Chapter 3

Contemporary ‘Head Culture’

“If you put a test before me I can get a high mark, but it’s only head culture,” says the hero of Humboldt’s Gift. Critics have repeatedly referred to Bellow as a consummate city novelist and Joyce Carol Oates describes Saul Bellow, as being “obsessed with the riddle of what it means to be an urban man in a secular, mass-market culture . . . without a coherent sense of history or tradition.” (Oates, Imaginary) He uses, as his subject matter, contemporary culture, and depicts contemporary America as he sees it, devouring and materialistic. He writes about society but it is not easy to extract social messages from his work, because his primary aim is to create literature. “Although Bellow may reject ‘social messages,’ the expression of the individual’s dispossession in society is central, though not entirely straightforward,” says Chris Vaughan. Frederick Glaysher believes that Bellow is the only American writer, along with Isaac Balshevis Singer, who addresses the problem of the modern soul.

In an interview with Jo Brans, Bellow testified “to his own troubling
experience of a rift in consciousness and to his resolve to overcome it.”

I’ve become aware of a conflict between the modern university education I received and those things that I really felt in my soul most deeply. I’ve trusted those more and more - You see, I’m not even supposed to have a soul… The soul is out of bounds if you have the sort of education I had [in anthropology, Marx, Russell, the logical positivists, Freud, Adler, and so on]....And I know how a modern man is supposed to think…”

Bellow was unhappy with excessive worldliness and complained that “there’s no room” for “the soul” in “the new mental world that we’ve constructed.” He feels like a prisoner in a world where we are not allowed to think and feel as we like, forget about doing what we want to do. He feels stifled and “as a writer whose business, and life, is to articulate what he knows, he must object to the public silencing of this ‘inner voice’ - to the repression of ‘some unacknowledged information that we have.’” (Pifer 4)

Gifted with a reflective mind and an introspective nature, Bellow never fails to see through the surface greatness of ideas, nor
does he hesitate to puncture theories and philosophies, even of the
greatest of thinkers and philosophers. An author with a tendency of
questioning everything under the sun, Bellow is never satisfied with
readymade answers and deals with questions of alienation, love and
death in almost all his novels. He expressed his dissatisfaction with
the scientific explanation of death, to Antonio Monda in an interview
saying that he does not know what happens after death “but I don’t
think everything is resolved with the destruction of the body. What
science has to say seems to me insufficient and unsatisfying.”

Bellow’s quest is not for the tangible, he is rather disgusted with
the material pursuits and physical strife of humans. He has read and
learnt a lot, but the knowledge he craves for is not found in books. He
prefers intuition to analysis and heart to head. That is why he is
unhappy with the contemporary head culture and its corollaries. All of
Bellow’s novels “exhibit, either subtly or as a major tenet, dualities
between the individual and American influence, control, and
intervention.”

Many of Bellow’s novels display an unambiguous objection, not
simply to the United States, but also to the gamut of
iconographical impressions that would ultimately constitute the
“multitude of false” impressions. Bellow has an affinity for the Conradian novel, and it is clear that Bellow’s contemporary intentions in literature are close to Conrad’s. According to Bellow, Conrad’s definition of art was the search for “what was fundamental, enduring, essential” in humanity (“The Nobel Lecture” 325). In the same speech Bellow says of the Conradian novel, “There are writers for whom the Conradian novel—all novels of that sort—are gone forever. Finished” (317). It is with these “impressions” that Bellow’s novels can be approached, from a standpoint of understanding his works in relation to the United States and his objections to it. From here the American Empire (1) can be defined as being that which renders Bellow’s characters often dwarfed, isolated, meditative, emotional, and always journeying through what Bellow describes as a “mental life,” or what is described by Charlie Citrine, the narrator of Humboldt’s Gift, as a “reflective purgatory” (325) in “the world of human diminution” (Bradbury 169). Anthony Burgess writes of Bellow’s resistance to explicitly social writing: “Bellow ... is primarily concerned with creating literature, and the extraction of social messages from his works is not easy” (146). Although Bellow may reject “social messages,” the expression of the
individual’s dispossession in society is central, though not entirely straightforward. (Vaughan, Images)

The self-destructive nature of contemporary culture forms an important theme in Bellow’s fiction. Joshua Zajdman, in his ‘Sammler’s Theater: Walking through Sammler’s New York City,’ observes:

Sometimes it takes a Holocaust survivor with limited sight to show you what the world really looks like. If you peek behind the scrim and scratch underneath the gilding of Saul Bellow’s novel, you’ll find Mr. Sammler’s New York City--a wide world unto itself. In his city of many facets, he is a man of many roles. He is foreigner, father, uncle, judge, intellectual, survivor, and maybe even prophet. To see and understand Sammler, it’s crucial to know that he is not a thinly veiled representation of Bellow’s feelings toward the turbulent sixties. Instead, he is a social observer gravely concerned with the state of the world around him. His story is one of struggle. Mr. Sammler decides “to get a grip on New York, America’s financial capital and the pinnacle of the nation’s culture” (Crouch viii). It’s no accident that commerce and culture are so closely related. This is a great
source of displeasure to Sammler. He is not pleased by the way “vulgarity and [the] brutal appetites of our culture” (Crouch vii) are widening their reach. For the entirety of the novel, the cacophonous “sour trumpeting of decay” (Crouch x) can be heard, and Sammler is the red-cheeked Gabriel. He is a keen and observing mind housed in a nerve-damaged body, which is in turn housed in a brutal, unyielding but oddly compelling city. (Zajdman)

Myron Magnet felt a “jolt of electricity” at Bellow’s “political incorrectness” in “Mr. Sammler’s Planet.” The book was prophetically true, says Magnet but “some thought it racist and reactionary; others feared it was true but too offensive for a decent person to say.” (Magnet) The book depicts a septuagenarian Holocaust survivor, Mr. Sammler’s “invasion and violation in public and in broad daylight.” Magnet says, “it’s the ultimate satire: the state that promises you the security of an old-age pension can’t even provide you the security to keep it—the primary purpose of a state.” New Yorkers in the nineteen sixties and the elite generally were blinded by the “romance of the outlaw” that “focused primarily on blacks, whose status as social victims and outcasts transformed their criminal acts (ex officio, so to
speak) into manly, quasi-heroic revolts against oppression, however inchoate.” (Magnet)

Sammler’s niece, Sarah Lawrence, regularly sends money to “defense funds for black murderers and rapists” and her uncle obviously, “has no patience with this attitude.” A crime cannot be defended by saying that it has been “committed by a victim.” Sammler, moreover, complains that the Americans wanted “the privileges, and the free ways of barbarism, under the protection of civilized order, property rights, refined technological organization, and so on,” two things exclusive of each other. Bellow’s shift towards transcendentalism is quite evident in his later works.

From page one of Mr. Sammler’s Planet, Bellow himself insists that, beyond the explanations we construct through Enlightenment reason, the soul has “its own natural knowledge.” We all have “a sense of the mystic potency of humankind” and “an inclination to believe in archetypes of goodness. A desire for virtue was no accident.” We all know that we must try “to live with a civil heart. With disinterested charity.” We must live a life “conditioned by other human beings.” We must try to meet the terms of the contract life sets
us, as Sammler says in the astonishing affirmation with which Bellow ends his book. “The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows. . . . As all know. For that is the truth of it—that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know.” (Magnet)

According to some critics, Bellow’s novels carry a political message, rather than social. “Bellow is more often political than is usually conceded. Though it is mentioned that Bellow was left-wing, it is not so easily definable as that. Bellow’s conservatism, shown clearly in novels such as *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* and *The Dean’s December*, gives another political dimension to Bellow.” (Vaughan, Images) In *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, Bellow “contrasts the ideal standards of the past with the corruption of contemporary life.” (Meyers) New York reminds him of the collapse of civilization, and makes him think of “Sodom and Gomorrah, the end of the world.” (Meyers) Saul Bellow himself had a fascination for the ancient, the nostalgic and preferred the old order to new. Sondra, Bellow’s second wife used to say that he was “medieval pure and simple” and Madeleine tells Herzog that he would never be able get the surroundings of his choice because they existed in “the twelfth century
somewhere.”

Bellow denounces radicalism for attempting to destroy classically American institutions as also he rejects the standardization of the arts, whereby they are “conditioned by America. Bellow was vehemently against the attacks upon universities around America. This can be justified, as Bellow perceived these institutions to be the cultural strongholds in the United States.” (Vaughan, Images) Even though the attacks were upon the exclusivity of universities and the stringency of their teaching and not upon culture “except the ideal of a cultural reform” and challenged the growing consumerism and nihilism, opposed by Bellow himself, Bellow got angry probably because they threatened his own sense of cultural advantage.

Saul Bellow told James Atlas that each of his books is “a bulletin on his own condition” and if it is true, “it is the transition from introversion to complete observation, as well as Bellow’s age, and more directly, it is Bellow moving away from the meditative, philosophical protagonists in place of affirmative ones.” (Vaughan, Images) Bellow moves from anger to contemplation to affirmation, not only in his writing, but also in his life as he ages. If Joseph and Herzog are young dissatisfied fellows full of complaints for everyone,
Sammler is contemplative, though complaining and Chick more relaxed and affirmative. Joseph feels like a stranger as if he does not belong to the world, as if he is “lying under a cloud and looking up at it.” Everyone shares this feeling to some extent, he believes. Some children feel that their “parents are pretenders” and their real parents are elsewhere. They wait for them to return and “for others the real world is not here at all.” Everything is a fake; “spurious and copied,” according to them. “Joseph’s feeling of strangeness sometimes takes the form almost of a conspiracy: not a conspiracy of evil, but one which contains the diversified splendors, the shifts, excitements, and also the common neutral matter of an existence.” It is very difficult to live everyday “under the shadow” of a conspiracy like this. “If it makes for wonder, it makes even more for uneasiness, and one clings to the nearest passers-by, to brothers, parents, friends, and wives.”

Herzog too has this feeling of being conspired against. He doubts everyone from his psychiatrist to lawyer to relatives of taking Madeleine’s side and blaming and holding him responsible for their divorce. Ironically, he remained oblivious of the real conspiracy against him that was hatched by his dear friend Valentine Gersbach, who took away his wife from under his nose. Or probably that is why
he smells foul everywhere, having been fooled thus by Madeleine, his beloved wife and Valentine, his best friend. “Valentine spoke as a man who had risen from terrible defeat, the survivor of sufferings few could comprehend” (61) and Madeleine, according to Herzog, used everyone, even God for her personal benefit. “And you fell in love with her yourself, didn’t you? Just as she planned. She wanted you to help her dump me. She would have done it in any case. She found you, however, a useful instrument. As for me, I was your patient…” (H 65) When Dr. Edvig calls her a deeply religious woman, Herzog is reminded how she often changed her faith and went to pray as if she had been doing it that way all her life. She was that pretentious. Valentine brought him religious books by Martin Buber and commanded him to read them. “I’m sure you know the views of Buber. It is wrong to turn a man (a subject) into a thing (an object)” (H 64) and ironically, Gersbach himself and Madeleine too used him, and treated him like a thing, an object.

Herzog is shocked after being betrayed by his second wife, whom he loved a lot as he claims, but not enough to not see other women. He has always had mistresses and girl friends, extra marital affairs, yet expects loyalty from his wife. He is already undergoing
psychiatric treatment and is diagnosed as a “reactive-depressive.” After the betrayal, he has isolated himself and is busy writing mental letters to everyone under the sun, even God. In one of his letters he writes, “In every community there is a class of people profoundly dangerous to the rest. I don’t mean the criminals. For them we have punitive sanctions. I mean the leaders. Invariably the most dangerous people seek the power.” (H 51)

He worries and wonders about the world; questions political, social, financial, religious and many more obsess him and he has something to say about everything. “Ours is a bourgeois civilization,” he says. He is a deep thinker and very correctly points out, “De Tocqueville considered the impulse toward well-being as one of the strongest impulses of a democratic society. He can’t be blamed for underestimating the destructive powers generated by this same impulse.” (H 50)

Herzog is upset at the trust-deficit in the world today and cries, “Charity, as if it didn’t have enough trouble in this day and age, will always be suspected of morbidity – sado-masochism, perversity of some sort. All higher or moral tendencies lie under suspicion of being rackets. Things we simply honor with old words, but betray or deny in
our very nerves.” (H 56) Moses writes another mental letter thinking that Edvig was suspecting his intention and desire to take care of Madeleine. Herzog is the account of Bellow’s own state of mind, an outpouring of his frustration at his second wife Sondra’s betrayal of him with his own friend, Jack Ludwig. She later forgave him for the book, saying she was forgiving him “Herzog” just he had forgiven her “Jack.” Herzog is Bellow’s personal memoir that angered and upset many of his acquaintances and friends as they were all there, being blamed and insulted in a thinly veiled narrative of betrayal and deception.

Many were angered by Ravelstein too, Bellow’s disclosure of Allan Bloom’s secrets was termed as deceit and a breach of friendship on Bellow’s side. But Bellow claims that he had made a promise to Bloom that he would write this story. In Ravelstein, Abe requests Chick to write a “Life of Ravelstein,” and Chick automatically takes it upon himself “to interpret his wishes and to decide just to what extent,” he was “freed by his death to respect the essentials—or the slant given by my temperament and emotions to those essentials, my swirling version of them. I suppose he thought it wouldn’t really matter because he’d be gone, and his posthumous reputation couldn’t
matter less.” (R 60) Bellow was opposed to homosexuality and Bloom was a homosexual, still they were very good friends because they were both men of ideas and loved philosophizing. Their political views matched and they were both opposed to excessive materialism and worldliness. Chick and Ravelstein represent Bellow and Bloom respectively. It is Chick who “proposes that Ravelstein write the egghead bestseller (‘It’s no small matter to become rich and famous by saying exactly what you think’) and who in return accepts Ravelstein’s commission to become his – probably posthumous – biographer.” The account is accurate. “Bellow was the egghead’s egger-on, and also his angel in the publishing world, and here we find the second half of the debt redeemed. The story is authentic too, as far as it goes, about Ravelstein/ Bloom’s egghead allegiances.” (Hitchens)

Even though Ravelstein is a true blue American, he has complaints against the American culture and he does not approve of the culture of hard-boiled dom. The American dream pressurizes individuals to achieve success at whichever cost it comes. Bellow heroes are all troubled by the world’s expectations and their incompetence as opposed to them. “Seize the Day is about the tremendous pressure to achieve, the tremendous pressure to succeed,”
says Atlas. Tommy Wilhelm is a perpetual loser while his father was a very successful man, who had attained success at the cost of his relationships. His relations with Tommy are highly strained and that partly is one of the reasons of his failure. Tommy has been a failure, “whose life is riddled by self-defeating choices.” *Seize the Day* presents to us twenty-four hours of Tommy’s life where he “grapples with the emptiness of his bank account and spirit.” He has failed to make it in Hollywood and is having trouble arranging for alimony and child support. He of course needs money, but more than that, he desires a cordial and healthy relationship with his father.

Bellow wants the American dream to “include spiritual fulfillment” along with material wealth; he dreams of it, he imagines it. Bellow himself had been through a similar struggle in his life, fighting with a “lack of resemblance between his life and that of his family,” in spite of being a successful writer. Tommy’s life differs in details, but “his quarrel with society’s definition of success reflected Bellow’s own internal struggles.” He had to face the bullying of his brothers and father, who were better off than himself. His personal unhappiness also reflects in Joseph’s relationship with his brother and his family. Joseph is not as ambitious and rich as them and thus faces humiliation
at their hands. If you are not born ambitious, you end up being
confused and unhappy because you will either do what you do not
want to do or not do what others expect of you.

Writers over the years have presented the American dream and
the dilemmas related to it, in innumerable, different ways and Bellow,
Dickstein thinks, is trying to take the American success and failure
novel to another level. While Dreiser’s Carrie and Fitzgerald’s
Gatsby realized after fulfilling their respective dreams, that they were
flawed, Saul Bellow’s Tommy Wilhelm is an eternal loser. Tommy
Wilhelm has “absolutely reached bottom.” He is unsettled and lost.
“Wiped out” and spurned, he appears to be a “natural candidate for
suicide.” But fortunately, before he can go to that extreme, he
“stumbles into” a stranger’s funeral and starts sobbing uncontrollably,
providing a vent to all his “bottled up” emotions, mourning his present
condition and all his losses till date. The mourners, thinking that
Tommy is crying for the dead person, feel jealous of him. Atlas
believes that Bellow’s version of the American dream is “life rooted in
spirit, rooted in our capacity to feel. Success matters little unless you
can give it a deeper, soulful meaning. Without it, the American dream
is empty.”
The desire for immense success and material gains has been woven into the American psyche over the years and in each generation, novelists have put different twists on the theme, each new twist reflecting its authors’ times. UCLA professor Richard Yarborough suggests that just as all religions have a list of rules that one can follow, “the American dream from that standpoint is the secular religion.” Wilhelm oppressed by the demands of the American dream and crushed by defeat and betrayal, is a typical Bellow protagonist; defeated, cheated and hurt like Herzog, brooding like Corde and Mr. Sammler and craving for love. He is distressed and he broods, but the pain is personal and his problems are immediate, while the other three, especially Mr. Sammler, worry about the eternal troubles of humanity. Wilhelm, on the other hand, faces financial and familial troubles; difficulties in relationships, including a strained marriage and a broken filial bond. Although Sammler and Wilhelm are essentially different characters, they are both trying to adjust to, or instead, split up from contemporary America.

In the material prosperity of cities like New York and Chicago, there is too much pressure and the joys are all superficial. In their hearts, modern city dwellers are all frustrated and restless. There is no
peace of mind nor any real happiness. Tommy’s mind too, is unsettled and he is weighed down by the demands of life in a modern city and countless other problems of the modern age. Sleeping pills are in common use and in this regard, Dr. Adler points that only God knows why people trust these things when everyone knows their poisonous nature. All Bellow heroes are anxious and exhibit symptoms like chest congestion, difficult breathing, a choking throat and an increased heart rate. These are all indications of anxiety and psychological problems.

In spite of all its shortcomings, Bellow loves America and takes immense pride in Chicago and has always preferred to be called an American writer. In fact, in order to sound American or at least, to not sound too Jewish he changed his name from Solomon Bellow to Saul Bellow. He once wrote, “Chicago builds itself up, knocks itself down again, scrapes away the rubble, and starts over... Chicago does not restore; it makes something wildly different. To count on stability here is madness.” (IAAU 240) Bellow immortalized Chicago, the city where he lived and learnt important lessons of life. *The Adventures of Augie March* begins with the words, “I am an American, Chicago born-Chicago, that somber city” and Bellow himself said later about the novel that it was for him, the natural history of Jews in America.
Andrew Ferguson thanked Saul Bellow for registering Chicago forever in world history in the following words:

History, when it happens, can make a shrine of a cornfield or a tumbledown house, and books can do the same. Laid out flat as a griddle, sweltering in summer and packed in ice through its endless winters, Chicago the somber city is transfigured by its books, touched with magic. I can’t order a beer at the Berghoff, in the Loop, without a slight lift at the thought that this is the place Dreiser had in mind when he invented Fitzgerald and Moy’s, the restaurant managed by Sister Carrie’s Hurstwood, the most heart-breaking character in American literature. Bellow’s books touch every quarter of the city, and as a Chicagoan, Hinsdale-born, I’ll be grateful to him forever.

Saul Bellow experienced a variety of cultural influences in his life, “his family having emigrated from Eastern Europe to Quebec, Canada, then to Chicago in 1924. Bellow grew up and immersed himself in the intellectual and political fervor around Chicago before the war.” He embraced Trotskyism, a movement “that appeared openly in his earliest fiction.” This affiliation with Trotsky not just expresses his “sympathy with liberal politics” but also his acceptance and hope of a
replenishment of American life. “An unpublished memoir entitled ‘Starting Out in Chicago’ illuminates Bellow’s sense of cultural perspective, and his introduction to the United States, when ‘American Society and S. Bellow came face to face,’ (Atlas 3) evidently gave Bellow the renewed perspective he needed to dissect American society while remaining culturally open,”” wrote Chris Vaughan

Most of Saul Bellow’s novels present a “Jewish-urban milieu – usually that of New York or Chicago,” portraying city life through the eyes of various Jews in different novels. The American intelligentsia largely consists of Jews, who are bright, scholarly people, as Chick remarks, “for Millennia, Jews have taught and been taught. Without teaching, Jewry was an impossibility.” (R 101) Bellow heroes are generally intellectuals: professors, doctors, scientists, lawyers, and philosophers residing in the city and cursing city life, craving for the natural and sometimes for the transcendental.

All his protagonists complain about the convolutions and troubles of city life and yet they all love the city, because “the tree so beautiful to look at, never spoke a word and that conversation was possible only in the city, between men.” (R 100) All his protagonists have an urge to talk, to communicate and to relieve themselves of the
weight of innumerable thoughts and ideas. In *The Dean’s December*, when Corde meets the ambassador and finds him cordial and accommodative enough, he exults, “On the leather sofa with the Ambassador, conversation seemed definitely possible. Mind you, it could never have been easy.” (DD 61) He had faced charges of not having the right attitude toward things;

A man of words? Yes, but words of the wrong kind. For some years, to cure himself of bad habits, bad usage, he had been mostly silent. And now, it seemed he had even forgotten how to open his mouth. Corde’s confinement in the silent room where Minna had done her lessons in astrophysics or mathematics, where Valeria kept her relics and wrote her letters, had made him rusty, had shrouded him in mute heart-aching numbness. There was a moment at the beginning of this chat with the Ambassador when he imagined that his face was surfacing, coming up from under like the face that mason must have seen at the Cape, rising up from the green Atlantic, spectacles lost, back hair floating, big bare brow, French-Irish nose, blind eyes. (DD 61)

He has been through a lot and is an avid reader, socially and
politically alert like most Bellow heroes. He had gone to meet the Ambassador for his mother-in-law, who is in hospital and they are not being allowed to meet her, because of some old political rivalry, but when he feels that he can talk to him, communicate with him, “he wanted to try out on the Ambassador some of his notions about the mood of the west. Oh, he had lots of topics: the crazy state of the U.S., the outlook and psychology of officialdom in the Communist world, the peculiar psychoses of penitentiary societies like this one. The distinguished gentleness of the ambassador was very encouraging,” rejoices Corde. But after telling him everything about his problems, he feels a little embarrassed and realizes that “it was certainly tactless, stupid, to lecture a high-ranking and experienced Foreign Service officer about atrocities. Tocqueville was dead right when he said that Americans (democrats everywhere) had no aptitude for conversation, they lectured. Bombast, clichés, chewed-up newsprint, naturally made the other party tune out. He had heard what you had heard, read what you had read. The ambassador was too well bred to cut him off.” (DD 64)

He is in a terrible state, coming right out of a whirlpool of troubles in Chicago and falling into the Bucharest difficulties of
making it possible for Minna to meet her mother, who was not being allowed to see her because of Valeria’s past political rivalry.

The old woman was a very shrewd old woman, but she was a romantic old woman, too. She had loved her husband. When he died, all that was left of him was in their daughter. She sent her daughter directly into cosmic space. Nothing but particle physics, galaxies, equations. Minna had never read the communist Manifesto, had never heard of Stalin’s Great terror. Now then, could Valeria entrust such a daughter to a man like Corde? (DD 65)

Corde could never believe that his mother-in-law actually trusted him. He was always afraid that “that deep old woman knew his worst thoughts, instability, weakness, vices. Oh, Jesus!” (DD 65) Back home, a venomous article against him upset him a lot, which said;

“A little coaching in realpolitik would have done the dean no harm. It was too bad that he was carried away by an earnestness too great for his capacities, because he is a very witty man. In conversation he was charming and amusing about politics and the law in Chicago. When he wasn’t sailing in the clouds with
Vico and Hegel he was extremely funny. He made some memorable remarks about the varieties of public welfare in the United States. There are high welfare categories as well as low ones. Some professors work hard, said the Dean. Most of them do. But a professor when he gets tenure doesn’t have to do anything. A tenured professor and a welfare mother with eight kids have much in common....” (DD 303)

It also stated that “Dean Corde is unforgiving. Philistinism is his accusation. Philistinism by origin, humanistic academics were drawn magnetically back again to the core of American society. What should have been an elite of the intellect became instead an elite of influence and comforts.” (DD 302) To the dean, “the damage that these sentences would do was as clear as the print itself.” (DD 303) He knew he would be doomed, but he had been doing his duty, investigating a crime committed in his College. Moving ahead with his investigations, he reaches some unbelievable results.

An eminent Chicago scientist, Professor Beech, has read Corde’s Harper’s articles and is convinced that he can provide ‘the real explanation of what goes on in those slums.’ The true cause of the human impoverishment and despair described by
Corde is, the scientist says, ‘chronic lead insult.’ According to Beech, ‘millions of tons of intractable lead residues are poisoning the children of the poor’; it is in ‘those old slum neighborhoods’ that ‘the concentration is measurably heaviest.’

Eager to communicate the findings of his research to ‘the Humanists’ as well as to the scientific community, Beech seeks Corde’s help in writing up his findings--in hopes of gaining the widest possible audience. (Pifer 170)

Beech tells him, “Crime and social disorganization in inner city populations can all be traced to the effects of lead. It comes down to the nerves, to brain damage.” (DD 137) Corde could not believe this explanation and says to himself, “Once more, a direct material cause? Everything had a direct material cause? If you gave people employment, money, clothing, shelter, food, protected them from infection and from poison, they wouldn’t be criminal, they wouldn’t be mad, they wouldn’t despair? Sure, the right programs, rightly administered, would fix it.” (137) But somehow, Beech manages to convince him that “chronic lead insult now affects all mankind.”

Biological dysfunctions, especially observable in the most advanced populations, must be considered among the causes of
wars and revolutions. Mental disturbances resulting from lead
poison are reflected in terrorism, barbarism, crime, cultural
degradation. Visible everywhere are the irritability, emotional
instability, general restlessness, reduced acuity of the reasoning
powers, the difficulty of focusing, et cetera, which the practiced
clinician can readily identify. (DD 139)

Corde himself felt that irritability, the “combination of
inflammation and deadening—by God.” (DD 139) Herzog too, in his
mental letters, expresses social and political concerns along with
philosophical ideas.

Dear Mr. President, I listened to your recent optimistic message
on the radio and thought that in respect to taxes there was little
to justify your optimism. The new legislation is highly
discriminatory and many believe it will only aggravate
unemployment problems by accelerating automation. This
means that more adolescent gangs will dominate the
underpoliced streets of big cities. Stresses of overpopulation, the
race question… (H 49)

His concern for crime and the race question is shared by Mr. Sammler
and Corde along with others. Mr. Sammler encounters a black pickpocket in a bus and tries to raise a voice against him, but instead of getting justice, he is hounded by the criminal himself and humiliated. His own daughter donates money for the cause of blacks and favours them, while Sammler considers it wrong to excuse a crime in the name of past discrimination. He himself, being a Jew belongs to a race that has been discriminated against and persecuted, but never resorted to crime. They instead, have proven their worth by progressing in all fields through hard work and perseverance. Chris Vaughan describes *Mr. Sammler's Planet* as partly being a reaction to “student radicalism through Sammler’s ‘musings on history, religion, human character, the origin and future of the species.’” Bellow’s major themes are almost all, dealt with, in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*: “the individual as either assimilated or self-exiled, history, American culture in its artistic and popular form, humankind’s duality between intellect and lust (represented by Sammler as intellect and his promiscuous niece Angela as a proponent of the sexual revolution), and death.” Vaughan adds that *Mr. Sammler's Planet* is perhaps “Bellow's most lucidly polemical work.” Mr. Sammler, like Ravelstein and several other Bellow characters, is perturbed by the dehumanization of humanity through political intrusion. Albert Corde too, is “called to witness the
dire conditions of contemporary civilization.” The Dean of a College
and a journalist, Corde is so perturbed by the situation, that he feels
happy to get away from his routine, troubled life in Chicago.

Arriving in Bucharest in a state of exhaustion, Corde welcomes
his sudden isolation; it gives him the chance to reflect on a
recent storm of publicity at home, brought on by a couple of
articles on Chicago that he wrote for Harper’s magazine. Charged with apocalyptic images of decay and disaster, his
depiction of his native city has incited just about everyone who
is anyone in Chicago, including the Provost of his college. The
violence of the ‘black underclass,’ Corde wrote, is actually
condoned by a social and economic establishment that has
failed ‘to approach’--to seek real contact with--this population.
White middle-class society hasn’t ‘even conceived that reaching
it may be a problem. So there's nothing but death before it.’ The
communication gap is filled by drugs, crime, sexual assault;
they are the means by which a doomed population speeds the
tortuously slow process of its own extinction. (Pifer 166)

His own nephew has been addicted to marijuana and his mother,
Corde’s sister worries about “Mason’s lack of success with peer
friendships and the effects of marijuana on the brain.” Mason resembles his mother and Corde was seriously attached to his sister, “so it was all the more painful” for him “to see the same features adapted to-well, to mischief, contrariness, contemporary expressions of face badly interpreted.” (DD 33) It hurt Corde even more to think that “the skinny, ill-assembled, innerly weak kid taking the field against his uncle the Dean.” Mason had threatened some witnesses in a murder case and Elfrida, his mother is taken by astonishment, “It’s hard to imagine tough black street people being intimidated by skinny Mason,” (86) she says. And Corde takes a jibe at him, asking “what’s he gone into hiding for?” (87) He slams young Mason for behaving like a criminal.

He’s not exactly a hunted man. Obstructing justice isn’t such a big deal in this case. He must be thrilled to pieces to be a fugitive. It’s a terrific luxury for a kid like Mason. You corner two street people. You deliver a death threat. They take you seriously- that’s a real thrill. It means you are pretty close to being black yourself. You don’t have to be ashamed of your white skin. (DD 87)

Here, there is an obvious irony, but a hidden appreciation too,
for the power exercised by blacks in America. Blacks had earlier been ill-treated and used as slaves when they had no rights and now when they have been given special rights, they have started taking undue advantage of their position. Two blacks have been accused of killing a white student at Corde’s college and this has turned his life upside down along with other administrative and journalistic headaches. In Bucharest, Albert Corde gets time to reflect upon his situation in Chicago and at the same time he ponders over the political, social, geographical and cultural scenario in Rumania, and there is a juxtaposition of the “worlds of Bucharest and Chicago, past and present, East and West.” The cold reminds him of Chicago and he observes that the “faces [in Bucharest] were from the ancient world,” while in Chicago they had “something like a vast international refugee camp, and faces from all over.” This polyglot culture and atmosphere of Chicago had had its influence on the personality and art of Saul Bellow.

It was a rich culture. ‘In the streets of Montreal, on cold winter days, you could meet, in the 1920’s, characters wrapped in great coats, their breath exhaled in vapor, walking out of the 19th century,’ wrote the biographer Leon Edel, himself a Canadian,
‘in Westmount out of Dickens or Thackeray, in Montreal East out of Balzac. And in between, figures Biblical, or characters created by say Israel Zangwill-a glimpse of the Galician or Rumanian, the Lithuanian, or the Russian.’ It was out of this aggregate of languages and cultures that Bellow was to fashion his unique literary idiom. (Atlas 14)

Bellow was, no doubt, influenced by his surroundings, but he did not allow himself to become the product of an environment and “gainfulness, utility, prudence, business had no hold on me,” wrote Saul Bellow in his introduction to Allan Bloom’s The Closing of the American Mind, Allan Bloom’s most influential and popular work. In this book, Bloom had argued that “universities no longer taught students how to think and that students, especially those attending the top schools, were unconcerned about the lessons of the past or about examining ideas in a historical context. His blistering critique, which offered no solutions to the crisis, in education, blamed misguided curricula, rock music, television, and academic elitism for the spiritual impoverishment of students.” (Encyclopedia Britannica)

This book, which was a late product or blooming of the University of Chicago Committee on Social Thought, argued
that the American mind was closed because it had become so goddamned open – a nice deployment of paradox and a vivid attack on the relativism that has become so OK on campus these days. Bloom’s polemic swiftly became a primer for the right-wing Zeitgeist; a bookend for the shelf or index sternly marked ‘all downhill since 1967’. And even then, there were those who detected a Bellovian lending, or borrowing as the case might be. (Hitchens)

Saul Bellow and Allan Bloom were very good friends and they had a lot in common. Bloom wanted Bellow to write a book based upon his life and death but when Bellow did so, the book, *Ravelstein*, ran into controversy. Followers of Bloom alleged that Bellow had revealed too much about his dead friend’s personal life, which was highly unethical and a clear betrayal of friendship. Bellow defended himself by saying that it was Bloom who wanted him to write this book and he believed he had a right to choose what to hide and what to reveal. In spite of being a disciple of Leo Strauss, who regarded “sodomy” as “sterile and nihilistic,” an “unmanly betrayal of tribe and family,” Bloom was a homosexual.

Christopher Hitchens, in his review of *Ravelstein*, says that there was
an attempt at anonymity in the first proof of the book, but “the chief point is allowed to survive its euphemisation: Allan Bloom died of AIDS, as was finally and reluctantly admitted by his admirers.” It has been noted that Bloom never attacked nor mentioned the gay-movement in his attacks on “promiscuous Modernism.” Ravelstein too, is a neoconservative, who does not approve of a lot of things in the world around him and is unhappy with the disconnect with tradition and history. “Thin though this novel may be, and perfunctory in keeping its commitment as the unwritten memoir that Bellow promised to Bloom in a moment of weakness, it does exemplify some of the stoicism of the neo-conservative mentality.” (Hitchens)

Political, social, psychological, philosophical, all sorts of thoughts and ideas merge and emerge in Bellow’s writing. Sammler, a Holocaust survivor, an idealist old man is faced with his younger generation’s eccentricities on one hand and a black pickpocket on the other. At home his daughter does things to annoy and trouble him and outside, the black criminal whom he catches picking pockets in a bus harasses him. In the Holocaust, he lost his wife and one eye “and lost the underlying sense, as well, of being grounded in human existence. He tends to regard his ‘onetime human, onetime precious, life’ as
having been ‘burnt away’ by this century’s conflagrations.” (Pifer 15)

He is in two minds, one of which seeks release from worldly activity and the other pays attention to the world.

Not only Sammler, all Bellow heroes seek refuge in some faraway, quiet and trouble-free paradise. “Bellow’s fiction is a study of the twentieth century American experience, and his conclusion is that Americans find meaning only as their lives transcend what society gives them.” (Bancroft) Chasing the American dream, his protagonists feel somewhat lost. They find it difficult to cope with the pressure of possibilities and opportunities that demand extreme determination and a completely materialistic approach from these idealistic dreamers.

*The Adventures of Augie March* chronicles the late 1920s to the mid-1940s. Chicago, the setting for so many of Bellow's works, becomes a symbol of the American Dream. One way or another, with brains, effort, and charm, a person can make it there. Augie March has these qualities, but he can't seem to settle on anything. His adventures are all opportunities to share the American Dream-working for a wealthy family, being engaged to a wealthy woman, brushing against organized crime, getting advice from a financially successful brother. Part of the
American Dream is that with charm and good luck, a person can have what he wants. (Bancroft)

In *Dangling Man*, Joseph suffers because he is not too compulsive and chooses to lead a simpler life as compared to his brother Amos. Joseph’s relations with Amos are strained, because Amos is unhappy with his choice of wife and occupation. Joseph mulls over his relationship with Amos; “He tries not to disapprove of me too openly; but he has never learned that I resent his way of questioning me when we meet.” Joseph finds his brother tactless and rude, who, he thinks, “has not been able to accept the fact that it is possible for a member of his family to live on so little” Amos tries to lend him money, which he never accepts. Amos was highly disappointed when Joseph married Iva, while he himself has married a wealthy woman, Dolly. But what hurts Joseph most is, his niece’s behaviour, who insults and looks down upon him and Iva. He even punishes her for calling him crazy, “a beggar” and “a clever man” once. “My niece and I are not on good terms; there is a long standing antagonism between us.” Their family had not been rich and Amos often remembers his struggle, “how badly he was dressed as a boy” and how little their father could afford for them. Joseph describes his childhood in Montreal in the following
I have never found another street that resembled St. Dominique. It was in a slum between a market and a hospital. I was generally intensely preoccupied with what went on in it and watched from the stairs and the windows. … the pungency and staleness of its stores and cellars, the dogs, the boys, the French and immigrant women, the beggars with sores and deformities whose like I was not to meet again until I was old enough to read of Villon’s Paris, the very breezes in the narrow course of that street, have remained so clear to me that I sometimes think it is the only place where I was ever allowed to encounter reality. My father blamed himself bitterly for the poverty that forced him to bring us up in a slum and worried lest I see too much. And I did see. (DM 85-86)

Amos and Dolly had brought up Etta in a way that she related poverty with “unimportance” and was made to feel superior as the daughter of a wealthy man, to believe that she was worlds apart from “those who live drably, in ill-furnished flats,” who do not have servants, who “wear inferior clothing,” have little pride and are debtors. She prefered her maternal relatives, her cousins who had
“automobiles and summer homes. I am in no way a credit to her,”
reflected Joseph. Even though he knew he could have little effect on
her, he tried to influence the girl by “sending her books and, on her
birthday, record albums.” Joseph recalls how he had undertaken to
tutor her “in French as a means of broaching other subjects” and how
he had failed. “Etta hated the lessons and by extension,” she hated
Joseph and if he had not given her an “excuse for discontinuing them,
she would soon have found one,” he thinks.

For Augie, opportunities in business, adventure, and love seem
to seek him out. Yet, these adventures do not entirely satisfy, but
they teach and Augie learns. “I had the idea also that you don't
take so wide a stand that it makes a human life impossible, not
try to bring together irreconcilables that destroy you, but try out
what of human life you can live with first. All the great themes
of Bellow's work germinate in this novel. Augie always seems
captured up in the American disease of restlessness that pushes
back the ‘terror’ as he calls it, the fact of our own mortality.
How does one cope? Augie has all the obvious qualities for
success, but they don’t add up. (Bancroft)

Saul Bellow once told Philip Roth, “Much of ‘Augie’ was for me the
natural history of the Jews in America.” Bellow examines the dilemma of chasing the American dream in almost all his novels. “For more than two hundred years, the notion of making something of oneself, of becoming a somebody, has been woven into the American psyche. In each generation, novelists have put a different twist on the theme, and those twists have reflected the authors’ times.” (Meredith) Saul Bellow gives the theme his own twist and takes it to another level. According to James Atlas, Bellow's version of the American dream is “life rooted in spirit, rooted in our capacity to feel” and the American dream is empty without spirituality and success has no significance without a deeper, soulful meaning. That is why a void is evident in all Bellow heroes’ life, in spite of everything. In spite of being rich and influential, they remain dissatisfied and unhappy.

Henderson in *Henderson the Rain king* is rich and powerful, yet his heart says, “I want. I want. I want.” He has strange desires, he raises pigs and wants to study medicine at the age of fifty plus. Moses Herzog, on the other hand, is a “respected scholar in the academic world and a failure outside it. He writes letters as a means of coming to grips with his own failures. The breadth of his knowledge somehow does not provide answers until he is ‘overcome by the need to explain,
to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to clarify, to make amends.” (Bancroft) In the novella, *Seize the Day*, “Tommy Wilhelm has movie-star good looks and a wealthy father. Yet, he has never developed from the adolescent state of wanting independence without risk.” (Bancroft) In *The Bellarosa Connection*, the protagonist says:

I was at the bar of paternal judgement again, charged with American puerility. When would I shape up, at last! At the age of thirty two, I still behaved like a twelve year old, hanging out in Greenwich Village, immature, drifting, a layabout, shacking up with Bennington girls, a foolish intellectual gossip, nothing in his head but froth-the founder, said my father with comic bewilderment, of the Mnemosyne Institute, about as profitable as it was pronounceable.

As my village pals used to say, it cost no more than twelve hundred dollars a year to be poor-or to play at poverty, yet another American game. (TBC 8)

Joseph complains against America’s consumerism in the following words:

Jeff Forman’s falling plane crossing his security, he resolves to
protect himself by charging eighty dollars for suits worth forty and fifteen cents for a button he formerly sewed out of kindness. Mr. Fanzel is innocent. I blame the spiritual climate. In it we enjoy our gobber of Jeff Forman without a thought for him, let alone a word of gratitude. Supply is supply, and demand is demand. They will be satisfied, be it with combs, fifes, rubber, whisky, tainted meat, canned peas, sex, or tobacco. For every need there is an entrepreneur, by a marvellous providence. You can find a man to bury your dog, rub your back, teach you Swahili, read your horoscope, murder your competitor. In the megapolis, all this is possible. There was a Parisian cripple in the days of John Law, the Scottish speculator, who stood in the streets renting out his hump for a writing desk to people who had no convenient place to take their transactions. (DM 110)

Bellow once complained, “I’ve never turned over a fig leaf yet that didn’t have a price tag on the other side.” Satisfaction is important and one needs to check one’s needs and desires in order to avoid spiritual death, otherwise in a consumerist, materialistic society like America, one would end up being entirely mechanical and soulless.
“Shall my life by one-thousandth of an inch fall short of its ultimate possibility? It is a different thing to value oneself, and to prize oneself crazily. And then there are our plans, idealizations. These are dangerous, too. They can consume us like parasites, eat us, drink us, and leave us lifelessly prostrate. And yet we are always inviting the parasite, as if we were eager to be drained and eaten.” (DM 88)

In *The Dean’s December*, Zaehner had earned a lot of money and had left Elfrida a rich widow and “she was increasing Zaehner’s dollars, preserving them for Mason!” (DD 91) But the kid in turn is waiting for his mother to die so that he could own her wealth. Corde understands the situation very well and says;

I assume the Mason problem comes down to money, somewhere along the line. The form Mason’s ambition has taken is downward, for the present … But when Mason’s downward ambition stops—and where can it lead?—he’ll want his dough. She’ll die, he’ll get it. He’s waiting for that. Elfrida would not be shocked by these parricidal thoughts. Why should she be? If she hadn’t read Proust’s “Filial sentiments of a parricide,” she had been married to Mason Zaehner, who had practiced law on La Salle Street for four decades. She had no
need of Proust or Freud or Krafft-Ebing or Balzac or Aristophanes. Chicago had it all. (DD 90)

Zaehner, Corde’s materialistic brother-in-law represents the typical materialistic class of Americans, who lived the characteristic American life, involved with its “operations, its historical position, its power—the actual American stuff.” Even though possession of wealth puts one at an advantage over others, Bellow sends a message that money is not enough.

With the exception of Augie, Bellow’s characters are upper-middle class. Money problems plague them at times, and the loss of wealth may help them define themselves. Bellow does not disparage wealth, but he does attack the alienating requirements for maintaining wealth. Augie’s brother Simon sets out to acquire wealth and succeeds through a natural sense for business and a good marriage. Simon holds image above affection. In Humbolt’s Gift, Charles Citrine, a successful writer, comes to financial ruin only to discover the relative uselessness of money. The posthumous gift of his friend, Humboldt, is a cache of writings that Citrine is not quite sure how to handle. As Citrine travels the world and loses his wealth, the gift proves to
be valuable economically only after Charlie has learned that money and public adulation are not necessary. (Bancroft)

Money, power and other material desires have the ability to corrupt the soul without getting noticed or caught. "There are evils that have the ability to survive identification and go on for ever... money, for instance, or war," announces Bellow. The Bellow protagonists’ surroundings and the city atmosphere form the background at times and at others reflect their states of mind. Joseph in *Dangling Man* is internally perturbed because of his unemployed state and his descriptions of his surroundings too are generally grim. Towards the end of the novel, he’s hopeful, yet frustrated and the dull and numb morning brightening up suddenly and the combination of colorful and drab, go well with his mood:

Morning began dull and numb, then brightened miraculously. I tramped the neighbourhood. It was warm in earnest at one o’clock, with a tide of summer odors from the stockyards and the sewers (odors so old in the city-bred memory they are no longer repugnant).

In the upper light there were small fair heads of cloud
turning. The streets, in contrast, looked burnt out; the chimneys pointed heavenward in openmouthed exhaustion. The turf, intersected by sidewalk, was bedraggled with the whole winter’s deposit of deadwood, match cards, cigarettes, dogmire, rubble. The grass behind the palings and wrought iron frills was still yellow, although in many places the sun had already succeeded in shaking it into livelier green. And the houses, their doors and windows open, drawing in the freshness, were like old drunkards or consumptives taking a cure. Indeed, the atmosphere of the houses, the brick and plaster and wood, the asphalt, the pipes and gratings and hydrants outside, and in the interiors—curtains and beddings, furniture, striped wall-paper and horny ceilings, the ravaged throats of entry halls and the smeary blind eyes of windows—this atmosphere, I say, was one of an impossible hope, the hope of an impossible rejuvenation.

Nevertheless, a few large birds, robins and gackles, appeared in the trees, and some of the trees themselves were beginning to bud. The large rough cases cracked at the tip, showing sticky green within, and one tree was erupting in crude red along its higher branches. I even saw in a brick passageway
an untimely butterfly, out of place both in the season and the heart of the city, and somehow alien to the whole condition of the century. (DM 172-173)

This description of the city immediately reminds us of T. S. Eliot’s

*Preludes*:

The winter evening settles down

With smell of steaks in passageways.

Six o’clock.

The burnt-out ends of smoky days.

And now a gusty shower wraps

The grimy scraps

Of withered leaves about your feet

And newspapers from vacant lots;

The showers beat

On broken blinds and chimney-pots,
And at the corner of the street

A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps. (Eliot)

Even though the time is morning in Joseph’s description and evening in Eliot’s, the similarity in mood and feel is striking. Joseph’s world during this period is confined to a single room, where he has nothing but a “mental life.” He thinks and writes down his thoughts in a diary. Memories from his childhood and more recent past, along with present difficulties occupy his mind and we get a fairly good idea of what his life has been like till now. His present unemployed state makes him suspect everyone and he even gets into fights with his neighbor and landlord. After his fight with Vanaker, Joseph feeling embarrassed and guilty, says;

This was ‘not like’ me; it was an early symptom. The old Joseph was inclined to be even-tempered. Of course, I have known for a long time that we have inherited a mad fear of being slighted or scorned, an exacerbated ‘honor.’ It is not quite the duelist’s madness of a hundred years ago. But we are a people of tantrums, nevertheless; a word exchanged in a movie, or in some other crowd, and we are ready to fly at one another. Only,
in my opinion, our rages are deceptive; we are too ignorant and spiritually poor to know that we fall on the ‘enemy’ from confused motives of love and loneliness. Perhaps, also, self-contempt. But for the most part, loneliness. (DM 147)

Exile and isolation, whether imposed or self-inflicted form a common thread joining Bellow’s novel. All his heroes think, think and think. Mr. Sammler is isolated due to age, he is old, in his seventies and therefore a generation gap exists between him and his daughter, and he fails to understand the new generation in general, “which was spoiled by their elders after World War II.” The young see “little wrong with a host of social ills including selfishness, a tolerance for rampant crime, racial strife, and a preoccupation with sex that has reduced society to a state of nature that alienates man from his soul, which “poor bird” is under such siege that its capacity for moral guidance is obscured.” A variety of “experiences, by no means all good, jolt Mr. Sammler's soul--reminding him that his deepest human levels, so long deadened, are still accessible and that the soul, clearly read, may provide access to human constants that can put us back on the right course.” (Bellow and Berger) Mr. Sammler, who had remained oblivious of the Holocaust in spite of having lost his wife
and an eye in the attack, awakens to “the nightmare of modern life represented by a deteriorating New York, a harbinger of man’s perilous future.”

The origin of that nightmare is the same false hope about human nature that once blinded him to the Nazi threat. Growing like a cancer while he slept, it has become the unbridled freedom of the 1960s... The novel is set as human beings are about to take a trip to the moon, a triumph for scientific rationality. H. G. Wells, a pre-Holocaust friend of Mr. Sammler’s in London, wrote about the future, including space travel, expressing a great deal of faith in human rationality. The awakening post-Holocaust Mr. Sammler poses a series of questions about the future of mankind, perched on the frontier of escaping the earth’s gravity. Will space travel unleash a period of rational humanism of the type expressed by Wells or will we export our human vices to the moon and beyond?

This question, to be played out in the near future, is deepened by the question of whether we can learn from evil--the contemporary evils of modern society and the evil of the Nazi outrage, buried within Mr. Sammler. If he can be
awakened from the forms of blindness that prevented him from appreciating an evil through which he lived but never fully faced, can't the rest of us also learn from the lessons of the Holocaust? (Bellow and Berger)

If Sammler is dreaming of colonies on the moon, Henderson observes that ours’ is the “first generation to see the clouds from both sides.” What a privilege it is to be blessed with the ability to “dream both upward and downward.” Science has brought us closer to faraway things, including the moon and the clouds, things that always remained mysterious and had fairy associations with them. The moon that was supposed to store the things lost on earth is now accessible and man can place himself on it. Nothing that was ever lost on earth has reached the moon, but man has, and is about to colonize it. Sammler wonders if we are going to leave our fever and fret on earth itself, or are we going to carry the anxiety and ignorance with us to the moon. If the latter is the case, then Sammler finds no sense in leaving his present world for the moon. Yet we all know that human beings carry material desires inside them and they shall go with them wherever men go. Sammler’s isolation is shared by Bellow’s other heroes too, like Corde and Herzog.
*Herzog* is largely a work based upon Herzog’s reclusion in the Berkshires, detached from the city’s activity and removed from its culture. Herzog’s self-exile is a cause of marital dissolution, which subsequently gives Herzog a reserve toward culture… letters often seem eccentric, superfluous, and perhaps neurotic, they display an acute understanding of contemporary America. In another letter, not addressed to anyone, Herzog writes:

‘Living amid great ideas and concepts, insufficiently relevant to the present, day-by-day, American conditions. You see monsignor, if you stand on television in the ancient albs and surplices of the Roman church there are at least enough Irishmen, Poles, Croatians watching in saloons to understand you.’

Herzog’s remoteness is not so much escapism but a withdrawal from the “painted veils.”… Herzog’s objection is that American culture, while remaining explicitly open to ethnicity, technology, and militaristic advances, has rejected cultural advances in the arts and humanities. Though Herzog celebrates the inexhaustible diversity in the United States, he still perceives the United States to be rigidly capitalist, while at
the same time declaring equality to be the foremost American principle. It is the same tenet as in *Ravelstein* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet*: humanity becomes less human through political intervention. (Vaughan)

Saul Bellow’s dissatisfaction with the contemporary “head culture” is a commonplace of Bellow criticism, which has been explored in the above passages. His protagonists invariably feel like misfits and unsuitable for the society they live in. The anxiety in his discourse is evidence that he looks for a simpler and less materialistic world.