigns to Romilayu the role of the moral norm against which the other
characters may be measured.
With Romilayu as his guide, Henderson leaves his friend Charlie and Charlie's bride, with whom he has come to Africa, because they insist on maintaining the trappings of Western comfort. Behind the lens of his camera, Charlie insulates himself against immersion in Africa, preferring a two-dimensional rather than a three-dimensional experience. Thus, with Romilayu as representative of Western values as well as master of survival tactics, Henderson enters the African "heart of darkness" to plumb his own depths in the hope of emerging a more integrated man.

Henderson attributes to his mission a biblical cast—to find meaning in Daniel's prophecy to Nebuchadnezzar, "They shall drive thee from among men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field." He has tried this approach at home, by raising pigs, but it did not revitalize him, merely denigrated his aristocratic heritage. Pigs, he finds, are not significant enough to reveal his innermost being.

Bellow's parody of the heart of darkness begins with Henderson's entrance into the Arnewi village. He and Romilayu approach the Arnewi through a Garden of Eden-like area uninhabited by humans, where mountains, Edenic and snakelike, rise above vapor-enshrouded rocks: "It was all simplified and splendid, and I felt I was entering the past—the real past, no history or junk like that" (42). His first impression of the Arnewi village is that its primitive appearance augurs an experience that will help him to cleanse himself of his self-concern. But his first act is self-centered—he attempts to impress the children by the God-like act of setting a bush on fire with his cigarette lighter. And his first thought upon seeing a young girl
burst into tears is that his action has caused her outburst. Expecting the Arnewi to be Rousseauian savages, he is shocked when the chief, Prince Itelo, asks him, tongue in cheek, "You thought first footstep? Something new? I am very sorry. We are discovered" (49).

If his expectation of the Arnewi is shattered, so is his expectation of himself as savior-from-the-civilized-world. In contrast to the passive, nonviolent Arnewi, Henderson's acts are impetuous, aggressive, and violent. To rid their cistern of the biblical-like plague of frogs, he blows the frogs out of the water with a homemade bomb. Unfortunately, his well-meaning action results in the destruction of the cistern as well. In this episode Bellow contrasts through parody the two extremes of aggressive and nonaggressive approaches to solving real problems. Clearly, Henderson's approach is destructive. His heart is in the right place but his self-absorption prevents him from finding a more reasonable solution to the frog problem. At this point in the narrative his head and his heart are not properly integrated.

But the Arnewi approach is, in the long run, equally destructive to the tribe. Superstition prevents them from trying to rid the cistern of the frogs, which they regard as a curse they can do nothing about. Here again, as in The Victim, Bellow points to the danger of the extreme position. The overly aggressive and the excessively passive approaches are ineffective. Through the use of parody here Bellow calls for moderation and balance to cope with natural and manmade catastrophes.

The most important experience of his stay among the Arnewi is his meeting with Queen Willitale, who serves as a reality instructor for him. Androgynous, Willitale has both husbands and wives. Blind in one
eye from a cataract, she is, however, far-seeing and projects a deep human understanding. When, as a gesture of respect, Henderson kisses her lion fur-clad belly, he feels her elemental power. She is at home with the human and the animal and has integrated both of these aspects of herself. She senses that he is like a child to whom the world is strange, that he suffers and wants desperately to live ("Grun-tu-molani") and to "burst his spirit's sleep." But before she can give him the verbal key to the mystery of human contentment, he must leave the Arnewi in disgrace for blowing up the cistern.

His second encounter in Africa, with the Wariri, is totally unlike the first. Unlike the passive Arnewi, the Wariri warriors greet him and Romilayu with loaded guns, strip Henderson of his own gun, and deposit him and Romilayu in a hut inhabited by a corpse. Skulls on sticks baking in the sun make clear to Henderson that the Wariri leaders will brook no opposition. Corpses and skulls serve as a constant reminder of the Wariri orientation toward violence. And where the Arnewi venerate cattle, the Wariri slaughter them. In Bellow's continuing use of irony, the Wariri are the knowledgeable ones, while Henderson as representative of civilized man is in the dark. They are not straightforward with Henderson; in their search for a new Rain King they trick him into displaying his strength by disposing of the corpse in the hut. When he has successfully completed this task, they play upon his ego to get him to lift the statue of the god Mummah during the rain-making ceremony. Pleased with his performance, he feels jubilant but, still ego-ridden, he tells the reader, "I was brilliant, a success" (165). Even their king, Dahfu, whom Henderson learns to trust,
does not tell him the full truth about the role of the Rain King when
that honor is bestowed on him.

Dahfu plays the role of Henderson's major reality instructor in the
novel; one critic has termed him Henderson's analyst. Dahfu sets an
example for Henderson. As another critic puts it, "Dahfu can give
Henderson a spectacular example of Hemingway's grace under
pressure." Dahfu radiates an "extra shadow of brilliance... the
sign of an intenser gift of being" (189). The "smoky, bluish trembling
of his extra shadow" expresses his strong gift of life (248). An
optimist who believes that "the noble will have its turn in the world"
(182) despite his acceptance of the mixed motives of human beings,
Dahfu exerts a strong influence on Henderson, his magnetism drawing
Henderson in like a flower does a honeybee. Dahfu is a risk-taker;
always poised on the precipice of death, should he fail to satisfy his
wives or to capture the lion Gmilo which, according to tribal belief,
houses his late father's soul. On a table next to his sofa sit the
skulls of his dead father and grandfather, with which he lives in easy
accord. He has learned to make himself at home with death, even to
create art from death in the ritualistic and beautiful dance with the
skulls during the rain-making ceremony.

Dahfu is comfortable with the animal nature of his being as
represented by Atti, the lion whom he has tamed. He has succeeded in
integrating his body and soul into a harmonious whole, an
accomplishment Henderson would like to emulate. Like Bellow's other
reality instructors, however, he is mildly eccentric. As Bellow takes
pains to point out, Dahfu is a parody of a primitive African king.
After all, he has spent three years in medical school in the West, yet amusedly tells Henderson that Henderson is the tribe's first civilized visitor. In his ludicrous costume of purple ballooned drawers and matching large-brimmed velvet hat adorned with human teeth to protect him from the evil eye, he looks more like a dandy than a warrior king. His eccentricity is most obvious in his espousal of the "core/rind" theory. This theory proposes that the mind can transform the body through exertion of will. Dahfu even wonders whether inanimate objects might have a mental existence that would enable them to become transformed as well. He convinces Henderson that he can change himself for the better, however. According to Dahfu,

"It is all a matter of having a desirable model in the cortex. For the noble self-conception is everything. For as conception is, so the fellow is. Put differently, you are in the flesh as your soul is. And in the manner described a fellow really is the artist of himself. Body and face are secretly painted by the spirit of man."

(226)

Both Dahfu and Henderson do wish to change themselves. In their desire to end "becoming" and start "being" they are similar. According to tradition Dahfu will enter a state of being when he captures the lion Gmilo which houses his father's soul. Then he will be king in his own right. Henderson feels he will cease "becoming" when he reconciles the warring elements of his personality.

Dahfu's education of Henderson begins with his recognition that Henderson needs consequence and salvation. Dahfu has made a study of human types and sees Henderson as desperate for salvation. He encourages Henderson to put his trust in him and follow his course of
therapy even when it leads him into the dangerous expedition of the
lion hunt or the fearful experience of the lion's den. The trip down to
the dark, dank den beneath the palace is yet another parody of the
heart of darkness; although Henderson quivers with fear, Atti the lion
is quite tame under the control of Dahfu. Dahfu establishes Atti as the
pivotal point in his relationship with Henderson. Only by keeping the
elemental (Atti) between them, he insists, can they establish a
meaningful communion of trust and affection. Putting his trust in
Dahfu, Henderson takes the first step in his education. He sees Dahfu
as a man of great vision and enthusiasms, "a dreamer-doer, a guy with
a program" which he admires (198).

Dahfu's therapy for Henderson has been termed by some critics as
Reichian, in which the layers of acquired behavior patterns are
stripped away so that the patient may get in touch with his elemental
self and participate in a kind of primal scream release. Dahfu's theory
is that by imitating Atti, crawling on all fours and roaring, Henderson
will get in touch with his animal self. Atti will help Henderson to end
his escapist behavior because, as pure animal nature, she is
unavoidable. Her vitality and rhythm of life—her movements, breathing,
eyes—"the vital continuity between her parts" (219)—will change how
he feels about himself. She will, Dahfu believes, resurrect Henderson's
nobility.

As drama teacher, Dahfu extracts a "Method" performance from
Henderson. Henderson takes on the role of lion: "And so I was the
beast. I gave myself up to it, and all my sorrow came out in the
roaring. My lungs supplied the air but the note came from my soul"
(225). In roaring he finally understands Daniel’s prophecy. By absorbing an animal presence, he perceives the limits of human strife. Now he can be more aware of others’ needs. According to Hassan, he attains wisdom “by learning how to absorb the pure moment which brings together the currents of life and death, ecstasy and numbness.” He accepts the intimate connection between life and death as illustrated by the lion, who is both a life force and a potential killer. By absorbing the lion’s pure moment of being, the moment of opposites, into himself, he emits his sorrow and purges himself of his isolation. Although he has not purged himself of his human longing, he has touched his animal nature. Now he is ready to form communities with others.

He begins to see himself in perspective and to have a clearer vision of the path he must take:

I must change. I must not live in the past, it will ruin me. The dead are my boarders, eating me out of house and home. The hogs were my defiance, I was telling the world that it was a pig. I must begin to think how to live. I must break Lily from blackmail and set love on a true course.

(242)

Guttmann puts it aptly: "Henderson’s comic quest is ended when he learns to replace one verb (want) with two others (imagine, love).” Only through love and imagination can community be created. Through love and the power of the renovating imagination, redemption can occur. Through Dahfu’s love, instruction, example, and call to the imagination, Henderson experiences bonding with his African brother and can then create a community—with the boy on the plane, with Lily, and with mankind, to whom he can return from his heart of darkness in
servitude and love. Like Asa Leventhal, Henderson has learned that caring for another human being brings redemption.

Imagination is a key word not only in Henderson's education but in the education of Bellow's other protagonists and in Bellow's philosophy as a writer. As pointed out in the discussion of Dangling Man, Bellow sees the imagination as a redeeming force in the contemporary world. Dahfu believes in the power of the imagination to forge reality. Imagination can transform people from small and mean to happy, more productive, more fulfilled human beings. Imagination can be used for moral good—to fulfill man's potential for nobility in Dahfu's—and Bellow's—eyes: "Imagination, imagination, imagination! It converts to the actual. It sustains, it alters, it redeems! ... What Homo sapiens imagines, he may slowly convert himself to," Dahfu exhorts (228). He urges Henderson to use his imagination to recreate himself so that he may, like the artist John-Pearl in Dangling Man, create a community with "the best part of mankind" despite the conditions of the contemporary world in which he must live. Dahfu's efforts convince Henderson of the value of the imagination in redeeming life:

Yes, I thought, I believed I could change; I was willing to overcome my old self; yes, to do that a man has to adopt some new standard; he must even force himself into a part; maybe he must deceive himself a while, until it begins to take; his own hand paints again on that much-painted veil. I would never make a lion, I knew that; but I might pick up a small gain here and there in the attempt. (250)
Art, the product of the imagination, can arrest chaos, as we will see in Humboldt's Gift. Henderson reflects, "Chaos doesn't run the whole show... this is not a sick and hasty ride, helpless, through a dream into oblivion. No, sir! It can be arrested by a thing or two. By art, for instance" (149). Even Dahfu's dance with the skulls creates art and order out of chaos—the old chaos and terror of death.

As in Bellow's previous novels, the protagonist must learn to come to terms with death. In a 1964 interview, Bellow was asked, "Which of your characters is most like you?" He answered: "Henderson—the absurd seeker of high qualities. But what Henderson is really seeking is a remedy to the anxiety over death. What he can't endure is this continuing anxiety, which most of us accept as the condition of life which he is foolhardy enough to resist." In this novel, more than in any of Bellow's other novels, accidental or sudden, violent death plays a major role. It is this death which causes Henderson's greatest anxiety: he was one of only two survivors of his unit in the war; his brother died an unnecessary death; and Miss Lenox collapses suddenly. In Africa he experiences the violence of the Wariri culture, and faces death by violence on the lion hunt. But as the climactic scene of the novel illustrates, his fear is superseded by his concern for Dahfu. His brotherhood with Dahfu enables him to risk his life without hesitation when Dahfu is mauled by the lion he is trying to capture.

Dahfu's death puts to rest Henderson's guilt over being a surviving brother. He accepts that his father, who loved him, would have preferred Dick to live, and he forgives him. He also forgives himself. He accepts that Dahfu, who loved him, did not hesitate to put him in a
dangerous situation on the lion hunt. In an ironic reversal of roles, at this last minute he becomes Dahfu's reality instructor, warning him of his precarious position in the trap. Dahfu, however, ignores his advice. In tackling the lion with his bare hands after it has mauled Dahfu, Henderson risks his own life to save a brother, as he was not able to do for Dick. This act helps him to expiate his guilt. At last he accepts the truth of the quote, "The forgiveness of sins is perpetual and righteousness first is not required." This expiation brings him the integration of self and world he has hungered for. He recognizes that there is an inevitable rhythm of life which he cannot fight; indeed, he will be happier if he accommodates himself to it:

Oh, you can't get away from rhythm... You just can't get away from it. The left hand shakes with the right hand, the inhale follows the exhale, the systole talks back to the diastole, the hands play patty-cake, and the feet dance with each other. And the seasons. And the stars, and all of that. And the tides, and all that junk. You've got to live at peace with it, because if it's going to worry you, you'll lose.

(276)

In recognizing that he cannot change circumstances, but must learn to accommodate to them, he gains maturity. His long-suffering adolescence is over. Life, he realizes, is ambiguous: "It has a right to our respect. It does its stuff... that's all" (267). In a discussion of this novel Malin points out that the imagery "suggests that reality is erratic and orderly, wild and peaceful, high and low. It is a mixed movement--this is the answer Augie accepts as do Asa and Allbee at the end of The Victim."18 This is also the reality to which Henderson has accommodated himself at last. Like Smolak the bear,
Henderson learns that life is a mixed bag: "[Smolak] had seen too much of life and somewhere in his huge head he had worked it out that for creatures there is nothing that ever runs unmingled" (284).

Henderson refers to himself as Ishmael, and rightly so, for he is a survivor. Unlike the solipsistic Ahab, he can compromise with life. He has overcome the dangers of overvaluation of self pointed out by Schlossberg in The Victim. Chase's comments on solipsism in Moby-Dick assume a particular pertinence here:

Death—spiritual, emotional, physical—is the price of self-reliance when it is pushed to the point of solipsism, where the world has no existence apart from the all-sufficient self. Life is to be clung to, if only precariously and for the moment, by natural piety and the ability to share with others the common vicissitudes of the human condition.¹⁹

With the aid of Dahfu, Henderson has escaped the fate of Ahab and can now "share with others the common vicissitudes of the human condition." His salvation will be, as Hassan claims, "through service and love. The movement [of the novel] is toward a resolution of the conflict between self and world; the movement is from acid defeat to acceptance, and from acceptance to celebration."²⁰ To accept life on its own terms—this Joseph and Tommy Wilhelm have not been able to do. Asa and Augie do make this adjustment and are thus able to lead moderately fulfilling lives. The world, they realize, cannot be made to fit their personal vision, nor can it be made consistent in any way.

From acceptance comes celebration. Henderson's trek onto the Arctic ice in Newfoundland celebrates his "newfound" self. With the lion cub (the manifestation of grun-tu-molani), and the orphan boy, with whom
Henderson, in his newly acquired maturity, is able to play the role of father. Henderson celebrates life. Although they speak different languages, Henderson creates a community with the boy, who, "still trailing clouds of glory," trusts Henderson not to fall with him on the ice (as Henderson trusted Dahfu to protect him in the lion's den). Unlike Frankenstein, who chases the monster he has created in vanity out into the void of the Arctic ice, Henderson carries life with him. The heart of darkness which he has plumbed has given him back his life, with which he peoples the Arctic silence.

Some critics have criticized Bellow for what they call incomplete development of the character of Henderson,\textsuperscript{21} or for what they feel is the inability of the bizarre plot to sustain serious statement.\textsuperscript{22} Bellow has stated that he is satisfied with *Henderson the Rain King*, that with this novel he felt "the terrible gratification of composition."\textsuperscript{23} In defense of his use of romantic parody as the vehicle on which this novel rides, he replies in an interview: "Years ago, I studied African ethnography with the late Professor Herskovits. Later he scolded me for writing a book like *Henderson*. He said the subject was much too serious for such fooling. I felt that my fooling was fairly serious. Literalism, factualism, will smother the imagination altogether."\textsuperscript{24} In his quest for reality, Bellow has left realism behind, but through the use of parody we are guided on the course of Henderson's education, a course without pedantry, always seen in the perspective of irony.
Just as Henderson is Bellow's most affirmative hero, so Henderson
*the Rain King* is Bellow's most affirmative statement on human
possibility in the contemporary world. In his next novel, *Herzog*, we
meet a man mellowed by life's vicissitudes and ironies who embarks on
an internal journey to re-examine his experiences in order to make
sense of his life. If Tommy Wilhelm is afraid of life and Henderson
looms larger than life, *Herzog*, "that suffering joker," is Bellow's
most human character, a contemporary Everyman.
FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER FIVE


4 Hassan, Radical Innocence, pp. 115, 119.

5 Alter, After the Tradition, pp. 105-06.


8 Clayton, Saul Bellow, p. 169.


11 See especially Bradbury, Saul Bellow, p. 66, and Rupp, Celebration in Postwar American Fiction, p. 201.

12 Tanner, Saul Bellow, p. 74.

13 Schechner, "Down in the Mouth with Saul Bellow," p. 52.


15 Hassan, Radical Innocence, pp. 319-20.


20 Hassan, Radical Innocence, p. 322.
21 Ibid., pp. 320-21; Cohen, Saul Bellow's Enigmatic Laughter, pg. 219; Schechner, "Down in the Mouth with Saul Bellow," p. 53; Clayton, Saul Bellow, p. 185.


23 "Literature and Culture: An Interview with Saul Bellow," Salmagundi, Saul Bellow Issue, 30 (Summer 1975), p. 22.

CHAPTER SIX

"That Suffering Joker": Herzog

A dandy in candy stripes, Moses E. Herzog races helter-skelter through the landscape of his mind and across the vistas of America in quest of emotional well-being. Like Joseph, Tommy Wilhelm, and Eugene Henderson, he is "a chopped and shredded man" (Dangling Man 109). Cuckolded by his best friend, thrown out of his house and out of his child's life by his wife, his academic career in shreds with eight hundred pages of unsynthesized material for a critical work moldering in the closet, Moses E. Herzog feels himself disintegrating. A modern Humpty Dumpty, he needs to put his fragmented psyche together again. To do this he must take the inward journey of re-experiencing his life. Only through this process can he come to terms with his past and so learn from it, and this education will enable him to expiate his guilt and resolve, as much as is possible, his conflicts. Herzog thus weaves together the typical Bellovian Bildungsroman with an unconventional self-therapy aimed at recovery from emotional trauma.

The novel moves from frenzied physical and mental activity reflecting the turmoil Herzog suffers to a condition of physical rest and mental quietude. Beginning at the end of Herzog's quest, with his hard-won conclusion that "If I'm out of my mind it's all right with me," the novel takes a tour of Herzog's life through the free-flowing associations of his mind. Like its eighteenth-century predecessor Tristram Shandy, Herzog can be described as a picaresque novel of the mind. As Solotaroff puts it aptly, "[The novel's]
principle of composition is overflow: Bellow's consciousness of life caught at the flood, with the form of the novel kept wide open to receive it."² Although the narrative is told in the third person, the narrator's voice so closely synchronizes with Herzog's that with seemingly little effort and less artifice it draws the reader into the protagonist's consciousness. Fuchs describes the reader's position in the novel: "We view Herzog and view Herzog viewing Herzog."³ This dramatization of consciousness is the prime reality in the novel. Like Eugene Henderson's comic consciousness, Herzog laughs at himself as he reflects on his past, while with a sharply honed scalpel of wit, he performs a devastating self-dissection. This wit and its attendant tool of irony throw the reader off balance, thwarting his conventional expectations. Guard down, the reader is drawn into active participation in the reconstruction of Herzog's life.

The novel operates simultaneously on three interwoven time lines: the present moment, an instant of reflection which opens and closes the novel; the near past, a week-long trek of impulsive journeys taken by Herzog in an effort to escape his emotional burdens as well as in desperation to put his life in order; and the far past, which is approached by mental associations during his travels in the near past. Like Bellow's previous picaresque novels, Augie March and Henderson the Rain King, Herzog traces the impulsive journeys of the protagonist in his quest to "cleanse the gates of vision by self-knowledge, by experience" (110). For what Herzog needs most badly is, in Jamesian terms, to see. Like James's innocents, Herzog is the alienated observer, aptly described by Tanner as "the prisoner of perception,"⁴
who is locked into a fixed system of preconceptions which needs to be smashed in order to free him. Herzog deconstructs this fixed system through the letters he writes—but never sends—to nearly everyone who has passed through his personal and intellectual life. As Clayton points out, in these letters Herzog verbalizes his neuroses so that he can maintain some control over them. Sometimes the letters are composed on paper; often they are merely passing thoughts generated by some turbulent feeling or external event which Herzog cannot control in any other way. The letters function as an internal monologue, much like Joseph's journal. In them he works out not only his quarrel with the world but his mental quarrel with himself, as Joseph does by constructing an alter ego. Yet because this is a picaresque novel, we know as we knew in Augie March that Herzog as hero will emerge from his travail. The picaresque form precludes damage to the hero; the comic consciousness prevails.

Through this silent dialogue with the people in his life and the philosophers and world leaders alive and dead whose visions he considers, he tests and rejects philosophies for his own life. Just as in Bellow's earlier novels, especially Augie March, every character offers the protagonist advice on how to live his life. The letters allow Herzog to challenge these reality instructors without confronting them. In this way he can retain the control he lacks in real life.

Herzog realizes that the letters are as much constructions as are the visions of the reality instructors he rejects, but in a much quoted line he tells us that in the letters he is searching in the only way he knows how for his own reality: "I go after reality with language," he
tells the reader (332). Words are the tools by which he hopes to transform his life. Although he admits that the letters are an abuse of consciousness because he has not worked out "what to live for, what to die for" (333), he must press on. "What can thoughtful people and humanists do but struggle toward suitable words?" (332).

Human life rests on tensions and suffering, Herzog feels. The letters are constructed to keep tight the tensions that prevent him from imprisoning himself in a fixed vision of life. They are an attempt to maintain the human scale, that is, the recognition that life is ambiguous. The human scale, which reflects the ambiguity of life, is one of the key lessons the Bellow hero must learn. The lesson is learned by testing and probing, by trying on roles and rejecting them, by seeing the falseness of the "ideal construction" of life. Here, more than anywhere else in this novel, Bellow makes clear his own point of view which he has steadfastly transported with conviction from novel to novel. The purpose of writing the letters dovetails with the purpose of writing the novel itself:

I must be trying to keep tight the tensions without which human beings can no longer be called human. If they don't suffer, they've gotten away from me. And I've filled the world with letters to prevent their escape. I want them in human form, and so I conjure up a whole environment and catch them in the middle. I put my whole heart into these constructions. But they are constructions. (333)

Although Herzog decries constructions, he finds it necessary to compose letters. This ambivalence of approach reflects his overall ambivalence—and thus his humanness. For as we have learned from
Bellow's earlier novels, he who accepts the contradictory nature of
life will be most successful in navigating the choppy waters. As Herzog
tells his friend Luke Asphalter, "There is something funny about the
human condition, and civilized intelligence makes fun of its own ideas"
(331).

Laughing at yourself is the key to Herzog's return to health as
well as to Bellow's basic approach to the comedy of ideas. As he plays
out the comedy in this novel, Bellow expresses once again his
tentatively optimistic vision of life. In an interview shortly after
the publication of Herzog Bellow affirms this attitude: "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."6 He sees Herzog's struggle with ideas as
symptomatic of the inability of contemporary man to live by any fixed
set of ideas: "[Herzog] points to the comic improbability of arriving
at a synthesis that can satisfy modern demands."7 He finds no
precedent in the American novel for a dramatic resolution based on
philosophical ideas, as in the French or German novel: "The
intellectual hero of a French or a German novel is likely to be a
philosophical intellectual, an ideological intellectual." But the
American tradition, based on liberal democracy, is different:

The lines are less clearly drawn. We do not expect
thought to have results, say, in the moral sphere,
or in the political, in quite the way a Frenchman
would. To be an intellectual in the U.S. sometimes
means to be immured in a private life in which one
thinks, but thinks with some humiliating sense of
how little thought can accomplish. To call
therefore for a dramatic resolution in terms of
ideas in an American novel is to demand something
for which there is scarcely any precedent. My novel deals with the humiliating sense that results from the American mixture of private concerns and intellectual interests.8

Here Bellow reiterates the point made by Chase that the American novel reflects the disorder of American society. As stated earlier in this thesis, the protagonist of the Bellow novel, a product of a culture that offers no stability or tradition of values, cannot turn outward toward reconciliation with society. His only alternative must be to turn inward for resolution of his conflicts. This introspection can produce an imprisonment of its own, as Bellow notes:

To me, a significant theme of Herzog is the imprisonment of the individual in a shameful and impotent privacy. He feels humiliated by it; he struggles comically with it; and he comes to realize at last that what he considered his intellectual 'privilege' has proved to be another form of bondage. Anyone who misses this misses the point of the book. So that to say that Herzog is not motivated in his acts by ideas is entirely false. Any Bildungsroman—and Herzog is, to use that heavy German term, a Bildungsroman—concludes with the first step. The first real step. Any man who has rid himself of superfluous ideas in order to take that first step has done something significant.9

The key, then, to Herzog's education is to rid himself of the superfluous ideas of others as well as his own. To do this he must lead the examined life, through the composition of letters and the free association of ideas. Bellow's description of Joyce's approach to Leopold Bloom will also suit Moses Herzog: "Total examination of a single human being discloses a most extraordinary entity, a comic subject, a Bloom. Through him we begin to see that anything can be something."10
This last sentence expresses Bellow's belief in the "worth-fulness" of the human being, however laughable he may be. Unlike the apocalyptic novelists Sartre and Robbe-Grillet, whom he ridicules,\(^{11}\) Bellow finds something interesting and estimable in every protagonist he creates; the more flawed he is, the more lovingly Bellow portrays him. He caresses Herzog through language:

Three thousand million human beings exist, each with some possessions, each a microcosmos, each infinitely precious, each with a peculiar treasure. There is a distant garden where curious objects grow, and there, in a lovely dusk of green, the heart of Moses E. Herzog hangs like a peach. \(\text{(217)}\)

It is no coincidence that Bellow borrowed the name of his protagonist from a minor character in Joyce's *Ulysses*. Both writers explore the modern comedy of ideas through the character of a cuckolded schlemiel whose stream-of-consciousness ramblings are pitted against the external realities he must plod through. Both novels establish a tension between a rambling nonlinear internal monologue that flits back and forth in time and the cocoon of a tightly structured external framework: *Ulysses* takes place in a day, while *Herzog* occupies only a moment of reflection. Although "foolish, feeling, suffering Herzog" (76) resembles a latter-day Leopold Bloom, he also bears some similarities to Molly Bloom. Supine in a rumpled bed flecked with potted meat, Molly, like Herzog in his hammock, reviews her life. Like Herzog's, her thoughts ramble without synthesis, finally trailing off, as does Herzog's narrative, on an affirmative note.
As Bellow has stated, these days human beings are fit only for comedy. History has altered the concept of the romantic hero. Buffeted by the upheavals of the twentieth century, the contemporary hero, like Bloom, is reduced to a comic figure. The romantic quest can no longer be taken seriously. In this situation, parody remains the only mode for exploration of this quest. The letters, as Alter points out, parody the epistolary convention of the eighteenth-century novel.¹² Unlike *Pamela*, virtue is not rewarded, and reconciliation with society is not the ultimate goal. Like *Augie March* and *Henderson the Rain King*, *Herzog* also parodies the romantic quest tradition of Melville, Twain, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald. The quest is not for power, fulfillment of romantic dreams, or realization of an abstract ideal, but, for the disintegrating man, mental reintegration which will bring peace of mind. But Herzog, as comic consciousness, can only be seen as a parody of this quest.

To keep Herzog's problem in comic perspective, Bellow uses his most polished tool, irony. At no point in the narrative is the reader allowed to feel maudlin about Herzog's predicament. Both Bellow as narrator and Herzog himself cast aspersions on his suffering. Both see life as comic—*tsuras* (troubles) transformed into comedy and even into sexual excitement (195). With self-deprecating humor Herzog tells Ramona the sob story of his life, of "how I rose from humble origins to complete disaster" (188). Tongue-in-cheek he equates his misplaced love for Madeleine with Luke Asphaltier's overwhelming devotion to his diseased monkey; love, he concludes from this comparison, is "one of those painful emotional comedies" (328). This definition can also be
applied to Herzog's (and Bellow's) view of life. Herzog admits he has a lot to learn. "But I am diligent. I work at it and show steady improvement. I expect to be in great shape on my deathbed" (189).

The razor-sharp comedy of this novel operates by deflation, puns, and exaggeration. As Porter has pointed out, Herzog uses humor to alleviate his pain.¹³ Suffering, Herzog reminds us often, is only good for comic relief. Many critics have commented on the verbal tricks Bellow plays, but have not discussed the underlying acerbity of his vision. Everything Bellow has treated with any degree of seriousness in earlier novels is reduced, through bitter irony, to parody. In a letter to his psychiatrist, Dr. Edvig, Herzog parodies Bellow's philosophy of human community so central to each of his earlier novels. Berating himself for befriending Valentine Gersbach, who has repaid Herzog's extended hand by reaching for his wife as well, Herzog writes:

> God comes and goes in man's soul. And men come and go in each other's souls. And sometimes they come and go in each other's beds, too. You have dialogue with a man. You have intercourse with his wife. You hold the poor fellow's hand. You look into his eyes. You give him consolation. All the while you rearrange his life. . . . And finally your suffering is greater than his, too, because you are the greater sinner. And so you've got him, coming and going.

(83-84)

Herzog also parodies Tommy Wilhelm's "subway communion" as "potato love," sentimentality without real substance. In the subway, "Innumerable millions of passengers had polished the wood of the turnstile with their hips. From this arose a feeling of communion—brotherhood in one of its cheapest forms" (218). Bitterly he
mocks those who, disappointed in their relationships and desperate for love, experience "a raging consumption of potato love" (218). The Bellow hero's quest for transcendence, a substitute for reconciliation with society (see Introduction), is reduced to parody here. On the subway walls Herzog sees graffiti expressing human degradation, which he refers to as "Trans-descentence." By mocking the aspiration of the hero for transcendence, Bellow colors the irony of the novel with a bitter tone.

It would seem from Bellow's bitterness that Herzog's quest for personal synthesis would be futile. And yet the tone only serves to underscore his protagonist's drive to extricate some meaning from his life. As function this quest is perfectly wedded to the form that Bellow has chosen for the novel. Bradbury makes the point that the novel's "apparently loose construction and drift...are central to its theme of pattern drawn from patternlessness."14

Herzog's search for synthesis is in part a reaction to the lack of synthesis in the contemporary world. His second book, which was to be based on the premise that despite "the revolutions and mass convulsions of the twentieth century" there will be a "universal and durable development of the equality of conditions, the progress of democracy" (13), has collapsed under Herzog's disillusionment with this thesis. Bellow's keen sense of the postwar world pokes ironic jabs at the defeated nations of World War Two now economically resplendent, and at the technological success of the West which has put the Holocaust behind it with scarcely a memory. But Bellow will not let the reader forget. He grounds his novel in an urban setting singed by the fire of
the Holocaust. He links the increasingly technological world with a loss of human values. Although technology has eased life, it has also put human beings under its control. Modern man has become miniscule in scope. Herzog, the victim of the pressures of modern life, "let the entire world press upon him" (247). His "wild internal disorder" can partly be traced to his inability to control his environment. Herzog, as Everyman, asks himself "what it means to be a man":

In a city. In a country. In transition. In a mass. Transformed by science. Under organized power. Subject to tremendous controls. In a condition caused by mechanization. After the failure of radical hopes. In a society that was no community and devalued the person.  

(247-48)

Technology corrupts, drowning us in conspicuous consumption, according to Herzog/Bellow, and as it increases its hold on us it decreases traditional moral values. The Romantic age which valued "beauty, nobility, integrity, intensity" (204) has passed; the "inspired condition" to which all of Bellow's heroes has aspired has petered out just as Herzog's argument for it peters out comically. In his vaudevillian straw hat and striped jacket he exhorts, "Reason exists!"—only to be drowned out by the sound of "progress" as the wrecker's ball demolishes a nearby building for slum clearance (205-06).

Herzog, the contemporary Everyman, is denied the coherent self possible in earlier times. Bellow tells us that "modern character is inconstant, divided, vacillating, lacking the stonelike certitude of archaic man, also deprived of the firm ideas of the seventeenth
century, clear, hard theorems" (134). There is no possibility of
integration of inner and outer worlds as in earlier eras, but worse,
there is no longer possible the personal transcendence inspired by the
Romantic era for which Joseph, Augie, Tommy Wilhelm, and Henderson have
quested. Herzog feels a sense of Wordsworthian loss in this "age of
special comedy" (203). Even moral suffering in the post-Holocaust world
is denied; the Holocaust has abolished the individual Jew's claim to
exceptional suffering.

Herzog's world is "an age of spiritual exhaustion—all the old
dreams were dreamed out" (286). Alter has pointed out the Waste Land
imagery in this novel,15 yet Bellow does not take an apocalyptic
stance. On the contrary, through his comic approach he undercuts the
apocalyptic novelists. He gives us a very human character in Herzog,
one who is loving and capable of growth. In Herzog's development we can
see reflected Bellow's belief that despite the odds he truthfully
presents, he still believes, like Herzog, that "there are human
qualities still to be discovered" (203), that we cannot and should not
limit our definition of a human being. The Hegelian view with which
Herzog wrestles throughout his self-examination, that man is
historically determined, along with the view that technology impinges
on individual freedom, together do not quench the spark that still
glows in every human soul.

This spark glows in Herzog. His strength as a character lies in his
humanity—the paradoxes and contradictions of his nature with which we
can identify, and his pathos, which he undercuts deftly with
self-deprecatory humor. A fully fleshed character, Herzog is a
composite of contradictions—egotistical yet easily intimidated, innocent of guile yet intellectually sophisticated, eager for life yet cynical about its rewards, full of physical appetites yet rarely allowing himself to enjoy them, desirous of forming relationships yet reluctant to commit to them.

Who is Herzog? He has been variously called "Moses in exile," a schlemiel, and Bellow's wisest fool. He refers to himself alternately as "aging, vain, terribly narcissistic, suffering without proper dignity" (243-44) and as a forty-seven-year-old child-man, a "pure heart in the burlap of innocence, [who has] set himself up with his emotional goodies—truth, friendship, devotion to children (the regular American worship of kids), and potato love" (325).

Introspection reveals a comic figure, "eager, grieving, fantastic, dangerous, crazed and, to the point of death, 'comical'" (117). He evades responsibility for his problems, even wishing some physical ailment would send him to the hospital so that he could escape his emotional burdens. He prays to God to "remove his great, bone-breaking burden of selfhood and self-development, give himself, a failure, back to the species for a primitive cure" (117). But unlike Eugene Henderson, for whom a "primitive cure" does the job, Herzog will have to perform his own dissection. He will have to strip himself of the mental glut of superfluous ideas—his own and others'—before he can accept himself as he is, warts and all, and reach Henderson's goal of being rather than becoming. Self-examination leads to self-awareness, and this process enables him to work through his conflicts and discard the posturings of the "marvelous Herzog" he was so intent on becoming.
earlier in his life. At the end of his mental and physical wanderings, he can proclaim, "I am simply a human being, more or less" (387).

To reach this state of being, he must re-educate himself. He must break free of his self-imposed role of "prisoner of perception" and give up the fixed conceptions by which he lives—conceptions which have stunted his emotional growth and damaged his mental health. These fixed conceptions have been pressed on him from without as well as from within. Advice from "reality instructors" is easier to evaluate and reject than his internalized prejudices. When he tells Ramona, "I'm going through a change of outlook" (233), he admits that he must change from within. Rejecting the superfluous ideas of others is not sufficient; he must change his internal perspective in order to reintegrate his fragmented self. To reconcile his public and his private self he must find common ground on which his intellectual and emotional life can co-exist. The first step in reknitting his unraveled self is to reject the advice of others, and in this novel, as in *Augie March*, advice blooms like weeds choking out a delicate flower garden.

The novel abounds with reality instructors. Everyone lectures the professor—his wife, lawyer, friends, lover, even dead philosophers whose world views Herzog turns over and over in his mind. Whenever real problems become too painful he retreats into intellectual play, pitting one philosophical position against another to escape confrontation with reality.

Although reality instructors are a thorn in Herzog's side, they provide an alternative perspective from which to view him. From them we learn that he is not the saint/victim he paints himself, that he can be
pigheaded, self-concerned, and difficult to live with. But to Herzog, all reality instructors are off the mark: "Only a very special sort of lunatic expects to inculcate his principles," he believes. "Reality instructors. They want to teach you—to punish you with—the lessons of the Real" (157). But each reality instructor has a different view of what's real. And each, while extending a helping hand to Herzog, punches him in the ribs with the other. Bellow's description of the lawyer Simkin suits the other reality instructors as well: "a practical realist, [Simkin] had to perform exercises, and a certain amount of malice kept him in condition" (42).

Like Simkin, Sandor Himmelstein, Herzog's Chicago divorce lawyer, tries to educate him to the "cruel facts" of life. "Guys at our time of life must fact facts," he claims (106). He urges Herzog not to fight for custody of his daughter June because the jury would favor Madeleine, who is young and pretty. As a middle-aged man, Herzog can expect little sympathy from the judge. Of course, the fact that Himmelstein himself sympathizes with Madeleine and has turned over to her money intended for emergencies—money which she then, with Himmelstein's knowledge, spent on clothes—does not improve Herzog's situation. Sharp and shrewd, Himmelstein manipulates Herzog while offering him his own crude assessment of his client and friend. On the one hand he exudes potato love toward Herzog, while on the other he hits hard, calling Herzog "an outstanding shnook" who wants only that "everybody should love him" (109, 106). And while urging Herzog to be a mensch, he recommends that his client take out an insurance policy on himself, payable to June should he have a mental breakdown. Herzog
takes no action against Himmelstein, other than to think of him as "that humped rat" (188).

Passive in his relationships with others, Herzog is the perfect receptacle for the advice of the aggressors in his life. Early in his life Aunt Zipporah, a reincarnation of Augie's Grandma Lausch, becomes his first reality instructor. Admonishing Herzog's father for living on dreams and leaning on others for financial support, she urges Herzog's mother to plant in her children not the unattainable dreams of professional or artistic success, but the practical goal of a good trade. Aunt Zipporah does not believe in dreams so much as she believes in a tightly rolled wad of bills which she stuffs in her bosom.

Reminiscences of Aunt Zipporah spring from an encounter with Herzog's childhood friend Nachman, a dreamer whose life is a lesson to Herzog in how not to live. Nachman, a renegade from Jewish tradition embodied in his rabbi-father, has become a bohemian. With his like-minded wife Laura, he "had been wandering up and down Europe, sleeping in ditches in the Rimbaud country, reading Van Gogh's letters aloud to each other—Rilke's poems" (162-63). Attracted to obsessed artists and writers, Nachman himself is obsessed with the belief that materialism corrupts values. Laura, oppressed by the Jewish bourgeois world of her background, has tried to commit suicide, and has been committed to an insane asylum. Extremists, Nachman and Laura have tried to live in the world of pure art and ideals and have crashed. Years later, Nachman, now old and decrepit, avoids Herzog when he sees him on the street.
By juxtaposing the two extremist views of Nachman and Aunt Zipporah, Herzog seems to be working out in his mind the realization that he must find a balance, a moderate approach to his own life. Just as Asa Leventhal realizes in The Victim and Augie discovers in his encounter with Basteshaw, Herzog learns that balance is necessary to successful navigation of life's course. Extremes present danger. Herzog has also learned this lesson from Madeleine, whose attempts to find meaning in her life have caused her to throw herself into the extremist, ill-fitting roles of religious convert-zealot and academic harpy, roles which later she has to reject. While Madeleine pursues these high-minded roles, Herzog is left with the practical running of the household. Victim of Madeleine and of those who seek to instruct him in their philosophies, he seeks an end to victimhood.

Ramona offers him that opportunity. She urges him to follow his erotic impulses, to accept her guilt-free love, and to set free "the devil that's in you" (24). A sensual woman who cultivates not only the romance of flowers (as a florist) but the flowering of romance, Ramona encourages the introspective Herzog to bloom. Unlike Madeleine, whom Herzog describes as a "frigid, middlebrow, castrating female" (228), Ramona sizzles with voluptuousness and sexuality. She expresses "the simple strength of simple desires" (188). Sex with her temporarily frees Herzog from anxiety and the need to write letters. Although she presses him to make a commitment to her, she does not try to control him as Madeleine did. Herzog realizes that "what he had to learn from her... was how to renew the spirit through the flesh" (228). Unfortunately, her need for commitment frightens him and sends him
running to Martha's Vineyard to escape her. This is the first of three major actions of the novel and focuses on Herzog's conflict between his desire for her and his fear of commitment. In his reflections and unwritten letters, he tries to resolve these contradictory impulses.

Just to complicate matters, and to remind the reader that there is no easy solution to the problem of love and commitment, Bellow throws us the "monkeywrench" example of Herzog's friend Luke Asphalter. Luke suffers a case of misplaced love and commitment to his monkey. By making the unilateral commitment of putting all his emotional eggs in a monkey's basket, Luke endangers himself, for in attempting to give artificial respiration to his tuberculosis-ridden pet, he risks contracting the disease himself. By such counterpointed parody Bellow gives us yet another exaggerated example of how not to live.

The examples of Aunt Zipporah, Simkin, Himmelstein, Nachman, Madeleine, and Asphalter are not lost on Herzog. By rejecting the reality instruction or example that each sets, he strengthens himself. He examines the fixed, self-important self-conceptions of each through reflection or the letters he does not send, and this examination brings him to the realization that he must reject his own self-imposed image of a "marvelous" Herzog, a man who has projected himself into a series of unsatisfactory roles, "Herzog the victim, Herzog the would-be lover, Herzog the man on whom the world depended for certain intellectual work, to change history, to influence the development of civilization" (131). This self-realization is the first step in his education, for by rejecting the fixed conceptions he holds, he can open himself to a more realistic interaction with others and eventually reconcile his private and public selves.
Bellow has referred to Herzog as a Bildungsroman, and in this vein the main thread of the narrative is Herzog's painful transition from middle-aged adolescent to maturity. The adolescent is a role that Herzog has mastered. All his life he has looked to others—his brother Will, Ramona, even Valentine Gersbach—to pick up the pieces of his life when it has shattered. Because he will not take responsibility for his life, he has difficulty making the transition from the role of son to the role of father. Early in the novel he makes excuses for not going to visit his son Marco at summer camp. Only when he has worked through his problems does he gain the strength to assume the mantle of fatherhood to his son. "Enough malingering!" he decides. He will visit Marco, "not plead weakness" (257).

Seeing himself in the role of helpless child stems also from the fixed conception that if one is good in the way in which a child is admonished by a parent to "be good," one will be loved in return. Twice he quotes the nursery rhyme that provides the maxim or fixed conception by which he lives:

I love little pussy, her coat is so warm
And if I don't hurt her, she'll do me no harm.
I'll sit by the fire and give her some food,
And pussy will love me because I am good.

(148)

Herzog's expectations of love have been refuted; he presumed that if he pleased the fickle female, she would love him in return. Madeleine rewarded him by manipulating and cheating on him. He projects onto her and Gersbach an evil which is reinforced startlingly in his mind by the courtroom trial he inadvertently witnesses. Here a mother is
accused of beating her innocent child to death while her lover lies in bed, idly smoking.

This scene provokes Herzog's second major action—a frantic trip to Chicago to "save" daughter June from what he imagines is child abuse at the hands of Madeleine and Gersbach. Ironically, this action is also prompted by the only letter sent in the novel, from Madeleine's babysitter to Herzog, complaining that Gersbach had locked June in the car. Thinking he would like to kill Gersbach, Herzog collects his father's old pistol, arming himself, according to Clayton, with his father's power as well. In the key revelatory scene of the novel Herzog stands as voyeur, gun in hand, outside the bathroom window as Gersbach tenderly bathes June. This dose of reality smashes Herzog's fixed conception of Madeleine and Gersbach. Like James's protagonist Isabel Archer, he sees now that what he imagined as real has actually been his own mental construction. His real problem has not been Madeleine but himself, for not being able to deal with her, either in the marriage or in his mind afterward. Clayton makes the point that Herzog's traits of paranoia, which he projects onto Madeleine—pride, anger, and inability to accept criticism—are really his own.

The bath scene provides a key lesson in reality instruction which helps Herzog to renounce both his stance as victim and his need for revenge. He can then put his past behind him and gain needed perspective. His cloudy vision clears and he can see himself as he is. The shock of Madeleine's adultery, which precipitated his feeling of disintegration, can be put to rest in the past. Madeleine's histrionic performance in the police station, when she comes to claim June after
Herzog's car accident, confirms to Herzog that she is not all-powerful, as he had envisioned her, but merely human. At this point he has gathered the emotional resources to face up to her and emerge unscathed.

His release from the Chicago prison triggers his release from his self-imposed prison and suffering. In the third and last action of the novel he retreats to the house in Ludeyville for spiritual and emotional therapy. Here he makes peace with himself and feels lighter, "his servitude ended and his heart released from its grisly heaviness and encrustation" (381). He has rid himself of his need for revenge against Madeleine and Gersbach, and experiences joy. Earlier in his life he had experienced bliss with his Japanese lover, Sono, but suffered guilt pangs for it:

To tell the truth, I never had it so good, he wrote. But I lacked the strength of character to bear such joy. That was hardly a joke. When a man's breast feels like a cage from which all the dark birds have flown—he is free, he is light. And he wants his customary struggles, his nameless, empty works, his anger, his affections and his sins. (210)

Herzog can now give up the crutch of suffering, which has been his touchstone to reality—as he calls it, "an antidote to illusion" (386). He can see clearly without making himself miserable, "Suffering breaks people," he realizes, "crushes them, and is simply unilluminating" (386). He can now stop punishing himself by making himself into a verbal punching bag for his own dissatisfactions. With his statement, "I am simply a human being, more or less" (387), he accepts himself as he is. In acknowledging his humanity, he accepts his own ambiguity—his
virtues and his sins—as well as those of others. He emerges from his torment because he has now experienced a truth he previously understood only intellectually, that "neuroses might be graded by the inability to tolerate ambiguous situations" (370). Like Henderson, he can now accept life as it is, a compromise. Unlike Nachman, he can live in an ambiguous universe. In Henderson's words, life "has a right to our respect. It does its stuff... that's all" (Henderson the Rain King 267). The pain of his conflicts has eased; he makes mental peace with Madeleine and Gersbach and he need not be so fearful of Ramona's desire for commitment. By accepting ambiguity he need no longer try to explain away the untidy ends and nagging feelings of his life by writing letters. The desperately wanted synthesis of public and private self cannot be achieved by manipulation of words, he realizes: "A curious result of the increase of historical consciousness is that people think explanation is a necessity of survival. They have to explain their condition. And if the unexplained life is not worth living, the explained life is unbearable, too" (392).

Herzog rejects the explained life, the province of philosophers and reality instructors alike. In a last, disjointed burst of mental activity he rids himself of the fixed conceptions of others while at the same time seeing himself anew, without the encumbrance of his past neurotic fixations. He rejects Nietzsche's apocalyptic ideas while painting June's old piano a bright green, the color of life, "apple, parrot green, the special Ludeyville color" (403). He experiences a kind of rebirth in which he celebrates the ordinary. Earlier he has taken intellectual exception to Heidegger's disparagement of the
ordinary life. Now he feels the joy of simple things as well—communion with nature on his property, and with the owls, mice, and insects who share his home. The mental letters become disjointed, the associations far-flung, as he mentally disgorges a final few philosophical and intellectual positions while resting on his mattress on the floor of his daughter's room.

Mental work gives way to physical labor, which Herzog finds more satisfying. Release from mental strife brings peace. The first sentence of the novel, "If I am out of my mind it's all right with me," can and should be taken to mean that although he may appear crazy, he has really only relinquished mental processes for the far more satisfying intuitive approach to life, an approach which brings with it freedom and relief. "He realized that he did not need to perform elaborate abstract intellectual work—work he had always thrown himself into as if it were the struggle for survival. But not thinking is not necessarily fatal" (324).

Herzog's mental burdens and his servitude to these burdens ended, he experiences the joy of being which Eugene Henderson craved. "Here I am. Hineni!" he cries. "How marvelously beautiful it is today" (377). At last Herzog affirms the "worth-fulness" of his own existence. Through new eyes he sees the intrinsic beauty of the natural world. Alter and Clayton have noted the significance of the Hebrew word Hineni (Here I am), which was spoken by Abraham and Moses to answer the call of God. Both see in the choice of this word a Hasidic affirmation of the holiness of reality.19
To God, Herzog writes disjointedly at the end of his narrative, "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 intesnests significance. Especially if divested of me" (396-97). This letter reiterates what Herzog has learned—that the imposition of mental construction will not bring order out of chaos, or peace from strife. Only the acceptance of God as inscrutable can bring intuitive sense to his life. Paradoxically, only when the mental activity of sense-making ceases can one experience the innate sense of life. All the mental activity of which Herzog is capable cannot bring him to this Whitmanesque and Wordsworthian quietism.

In a relevant essay, Lionel Trilling discusses the similarity of Wordsworth’s beliefs and rabbinical thought. Bellow’s introduction of a biblical reference and the letter to God, as well as Herzog’s acceptance of the truth of inscrutable natural law, strike the same chords Trilling notes about Wordsworth. The rabbis, Wordsworth, and, in my opinion, Herzog, reach, in Trilling’s words, "an affirmation of life so complete that it needed no saying."20 In Wordsworth (and in Herzog) we note "a certain insouciant acquiescence in the anomalies of the moral order of the universe, a respectful indifference to, or graceful surrender before, the mysteries of the moral relationship of God to man."21 Wordsworth (and Bellow) "create figures who are intended to suggest that life is justified in its elemental biological simplicity" and in whom "the will seeks its own negation—or, rather, seeks its own affirmation by its rejection of the aims which the world
sets before it and turns its energies upon itself in self-realization." This is exactly the education Herzog has imposed on himself.

With the acceptance of the ambiguity of life must come the acceptance of death as part of life. As shown in this thesis, each Bellow protagonist must come to accept his own mortality as part of his self-education. During the course of his reflections, Herzog comes to accept "that life was life only when it was understood clearly as dying" (225). As a young man he is afraid to face his mother's impending death. She teaches him an important lesson, however, by rubbing the palm of her hand with her finger to bring up the "earth" from which, she says, Adam was made. Mama accepts her death as part of the natural cycle of life, but not until Herzog has experienced catharsis does he accept his own mortality. As in Bellow's previous novels, the experience of someone else's actual or threatened death brings relief to the protagonist, as well as acceptance of his own mortality. In Herzog the trial of the child-murderer sends Herzog off in a tailspin to reassure himself that June is not in mortal danger. The voyeur scene reassures him that she is well and, with pistol in hand, he wields the power of life or death over Gersbach. Once he realizes that he has overreacted, he puts away his gun and his death wish for Gersbach. After this experience he feels better. Like the death of Dahfu in Henderson the Rain King and the funeral scene in Seize the Day, this scene acts as a catharsis for the protagonist. It both cleanses him and allows him to recognize his own mortality by placing someone else's life in danger; hence he can now go on living.
In his house in Ludewyville, Herzog has found peace, but only in solitude. He strikes a Whitmanesque or Thoreauvian note, but the tune of his life is not without discord. As a contemporary hero he has not been able to reconcile himself with society, but he has reconciled himself to the ambiguous nature of life and to his own ambivalent nature. Ambivalence characterizes his approach because although he seeks communion, the state of brotherhood sought by all of Bellow's heroes, he has not returned to the teeming city, but squirreled himself away in the country. His ambivalent feelings toward Ramona remain, and he is not ready for commitment. He takes the initiative in inviting her for dinner, but is relieved that she will not be staying. That he has, however, completed his course of self-therapy is made clear in his encounter with his brother Will. Herzog refuses Will's offer of a hospital rest. In answer to Will's question of whether he is leaving Herzog in good hands with Ramona, Herzog replies that he is not being left in anyone's hands, that he will stand on his own. This is a far cry from his earlier wish to be sent to the hospital as an escape from his burdens. At last he is on his own, free of others' influence, even the well-meaning suggestions of a solicitous brother. His education is complete and he can lie down on the couch, with no messages for anyone.

This novel has received enormous critical attention. It has been interpreted variously as a Freudian exploration of sexual guilt, an exploration of the psychology of the schlemiel, a nineteenth-century meditative romantic lyric, and as Bellow's most Jewish novel. Many critics have lauded the novel for its brilliant creation of Herzog as a center of consciousness, while others have criticized Bellow for
"muddying" the distance between himself and Herzog. Leslie Fiedler even claims that Valentine Gersbach, not Herzog, is "the most vital and believable human being created in the book." The novel, and Bellow's vision as expressed through Herzog, stand on the weight of Herzog as a sympathetic character, a contemporary Everyman. Several factors contribute to the success of his characterization: the close voice proximity but also the narrator's exposure of Herzog's comic flaws; Herzog's wit as well as the narrator's ironic tone; and the perspective of the other characters, which helps the reader to see round Herzog as well as through his eyes. When we look around the novel what we glimpse is the struggle, sought by all of Bellow's protagonists, to resolve conflicts within the self and to confirm that existence is indeed "worth-ful." Herzog succeeds by re-experiencing his past, chewing it over until he digests its significance, and spewing it out. His mind emptied, he can find peace in solitude. But what will happen once he must return to the world? The novel ends ambiguously because we cannot see round that corner of Bellow's vision. Like Dangling Man, Augie March, and Seize the Day, Herzog ends without real resolution. Herzog, like Joseph, Augie, and Tommy Wilhelm, has gained self-knowledge, but it is unclear whether that self-knowledge will enable him to succeed in his interactions in society. And the inability of the hero to effect even a momentary transcendent vision here (as he does in earlier Bellow novels), leaves a clue to the desperate grasping at outlandish transcendent visions in Humboldt's Gift. Seeds of the bitter vision and acerbic humor of this novel have been sown in Herzog (see pp. 159, 160, and 162 of this chapter). In Humboldt's Gift they come to wild and bizarre flower.
FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER SIX


7. Ibid., p. 16.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., pp. 16-17.


18. Ibid., p. 199.


21 Ibid., p. 113.

22 Ibid., p. 132.

23 For these respective interpretations, see Clayton, Saul Bellow, esp. p. 213; Wisse, "The Schlemiel as Liberal Humanist," p. 93; Allan Chavkin, "Bellow's Alternative to the Wasteland: Romantic Theme and Form in Herzog," Studies in the Novel (Denton, Texas: Fall 1979), 11:329; Alter, After the Tradition, p. 56.


CHAPTER SEVEN

"All He Wanted Was to Live Forever":
Charlie Citrine in *Humboldt's Gift*

If we describe *Herzog* as a novel in which the psyche of the protagonist has fractured and needs to be reknit, then we can best describe *Humboldt's Gift* as a novel in which the writer's vision of life has fractured into a panoply of irreconcilable elements. A host of distractions and characters produces this fractured vision. The protagonist, caught in the web woven by these characters and circumstances, has less control over what happens to him than any Bellow character since Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day*. He squirms, he evades, he reaches for far-flung lifesavers, but he flounders, storm-tossed, in what Bellow sees as the treacherous sea of the contemporary world.

Where *Herzog* strives for and succeeds in attaining an improved relationship between self and world, Charlie Citrine grasps at straws and embraces outlandish theories in an attempt to knit the fracture he has experienced between self and the contemporary world of distractions and destructive influences. What he needs is to "cancel out the world's distraction...and become fit to hear the essence of things." Among these distractions is the preoccupation with material rewards and public acclaim that can sidetrack the successful artist. A noted playwright, Charlie needs to cope with the world of commercial success while not sacrificing artistic integrity. He suffers not only from success but from the demands made on him by those who would help
themselves to his money—his ex-wife, lawyers, a business partner. He also suffers from guilt for not helping his mentor, Von Humboldt Fleisher, in Humboldt's dying days. During the course of the novel's action his task is to come to terms with his guilt, to bury his past, and to go forward in forgiveness and love. To do this he, like Bellow's earlier protagonists, must experience catharsis.

Today, however, Bellow indicates that it is harder to complete this rite of passage. The panoply of distractions and the chaos of contemporary society result in loss of individual identity. As in his earlier novels, Bellow laments the loss of identity in the contemporary world, an identity conferred by a more stable, traditional society in earlier centuries. Charlie tells the reader: "In the past the self had garments, the garments of station, of nobility or inferiority, and each self had its carriage, its looks, wore the sheath appropriate to it. Now there were no sheaths and it was naked self with naked self burning intolerably and causing terror" (213).

Like Augie March, Mr. Sammler's Planet, and The Dean's December, Humboldt's Gift is grounded in the unstable world of contemporary history. The tumultuous political events and world players of the 1960s and early '70s, strewn across the landscape of the novel, serve as backdrop to the action at the forefront. The fast pace of city life, the wheeler dealers, the emphasis on conspicuous consumption, the latest fads, the switch from the Kennedyesque ideals of the 1960s to the "me" generation of the 1970s—all these Bellow captures as background to his exploration of the comic travails of his latest schleimiel, Charlie Citrine. As early as 1963 Bellow voiced the fear
that the press of public affairs had reduced the individual to miniscule size. In his essay "Some Notes on Recent American Fiction," he prefigures a concern later developed in Humboldt's Gift: "The power of public life has become so vast that private life cannot maintain a pretence of its importance."²

Buffeted by forces too great to control, contemporary man has also, in Bellow's view, become the victim of the technological explosion, that vast, swiftly spreading network which is rapidly delimiting the "human" nature of the individual to an entry on a computer list and diminishing the importance of art and culture as determinants in our lives. In "Literature in the Age of Technology," Bellow claims that this process began as early as the nineteenth century: "Wordsworth was alarmed by the increase of distractions. The world was too much with us. The clatter of machinery, business, the roar of revolution would damage the inmost part of the mind and make poetry impossible."³ It is this world, with its schizophrenic incompatibility between the multiplicity of distractions bombarding the individual and the loss of the individual's control over his own destiny, that Bellow sees as increasingly absurd. This absurdity and schizophrenia he personifies in Von Humboldt Fleisher, the character who serves as linchpin of the novel.

Suffering from paranoid delusions and manic-depression, caught in a world that no longer honors the artist, Humboldt, the poet of "failed ideas," succumbs, unable to compromise those ideas with a society in which technological giants have stripped the artist of his influence and power. In this novel Bellow mourns the devaluation of the artist in America. With bitter sarcasm, he asserts that
America is proud of its dead poets. It takes terrific satisfaction in the poets' testimony that the USA is too tough, too big, too much, too rugged, that American reality is overpowering. And to be a poet is a school thing, a skirt thing, a church thing. The weakness of the spiritual powers is proved in the childishness, madness, drunkenness, and despair of these martyrs. Orpheus moved stones and trees. But a poet can't perform a hysterectomy or send a vehicle out of the solar system. Miracle and power no longer belong to him. Poets are loved because they just can't make it here.

(113-14)

Humboldt becomes lost. His creativity "punctured and torn by American flak" (232), "He threw himself into weakness and became a hero of wretchedness. He consented to the monopoly of power and interest held by money, politics, law, rationality, technology because he couldn't find the next thing, the necessary thing for poets to do" (150). He becomes mad, dousing his frustration in drink to put out the fire inside, for only in madness can he cancel out the world's distractions. Alone, reduced to a penury existence in a New York fleabag hotel, he drinks himself to death by heart attack while taking out the garbage.

In a 1975 interview, Bellow states that the suicidal artist is a romantic image:

Some artists accept the challenge of philistinism in a peculiarly literal way in that they feel that it's incumbent upon the poet to be a sort of martyr, that he must be the wild, heedless and free person who throws his life away: by drive, by narcotics, by recklessness. It is something of a romantic image by now, I think. This doesn't mean that the agonies are not real, I think they are, I know they are, but once the mind is fixed in this particular mold of antagonism, there's hardly any way to get out of it.4
Bellows warning is lost on the fictional Humboldt. The young Citrine, Humboldt's protege, idolizes the flamboyant poet, but later, when Humboldt has drunk his life away, Citrine realizes that he had better not cross that invisible line between artistic commitment and romantic folly. With Humboldt as mentor, and most important, as example of the destruction awaiting him as he too falls victim not only to the pitfalls of commercial success, but to the cannibalism of those who would take advantage of his financial success, and to his own inability to find the quiet center from which artistic endeavor springs, Charlie Citrine stretches farther and farther afield for a metaphysical vision he can grab hold of to see him through.

Who is Charlie Citrine? A middle-aged man staving off acceptance of his mortality by a rigorous physical fitness regimen and an affair with a younger woman (in his words, "an old troubled lecher...taking a gold-digging floozy to Europe to show her a good time" [184]). A noted historian awarded the honor of chevalier (Knight of the Legion of Honor) by the French government ("As a Chicagoan I scoffed inwardly at these phony foreign honors. I was the Shoveleer, burning with self-ridicule" [273]). A celebrated writer who finds that the rewards of success are not quite what he envisioned ("I experienced the high voltage of publicity. It was like picking up a dangerous wire fatal to ordinary folk. It was like the rattlesnakes handled by hillbillies in a state of religious exaltation" [157]). A man ridden with guilt over his avoidance of his old friend Humboldt in the poet's dying days ("I should have approached and spoken to him. I should have drawn near, not taken cover behind parked cars. But how could I? I had had my breakfast
in the Edwardian Room of the Plaza, served by rip-off footmen. Then I had flown with Javits and Bobby Kennedy" [51]). A self-pitying "innocent" victim of a host of money-grubbing cannibals—foremost among them his ex-wife—all after the last vestiges of his money ("And hadn't I tried in my own confused way to bring some good into the world? Yes...now that I was aging, weakening, disheartened, doubting my endurance and even my sanity, they wanted to harness me to an even heavier load for the last decade or so" [224]). A man so desperate for reconciliation with himself and with his world that he mistakes both these needs for the longing for a metaphysical vision that will relieve him of the tough confrontations he must make ("And when, I wondered, would I rise at last above all this stuff, the accidental, the merely phenomenal, the wastefully and randomly human, and be fit to enter higher worlds?" [281]).

As he tells us himself, Charlie Citrine is crumbling from within while being pummeled from without. Like his mentor Von Humboldt Fleisher, he gained critical fame early, basked in the aura of his celebrity, and fell prey to the distractions of commercial success. In abandoning himself to a life of globe-trotting, luxury cars, expensive women, and friends with an endless supply of hare-brained schemes for investing his money, Charlie has lost the quietude necessary for retaining the purity of his work. At the heart of this novel is what Humboldt calls "the contradiction between the painted veil [art] and the big money" (2). Both Charlie and Humboldt suffer from a case of attraction/repulsion toward money and fame. Choking on his monetary success, Charlie laments that America, the land where materialism
occupies the only kingly throne, poses a "harsh trial to the human
spirit" (370). Life here emphasizes material goods and shrinks
spiritual investments. Poets, who must free themselves of material
tenterhooks if they are to dream, find that "dreaming in America is no
cinch" (301):

The world had money, science, war, politics,
anxiety, sickness, perplexity. It had all the
voltage. Once you had picked up the high-voltage
wire and were someone, a known name, you couldn't
release yourself from the electrical current. You
were transfixed. . . . The world has power, and
interest follows power. Where are the poets' power
and interest? They originate in dream states. These
come because the poet is what he is in himself,
because a voice sounds in his soul which has power
equal to the power of societies, states, and
regimes. You don't make yourself interesting
through madness, eccentricity, or anything of the
sort, but because you have the power to cancel out
the world's distraction, activity, noise, and
become fit to hear the essence of things.

(301)

To "cancel out the world's distraction" in order to hear once again
"the essence of things" is one of Charlie's sharpest needs. But he
finds that art cannot be extracted from the fractured American scene as
easily as it could in earlier eras. "The agony is too deep, the
disorder too big for art enterprises undertaken in the old way," he
complains. He notes that unlike the eighteenth century, when the world
shared a more stable, cohesive vision and set of values, and artists
such as Haydn and Mozart could nourish and bolster each other, today
the artistic world mimics the commercial dog-eat-dog world. Instead of
encouraging Charlie, Humboldt is jealous of his success.
The contemporary world, as we have seen in Bellow's earlier novels, has all but obliterated the values of the past which Bellow espouses. As in *Augie March*, where the family unit is decimated and characters compromise their integrity for monetary success, and *Herzog*, where the wrecker's ball destroys old neighborhoods to make way for skyscrapers, so in *Humboldt's Gift* all that is left of the old way of life in Chicago are the Russian baths, now decaying. The baths represent a simpler time, of immigrants who draped round themselves the remnants of a culture and a moral order now all but lost. All around this crumbling landmark, Charlie's childhood neighborhood is in the process of destruction. Where cultural landmarks that cemented a neighborhood had once stood, gaping holes now wait for foundations to be poured for new, anonymous buildings. "The ruins of time had been bulldozed," Charlie notes, "scraped, loaded in trucks, and dumped as fill" (72). Charlie's heart aches at the destruction of his past. In counterpoint, from the depths of the Russian baths he is shepherded by Rinaldo Cantabile, a farcical caricature of a gangster, to the top of the Playboy Club, a new cultural landmark, all glitter without substance, which is representative of the contemporary shallow nature of American culture.

Charlie likens the loss of his childhood world and the values it represents to a Wordsworthian loss of "home-world." For Charlie it is an emigrant Jewish loss of a sense of place and culture from whose secure boundaries he could spread his imaginative wings as a creative artist. Both Charlie and Humboldt mourn the loss of this world. Humboldt expresses for both of them the Romantic notion of "the perennial human feeling that there was an original world, a home-world,
which was lost" (23). But the crass material world interferes with both his and Charlie's attempts "to get the enchantment back" (124). In describing Humboldt's dilemma, Charlie wittily puts his finger on his own problem: "Humboldt wanted to drape the world in radiance, but he didn't have enough material" (103).

This seemingly insoluble problem of the artist in the contemporary world is the key issue Charlie confronts in the personal reminiscence that structures Humboldt's Gift. As noted before, "American reality is overpowering" to the poet. One of Charlie's major tasks in his process of self-education is to come to terms with this implacable fact; to learn to cancel out the world's distractions in order to hear once again "the essence of things." Reconciliation with contemporary society is no longer possible, Bellow has made clear in his earlier novels. Here he pounds this point home. The world is too much with him to allow Charlie to retreat to a resolution of pastoral idyl as Herzog does. What course, then, does Charlie have? As Bradbury points out, Charlie inherits not only Humboldt's script, but the new version of Humboldt's task—to find the modern form of art. As Bellow's spokesman, Charlie expresses the artist's dilemma: "There's the most extraordinary, unheard-of poetry buried in America, but none of the conventional means known to culture can even begin to extract it" (461). Bellow, searching for a new form of art, finds it, as Bradbury correctly points out, in late modern comedy.5

Because the artist's vision has been fractured by the world's incessant distractions, Bellow feels that the artist must turn to comedy to express the absurdity he sees and experiences. As Clayton
notes, the struggle in Humboldt's Gift between the inner world and the world of distraction necessitates the use of "parody, burlesque, and farce." What Bellow shows us through the brilliant "tour de farce" of his novel is that the artist's dilemma must be seen in comic light for the artist to survive. In the end, only Charlie, who can turn his troubles into fodder for his comic imagination—not Humboldt the dedicated romantic—survives the modern comedy of life. Of course, Bellow, the master magician of the comedy of counterpoint and verbal tricks, survives too.

Through his use of comedy by deflation, parody, and farce, Bellow creates a gem that sparkles through many counterpointed facets. This technique of point-counterpoint structures both the vision and the pattern of the novel. Each vision is undercut by juxtaposition with another vision which renders it absurd. There are no sacred cows in Humboldt's Gift. Every reality instructor is contradicted by someone else. Every theory is carried to absurdity. Every romantic notion is punctured by gritty reality. In Herzog Bellow uses comedy to reaffirm his tentatively optimistic view of life. But in Humboldt's Gift his vision has altered. Like the image in a funhouse mirror, the serious concerns have been distorted by reflection in the glass; this reflection reveals an underlying comic absurdity.

The absurdity of this vision reflects what Bellow sees as the fracture of contemporary life. The format of the novel mirrors this fracture. There are no chapter breaks, as in a conventional novel, merely typographical designs to separate episodes in this extended meditation. Although a first-person narrative like Augie March and
Henderson the Rain King, Humboldt's Gift digresses more frequently, mirroring the world of distraction imposed on its narrator. Schechner claims that major sections of the novel read like Herzog's letters gone awry, yet an examination of the novel's pattern reveals a carefully crafted arrangement of counterpointed events and experiences designed to deflate previous Bellow sacred cows even while it serves to educate the protagonist to his own failures of vision. As in Herzog, the two time levels of the novel—present narrative time and elegy—interweave.

As in Herzog, Bellow mocks the protagonist's effort to effect a transcendent experience. Charlie, desperate for metaphysical vision, turns to anthroposophy, a theory which takes a Whitmanesque poetic vision to an exaggerated conclusion. According to this theory, the soul escapes to its own element during sleep, and there mingle with the angels. While mulling over this theory, which, he has convinced himself, has validity, Charlie is on his way with Cantabile to play, unwittingly, the role of a contract killer. This ludicrous juxtaposition undercuts the validity of Charlie's philosophical rambling. Charlie's lady friend, Renata, a prime reality instructor in the novel, also makes mincement of Charlie's interest in anthroposophy. Shrewd, clever, and most practical when it comes to her own welfare, Renata has no use for metaphysics and offers her own corrective view: "When you talk to me about this I feel we're both going bonkers: knowledge that doesn't need a brain, hearing without real ears, sight without eyes, the dead are with us, the soul leaves the body when we sleep. Do you believe all this stuff?" (338). And where Augie and Henderson experienced a momentary transcendent oneness with the
universe, Charlie can only fabricate such a vision through an alcoholically induced haze while on board an airplane.

Bellow mocks Charlie's efforts to effect consciously a metaphysical vision. Transcendence cannot be willed, nor can it be accomplished by frenzied strife, Charlie comes to realize. He mocks his own desire for metaphysical vision:

I had been practicing some meditative exercises recommended by Rudolf Steiner in Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and Its Attainment. As yet I hadn't attained much, but then my soul was well along in years and very much stained and banged up, and I had to be patient. Characteristically, I had been trying too hard, and I remembered again that wonderful piece of advice given by a French thinker: Trouve avant de chercher—Valery, it was. Or maybe Picasso. There are times when the most practical thing is to lie down.

"Finding before seeking" is the paradox Charlie cannot resolve until he realizes that love and forgiveness are the keys. And lying down, without imposing mental efforts on the self, can effect a transcendent experience, the crossing of the axial lines to Augie and an end of mental strife to Herzog. But the world is too much with Charlie—he cannot free himself from its clutches long enough to "rise into higher consciousness" (106).

In this novel Bellow also deliberately distorts other concerns which he has treated seriously in earlier novels. The love relationship between Herzog and Ramona turns to farce in Humboldt's Gift. Charlie feels not love for Renata but lust, accompanied by guilt. Renata puts up with Charlie's idiosyncrasies only for as long as he is a wealthy celebrity, then dumps him for an undertaker who offers marriage and
better monetary security. Eroticism is debunked as well: Renata passes out drunk on her first date with Charlie, before he can make love to her, and later, bored with his business talk while lunching with him at the Palm Court in New York's Plaza Hotel, she masturbates with his toe and walks off with his shoe.

Even the subject of death, always a serious matter of concern to Bellow, falls to farcical treatment. Although fear of death is one of Charlie's psychological fixations, Bellow undercuts what would ordinarily be a serious treatment of the subject. Cohen aptly calls Charlie "one of Bellow's graveyard school of comics...comically obsessed with death, both dreading and anticipating it." In contrast to Charlie's fear of death and agonized doubts over the immortality of his soul, Renata finds that the practical aspects of death provide a business for the living. Her two marriages to undertakers attest to her practical outlook: "I think that when you're dead you're dead, and that's that. And this is what Flonzaley stands for. Dead is dead, and the man's trade is with stiffis, and I'm his wife now" (417). In other comic touches, Charlie himself undercuts his own wish for his soul's immortality by citing the position of the father of his old friend George Sweibel: "He was a simple modest person, George's father. All he wanted was to live forever" (187-88).

Art turns to farce as well in the story Humboldt bequeathes to Charlie. Based on Charlie's life, this story tells of a writer who takes a vacation trip to an exotic island with his mistress. He writes a passionate book about this experience, but, afraid that his wife will realize that the book is based on truth, he repeats the trip with her.
In the story the wife does indeed find out about her husband's deception, and although he gains fame from his work, he loses all personally. Here the artist is treated deprecatingly, as a joke, a farcical martyr. This story, along with the scenario Humboldt wrote with Charlie about Caldogrezzo, the explorer who resorted to cannibalism in order to survive, turns to farce the concerns of the serious writer, for ironically it is not Humboldt's serious poetry for which the world memorializes him but his frivolous capers.

Because Bellow undercuts every serious concern he serves up, the reader may wonder whether to take seriously the self-education of the hero in this novel. But despite Bellow's vision of life as fractured, he presents us with a character with very real problems and shortcomings with which he needs to deal in order to live with himself and navigate his fractured world. Charlie Citrine suffers—as Joseph, Asa Leventhal, Augie March, Tommy Wilhelm, Eugene Henderson, and Moses Herzog suffered—from insufficient self-knowledge and inability to resolve personal and social conflicts.

What does Charlie need to experience and to learn? Opdahl observes that, like Herzog, Charlie needs catharsis, that his meditation on Humboldt serves the same purpose—to provide catharsis—as Herzog's reminiscence. Bradbury describes Charlie's dilemma in terms of contracts that need to be paid off—contracts with Renata, with con-men, in the divorce court, emotional contracts with the past and with the dead. Surely one of Charlie's greatest needs is to come to terms with the guilt he feels over Humboldt's death. He needs to bury this burden from the past in order to face the future without
emotional baggage. His sustained meditation on Humboldt expresses his concern. Even as he is jolted by the distractions of current calamities in his life, he maintains a dialogue with himself about Humboldt. He knows that he needs to forgive himself for his failure to aid Humboldt, and that he must understand why Humboldt failed so that he can avoid that failure himself. He tells us, "I meant to interpret the good and evil of Humboldt, understand his ruin, translate the sadness of his life, find out why such gifts produced negligible results..." (358). Because Humboldt, the pure poet, could not survive the destructive influences of modern life, Charlie must also learn to cope with these distractions in his own life—his ex-wife, the comic gangster Rinaldo Cantabile, the host of hangers-on who are out to part him from his last dollar, and a diverse cast of reality instructors who offer him advice on every intimate detail of his life.

Each reality instructor has an act, an image he or she tries to project, or a singleminded controlling preoccupation. These characters help to create the world of distractions from which Charlie tries desperately to dislodge himself. As Clayton claims, the reality instructors teach Charlie how to survive: "Reality teachers...try to make their materialistic reality his, to save him from solitude, from his innocence, make sure he's got a bagman, a Swiss bank account, a beautiful woman, a piece of the action."11 From some of them Charlie learns by example how not to live his life, while from others he gains valuable insight into his own character. He says of them, "Everyone is forever telling me what my faults are, while I stand with great hungry eyes, believing and resenting all" (247).
In the first category we find Humboldt, Charlie's girlfriend Demmie Vonghel (now deceased), and his literary friend Thaxter. Humboldt tries to make the world fit his personal vision. He sees himself as breaking out of the control of history and changing its course. He wants to become a "great" Humboldt (6). This inflated self-image does not allow him to accommodate to the vicissitudes of reality. As Schlossberg would claim, Humboldt tries to be more than human, and so fails to be human. Like Nachman and his wife Laura in Herzog, whose attempts to live in the world of pure art and romantic ideals fail, Humboldt rejects the imperfect world in which he lives. He insists on investing words with ideal meaning and romantic connotations—"Poetry, Beauty, Love" (6)—but his "high dreaming states [were] always being punctured and torn by American flak" (232). Like Nachman, he reads visionary writers (Yeats and Hegel). Chavkin's assessment of Nachman also applies to Humboldt: "Nachman's naive absorption in these visionary artists reveals his potential for self-destruction."12 Unable to impose his personal visions on his fractured world, Humboldt swings between mania and depression. Only in his manic state, or in alcohol-induced oblivion, can he cancel out the world's distractions. Although Charlie begins to take on Humboldt's coloration as he searches farther and farther afield for meaning in his life, he learns from Humboldt the dangers of an extremist position.

From Demmie Vonghel Charlie learns the same lesson, that inability to accommodate to the world can lead to self-destruction. Demmie is the most extreme example in the novel of someone who cannot cope with reality. Like Humboldt, she swings between manic and depressive, unable
to accept her own human nature. Rebell ing against her Fundamentalist father, she commits petty crimes, but suffers guilt over her actions. Hell-bent for escape from her conflicting impulses, she is terrified of "this strange place, the earth, and of this strange state, being. Laboring and groaning she tried to get out of it" (142). Afraid to sleep, she pops pills to try to block out the pain she feels. Self-destructive, she suffers self-induced accidents. And tempting fate once too often, she dies in a plane crash on a reckless mission.

Charlie learns from her misdirected life that he must learn to live with himself, warts and all.

With the parasitic Thaxter, Charlie sees the other side of the coin, a man with no principles who uses art and friends to feed his ego as well as to flesh out his pocketbook. Among those victims who are out to pick the pocket of the well-meaning Charlie, Thaxter sugarcoats his entreaties in fairytale schemes and promises which Charlie chooses to believe. It is ironic that their major proposed collaboration, a literary periodical to be called The Ark and to be financed by Charlie, will not be the salvage vessel of literature or culture because it never gets underway. Although Charlie chooses to stand by his friend—even offers to put up $25,000 ransom money to rescue Thaxter from South American kidnappers—he learns that Thaxter does not reciprocate his concern. When Charlie is arrested on false charges, Thaxter refuses to get involved. Thaxter has abandoned Charlie as Charlie abandoned Humboldt, a lesson not lost on Charlie.
Rinaldo Cantabile, one of Bellow's most hilarious characterizations, represents a human form of urban blight. Because Charlie has dented his pride, Cantabile smashes his Mercedes and drags him around Chicago, creating a series of ever more ridiculous scenes to humiliate him. From Cantabile Charlie learns how ludicrous it is to pursue a glorified persona. Vain himself, Cantabile ridicules Charlie's vanity. He does not hesitate to condemn Charlie's entire approach to life: "You put your back up in the wrong place and you're passive in the wrong place. You've got everything arsy-versy," he tells him (442). Bellow means for us to laugh at this gangster's vulnerability as well as his egotism, for even this tough character is touched by nerves and has to retreat, with Charlie as prisoner, into a bathroom stall for immediate relief of loose bowels.

Although Charlie learns from the negative examples of Humboldt, Demmie, Thaxter, and Cantabile, he gains his greatest insight from those who offer him direct advice. A host of reality instructors offer him advice on everything from financial investments to personal relationships. They feel he is not able to take care of himself and want to protect him from himself as well as from those who are out to do him harm. Like his friend Szathmar they worry: "How do I save Charlie now; how do I protect his dough; find him tax shelters; get him the best legal defense; fix him up with good women" (201).

Charlie must sift through the advice of these reality instructors to separate the wheat from the chaff. As noted earlier, Bellow throws an additional monkeywrench into Charlie's dilemma by playing one reality instructor against another. In addition to reflecting the
fractured vision of this novel, this technique results in hilarious parody and farce. For example, Renata, who has her feet on the ground, makes fun of Charlie's metaphysical preoccupations. Live, she urges, don't reflect. Her practical test for any idea is whether it increases or decreases erotic satisfaction. "To air is human," she puns, "to bare it divine" (365). She sees through Thaxter's well-polished efforts to relieve Charlie of his money: "First he swindles you, then he fills you with garbage explanations which you go around repeating. . . . Who needs this Ark of yours, Charlie, and who are these animals you're gonna save?" (238, 240).

Renata, in turn, is undercut by Charlie's friend George Sweibel and by Julius, Charlie's brother, who want Charlie to see that she is only after his money. This he does not fully admit to himself until he learns that she has married Flonzaley. Julius, whose fiscal advice Charlie finds sound, plays the role of a steadying influence in his brother's life. He recommends that Charlie put some money away in a Swiss account so that his ex-wife Denise, who is suing him, cannot get all his assets. Julius sees through Denise, who, he feels, would "fit in with the Symbionese or the Palestine Liberation terrorists" (370). Yet for all his savvy in the materialistic world, Julius longs for escape and asks Charlie to bring him from Europe a painting or a seascape with no rocks, boats, or people—only the vacant sea.

Denise, whom Julius as well as Charlie paint as a ferocious, sharp-toothed beast, becomes the object of Bellow's farce by comparison with the Senora, Renata's calculating mother. The Senora has brought a paternity suit for damages and child support against the man she thinks
is Renata's father. Charlie's comment, "Child support? You're almost thirty" (390), points up the ludicrous nature of the Senora's blatant attempt to milk the unsuspecting man of his money. By association this turns to farce Denise's own suit against Charlie to strip him of his present and future assets. Yet Denise offers one of the most telling perspectives on his character that Charlie receives from any reality instructor. She tells him, "When you're solemn you're a riot, Charlie. And now you're going in for mysticism, as well as keeping that fat broad, as well as becoming an athlete, as well as dressing like a dude—all symptoms of mental and physical decline" (218).

From the other major female character in the novel, Naomi Lutz, Charlie also acquires an opinion of his metaphysical preoccupations—Naomi rejects his reincarnation theory as adolescent. She also tries to make him feel guilty for "abandoning" his daughters to run off with Renata.

As in Herzog, letters figure prominently, but not as persuasively, in the protagonist's education. Both Humboldt and Renata write him letters which offer him insight and valuable truths about himself. However, in keeping with Bellow's effort to deny credence to any one theory, he plays these letters and their opposing pieces of advice against each other. This has a cancellation effect. Humboldt's letter, which contains a posthumous gift of the scenario that both mocks Charlie and brings him sorely needed revenue, offers Charlie keen advice and absolves him from guilt. In closing, Humboldt writes, "In part you are humanly okay. We are supposed to do something for our kind. Don't get frenzied about money. Overcome your greed. Better luck
with women. Last of all—remember: we are not natural beings but supernatural ones" (336). If we examine this statement sentence by sentence we see that (1) Humboldt accepts Charlie's faults, which Charlie must learn to do as well; (2) the human contract insists that we take responsibility for our fellow man (a key Bellovian creed); (3) and (4) money is a distracting influence on the artist; (5) Humboldt sympathizes with Charlie's troubles over his choices of the women in his life; (6) Humboldt confirms Charlie's desire to believe in life after death. This letter re-cements Charlie's relationship with Humboldt and helps to free him from the baggage of guilt that he has been shouldering.

Renata's letter, which, unlike Humboldt's, seeks to sever rather than to reaffirm a relationship, takes an opposing stance. Grounded in reality, Renata advocates living the human condition, not studying it:

As a beautiful woman and still young, I prefer to take things as billions of people have done throughout history. You work, you get bread, you lose a leg, kiss some fellows, have a baby, you live to be eighty and bug hell out of everybody, or you get hung or drowned. But you don't spend years trying to dope your way out of the human condition. To me that's boring.

(416)

Self-oriented rather than altruistic, she seeks a life cushioned by materialistic comforts. She rejects the role into which she has been cast by Charlie—"the palooka role. . .your marvelous sex-clown" (414)—and for this will not forgive him. She rejects his "passion for Von Humboldt Fleisher [which] speeded the deterioration of our relationship" (418). Finally, she rejects his need for a metaphysical belief: "If you think you're on earth for such a very special purpose I
don't know why you cling to the idea of happiness with a woman or a happy family life. This is either dumb innocence or else the last word in kinkiness" (418).

By playing one reality instructor against another, Bellow insures that no one vision predominates. This reflects his intent, as described earlier, to paint accurately, although with humor, the contemporary world as he sees it. While Charlie copes with a bombardment of conflicting advice from the reality instructors in his life, the claims of the hangers-on, and the distractions of a materialistically oriented society, he must also recognize the folly of his own purely escapist actions. Somehow he must learn to tread the fine line between the poetically pure and the mundane, and as previous Bellow protagonists have learned, to accept the flawed nature of his world and of himself. He must lower his expectations. Early in the narrative he admits, "The gratification-threshold of my soul has risen too high. I must bring it down again. It was excessive. I must, I knew, change everything" (98). He must end his "romance with wealth" (462), but also his romantic posture as a manipulated victim. Most of all, he must reconcile himself to his own mortality. As he himself admits, he needs to understand the intimate relationship between life and death, and to recognize that "death is the dark backing that a mirror needs if we are to see anything" (253). But it is hard for him to come to terms with death because he has not come to terms with life.

He cannot accept the less than admirable aspects of his own character. At the beginning of his meditation, he tells us that "what I wanted was to do good" (2). His failure to aid Humboldt and his
reluctance to marry Renata make him feel guilty for not living up to his moral expectations. He translates this failure and his inability to reconcile himself to the violence-prone, materialistic, technological urban world he lives in into a need for a metaphysical vision that will supersede mortal concerns—including death. He refuses to accept his mortal nature. "I continued to carry on as if it weren't yet time to think of death," he tells us early in his meditation (137). Like Herzog, when he must come to grips with a painful experience, he tries to intellectualize it in order to keep it from touching him. "But these learned high-class exercises didn't take the death curse off for me," he admits (190). Desperate for confirmation of the soul's immortality so that he will not have to accept the inevitability of his own death, he grasps at far-flung theories like anthroposophy in an attempt to prove that there is life after death. Cohen makes the point that, unlike Henderson, he does not flee to Africa to grapple with this problem, nor, like Tommy Wilhelm, does he sob at the corpse of a stranger, nor, like Herzog, does he accept his own mortality. Instead he searches for a philosophy that offers an alternative to the finality of death. But even here Bellow undercutts Charlie's desperate lunge at metaphysics. After a prolonged treatise on Dr. Scheldt's philosophy of anthroposophy, Bellow takes some of the air out of this intellectual argument by offering the opinion of Doris, Dr. Scheldt's daughter, who describes her father as a "crank" (251).

As a historian, Charlie Citrine writes about people who are dead. This puts his subjects into perspective for him and gives him a measure of control over death. We can look at Charlie's meditation on Humboldt
as an attempt to put the dead poet into a perspective with which he can live. Charlie's narrative elegy is also a eulogy, given to accompany the physical activity of reburying Humboldt. It serves as a living memorial to Humboldt, because through the meditation preserved in the pages of this novel, Bellow restores Humboldt to eternal life for his protagonist and for his readers.¹⁴

Charlie wrestles hard with the problem of death. Although he finds moments of comic relief in this subject, especially when, to gain sympathy in Madrid, he and Renata's son put on mourning clothes, he searches for confirmation that death is not the end. He does not find it in the death-defying Houdini, who also, he proudly claims, came from Appleton, Wisconsin. Even Houdini, whose profession was to taunt and outwit death, could not do so. A punch to the stomach brings on peritonitis, which proves fatal. "So you see," Charlie laments, "nobody can overcome the final act of the material world" (422).

But like the earlier protagonists in Bellow's novels, Charlie finds that the death or near-death of someone close brings reprieve. His brother Julius's near-death reassures Charlie of his own distance from death. And Humboldt's letter gives credence to Charlie's belief in life after death. Received by Charlie years after his friend's death, the letter acts like a message from the grave. Clayton claims that Humboldt's letter and legacy are an act of reconciliation that removes the death curse from Charlie and offers him an intimation of immortality.¹⁵
Humboldt's gift—the scenario in the letter and another scenario co-authored by Humboldt and Citrine many years ago—restores Charlie to fiscal solvency. But more than this, the letter both absolves Charlie of guilt (so that he can now move on with his life), and extends love. According to David Dougherty, who has written an interesting essay on Henderson the Rain King and Humboldt's Gift, Humboldt's real gift is forgiveness and love. This is what Charlie needs to bear up under the pressures of mortality. Humboldt's message, then, is not of immortality but of human values. Dougherty concludes, "Human love is the liberating and energizing force Bellow's characters need to find in order to define their freedom from absurdity." Love enables the Bellow hero to survive the chaos of contemporary urban society. According to McConnell, both scripts turn on the struggle to survive and make moral sense out of survival. Humboldt's underlying message, then, affirms again Bellow's belief in humanism and in the value of the human contract, a concern voiced most strongly in Mr. Sammler's Planet, the novel immediately preceding Humboldt's Gift. Just as the closing scene of Humboldt's Gift bids farewell to the dead, so Mr. Sammler's Planet ends with a death and a prayer of mourning by a survivor, Artur Sammler, for his nephew Eyla Gruner. Like Humboldt, Gruner has fulfilled the terms of his human contract. He has done "what was required of him. . . . He was aware that he must meet, and he did meet—through all the confusion and degrading clowning of this life through which we are speeding—he did meet the terms of his contract. The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows."
By reburying Humboldt and splitting evenly the proceeds from the scenario with Humboldt's uncle Waldemar, Charlie has also fulfilled his human contract. By standing by his brother Julius during his illness, by finally—although too late—asking Renata to marry him, by caring for her son, and by extending himself, however foolishly, to his friend Thaxter, Charlie has met the terms of his human contract. His duty done and his guilts resolved, his imagination can now be freed. Thinking, the ultimate source of freedom in an increasingly mechanistic world, can now be freed for creative endeavor. Through the acts of the imagination Charlie, like the artist John-Pearl in Dangling Man, can escape the conditions in which he must live, create a new vision, and humanize contemporary life. By caring, Charlie, like Eugene Henderson, releases the power of the renovating imagination. As noted earlier in this thesis, Bellow sees the imagination as a redeeming force in the contemporary world. Charlie describes his own calling:

I had business on behalf of the entire human race—a responsibility not only to fulfill my own destiny but to carry on for certain failed friends like Von Humboldt Fleisher who had never been able to struggle through into higher wakefulness. My very fingertips rehearsed how they would work the keys of the trumpet, imagination's trumpet, when I got ready to blow it at last. The peals of that brass would be heard beyond the earth, out in space itself. When that Messiah, that savior faculty the imagination was roused, finally we could look again with open eyes upon the whole shining earth. 

(383)

Despite this call to the higher reaches of the imagination, the novel ends on an ambiguous note. Although it is on an early spring day that Uncle Waldemar and Charlie rebury Humboldt and his mother, Charlie does not sense rebirth. Waldemar spots a crocus peeking through
autumn's fallen leaves: "'What's this, Charlie,' he asks, "'a spring flower?' 'It is,'" Charlie replies. "'I guess it's going to happen after all. On a warm day like this everything looks ten times deader.'"

(471). Although the elements of pastoral elegy are present, as Cohen has noted—expression of grief, praise of the dead, statement of belief in immortality, and flowers as a sign of renewal—Charlie's recovery is, as Bradbury states, oblique. He has matured, become more self-accepting, and found relief from guilt, but he still has not resolved his fear of death. As Clayton points out, unlike earlier Bellow novels in which the hero learns to accept death as the terms of his existence, Humboldt's Gift moves toward the denial of death. In earlier Bellow novels redemption can be found in this world: "Always the world of love and goodness lifts up from, transcends the everyday world, and yet it is that world, transformed... In Humboldt's Gift, however, the yearning for transcendence is much more complete—a Platonic transcendence, stretching towards an unrealized, abstract world of light, rejecting this 'tragic earth.'"

The despair of accommodating to this world and the accompanying need to escape to a more Platonic, abstract environment is further explored in Bellow's next novel, The Dean's December. In this novel the protagonist takes an active role in trying to deal with contemporary social problems, and here too fails. What we see in 'ow's later work is a progressive despair in the ability of contemporary man to integrate self and world. Charlie, and Albert Corde in The Dean's December, find the obstacles of modern life tougher to cope with than do the protagonists in the earlier novels. The tone of Humboldt's Gift is more acerbic than that of Bellow's earlier comedies. Charlie is not
as hopeful as the larky Augie or the exuberant Henderson, nor does he find the tranquillity of Herzog. His despair, though personal, is also more social than the most despairing of Bellow's heroes, Tommy Wilhelm. That Humboldt's Gift is a comedy of absurdity attests to its author's premise that not much can be done about the condition of modern life. Although Bellow makes this absurd world comic as he does in Herzog, the comedy is tinged with bitterness.


3 Bellow, "Literature in the Age of Technology," p. 17.

4 Bellow, "Literature and Culture: An Interview with Saul Bellow," p. 20.

5 Bradbury, *Saul Bellow*, p. 91.


7 Schechner, "Down in the Mouth with Saul Bellow," p. 73.


10 Bradbury, *Saul Bellow*, p. 86.


12 Chavkin, "Romantic Theme and Form in Herzog," p. 332.


14 A number of critics have ventured the opinion that the character of Von Humboldt Fleisher was based on Bellow's close friend Delmore Schwartz, a poet who died in similar circumstances. Cohen points out that three of Bellow's literary friends—Isaac Rosenfeld, John Berryman, and Delmore Schwartz—met with fates similar to Humboldt's, and she conjects that Bellow suffered survivor guilt over their deaths. See Cohen, *Saul Bellow's Enigmatic Laughter*, pp. 47-48.


17 McConnell, *Four Postwar American Novelists*, pg. 56.

19 Cohen, Saul Bellow's Enigmatic Laughter, p. 56; Bradbury, Saul Bellow, p. 91.

20 Clayton, Saul Bellow, p. 281.
CONCLUSION

In his novels Saul Bellow explores the nature of contemporary man and the difficulties he encounters in his effort to integrate self and world. Bellow states, "Undeniably the human being is not what he commonly thought a century ago. The question nevertheless remains. He is something. What is he?" In each Bellow novel the protagonist attempts to answer this question for himself. Each protagonist dealt with in this thesis experiences a rite of passage—from innocence or ignorance to self-knowledge, from inability to ability to cope with the urban world he inhabits. Like Augie March, the Bellow hero tries to resolve the paradox "I have always tried to become what I am" (The Adventures of Augie March 54). But his world places stresses on him that make the resolution of this paradox difficult. The political, economic, and technological upheavals of this century have created uncommon discord and stress in a society which, as delineated throughout this thesis, is already discordant and rife with contradiction.

Bellow's personal response to the case of the individual in the contemporary world can be charted by the swings in his work from depressive to expansive. In two early novels, Dangling Man and Seize the Day, the protagonists gain self-knowledge but not self-acceptance. Awash in self-pity, Joseph and Tommy Wilhelm do not find redemption, nor are they able to form communities with others that would aid them in dealing with the conditions of their lives. On the other hand, Bellow offers the reader visions of personal redemption. Asa
Leventhal's tribulations teach him to extend himself to others in a spirit of brotherhood. By facing up to his mistakes and taking responsibility for others, he learns to navigate his world successfully, and he looks forward to a bright future. Augie March and Eugene Henderson gain valuable self-knowledge that enables them to accept themselves and lead the way to a better integration of self and world. Herzog's picaresque journey of the mind leads him to self-acceptance but not to integration of self and world. In this novel we begin to see a wavering in Bellow's belief in the possibility of accommodation of self and world, for Herzog finds contentment only in the solitude of pastoral idyl. Humboldt's Gift centers on a protagonist who finds no redemption, either in this world or in belief in a metaphysical alternative. Charlie Citrine yearns for transcendence but his fractured universe impinges too much for him to succeed at this effort. He finds no escape or social resolution, but he does fulfill his human contract, despite the difficulties imposed on him, and so resolves his guilt.

Bellow's increasingly pessimistic view is expressed in his next novel, The Dean's December, where he appears overwhelmed by social and political issues. For the first time he puts these issues, rather than the protagonist, at the center of the novel. The moral point of this novel is not the development of the hero's ability to accept the limitations of self and history. Albert Corde is merely a vehicle for Bellow's direct moral indictment of what he finds wrong in contemporary Western civilization. As central consciousness Corde is not a fully fleshed character. For this reason The Dean's December is not included
in this thesis. As spokesman for Bellow's ideas, Corde seems transparent, without the substantive quirks and distinctive voice that bring Bellow's best characters to life. Corde seeks not a rite of passage but an indictment of Western corruption and decadence. The decay of the inner city, the appalling conditions in Illinois' Cook County jail, corruption in government institutions, and the danger of slanderous journalism—all are targets of his crusade. The novel castigates what Bellow sees as the worst aspects of contemporary life and institutions. As Bellow's spokesman, Corde condemns not only the decaying social and political institutions of the West but the moral decline that these represent: "It was not so much the inner city slum that threatened us as the slum of innermost being, of which the inner city was perhaps a material representation." He crusades for moral reform to retrieve "the noble ideas of the West" (124) now crumbled. These "noble ideas" are represented by the dying older generation of his wife's Rumanian family. The only vestiges of Western moral initiative are to be found in the outcasts of society—the black underclass, society's rejects. Corde fails at his task and is relieved of his academic appointment for his outspoken statements. In this novel Bellow offers no hope for resurrection of the Western moral value system. Because of its insistence on treatise and its failure to develop character, dramatic action, or the dynamics of his earlier reflective novels, The Dean's December develops into a polemic rather than a novel.
Bellow's other polemic, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, also presents a central character without dynamic consciousness. Artur Sammler has experienced the worst human atrocity in the history of Western civilization. He has literally risen from the ashes of the Holocaust and now, like the walking dead, wanders the streets of New York City. Appalled by the moral disintegration he sees not only in the disreputable characters he encounters on the street but in the solipsism and insensitivity of members of his own family, he tries to instill in them some semblance of commitment to the value system he cherishes. He does not seek an individual rite of passage—he has passed beyond that stage of his life. He has learned firsthand of the palpable evil human beings can inflict on each other, and in his declining years he acts as reality instructor to the younger generation. Like Schlossberg in *The Victim*, Sammler is detached, a stick figure spouting platitudes but never generating life as a character. For this reason *Mr. Sammler's Planet* was not included in this thesis. But it and *The Dean's December* raise questions about the nature of evil—personal, social, and political—that seem to be increasingly on the mind of the mature Bellow.

We see, then, a progression in Bellow's novels from hope to skepticism, from free-wheeling comedy to humor tinged with acerbity. The last three novels, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, *Humboldt's Gift*, and *The Dean's December*, express despair at shoring up the Western moral value system. The morally determined rite of passage may not lead to social integration as in the eighteenth- or nineteenth-century European novel, but in Bellow's earlier novels it led to acceptance of self and world
and optimism about the future. Artur Sammler, Charlie Citrine, and Albert Corde cannot reach the conclusion that life is "worth-ful."

Cynthia Ozick has claimed, "If the soul is the mind at its purest, best, clearest, busiest, profoundest, then Bellow's charge has been to restore the soul to American literature." Bellow still wants to believe in the individual's redemption. Two stories in his new collection, Him With His Foot in His Mouth, express this hope. Woody Selbst, in "The Silver Dish," honors his father despite the penalty he has had to pay because of his father's dishonesty. "Cousins" revolves around one man's attempt to meet his family obligations despite the unworthiness of some of those he tries to aid. But the evidence of the bulk of Bellow's work since the publication of Herzog leads us to ask again the question Bellow put to himself years ago: "Undeniably the human being is not what he commonly thought a century ago. The question nevertheless remains. He is something. What is he?" The answer Bellow offers today is not necessarily the one which he, as moral spokesman, would like to give.
FOOTNOTES: CONCLUSION

1 Saul Bellow, "Some Notes on Recent American Fiction," p. 69.


3 Saul Bellow, Mr. Sammler's Planet (1970; rpt. Fawcett, 1971).

4 Cynthia Ozick, rev. of Him With His Foot in His Mouth, by Saul Bellow, New York Times Book Review, 20 May 1984, p. 44.
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