CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: STILLNESS AMIDST CHAOS

Technical skill, however amazing it might be, is meaningless unless it conveys equally remarkable insights into human life and experience. Technique is important in relation to the rendering of human experience and communicating to the reader the meaning and significance of that experience. It is worth exploring only when it helps us in understanding and evaluating a work of art better, especially when we live in a time when the novel is changing radically, when new aesthetics are emerging and new ways of reading are needed. Saul Bellow (1915 -), one of the most important of our living novelists, is a writer who has both expressed and reacted against much that is at work in this new mood. His novels are in fact battlegrounds of contemporary intellectual dispositions. They are also the intellectual inheritors of our largest thoughts and concerns. But it is not hard to see behind it a moral, intellectual and metaphysical undertaking of great and classic power. Frank Kermode came near to these descriptions when he said of Bellow that "he is so good that anybody can see it with half an eye."
In the years since his emergence as a writer of imaginative literature, Saul Bellow has become one of the leading figures of American letters and the foremost Jewish voice of the Jewish speaking world. With the absorbing classical tales of Jewish Schlemiel, the "Jews for the first time (have moved) into the centre of American culture."\(^2\) Judaism in his work, "is not only source of nostalgia, but also of guilt and anxiety."\(^3\) The suffocating family ties, the alienated hero, with a messianic vision mixed with Jewish humour is often the theme of Bellow's fiction. So also Bellow often returns to the same characters like the dangling man, the gambler and the patriarch. They see metaphysical tensions at home. Even the close relationship of father and son is evident in the biblical lines of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. No doubt family closeness has always been important in Jewish literature, especially the father-son relationship. Each of Bellow's heroes finds a beast within himself leading to the conclusion that Nature which itself is wild is reflected in human beings too. In this case Bellow has few peers in delineating the particularity, the uniqueness and the topography of a single individual.

The Jew becomes a symbol of modern urban man, and the whole idea of exile that "modern man is an outcast from his own Land of Israel and a wanderer in the Diaspora,"\(^4\)
becomes an obsession with Bellow. In fact the Jew became the prototype of the victim, whose history of alienation and persecution seems to grip the feelings of modern man. This is exactly what the Kabbalists believe that those who are aware of the truth that beyond the divisiveness among men there exists a primordial unitive force, since we are all bound together by a common humanity more fundamental than any unity of dogma. Those who recognize that the centrifugal force which has scattered and atomized mankind must be replaced by an integrating structure and process capable of bestowing meaning and purpose on existence—it is in these concerns Bellow's work achieves universality of purpose.

Inherently comic, his writing is both subtle and subversive. His themes have become more complex and the problems he addresses broader. The increasing universality of his writing, the immediacy and compelling relevance of his most recent works have helped him win the international reputation which he enjoys today. He started his career as a writer in the 1940's and has evolved as a writer of world stature after the publication of The Adventures of Augie March in 1953. As Earl Rovit comments, "His achievement has been impressive enough in its own right; he had developed a marvellously supple style of grotesque realism modulated by an ever present sense of irony."5 In this regard, the evolution of Bellow's style is a key to the understanding of
his fiction, to interpret the progress of the writer from the time he first appeared in print to his most recent publication, taking into account especially the critical reception that greeted each work as it came from Bellow's hand. This certainly seems to be the best way to understand Saul Bellow.

Bellow has voiced concern on certain issues, as Gerhard Bach puts it: "The arts, contemporary culture, the modern age which has generated much controversy and often-times outspoken opposition." Where today some recognize in Bellow one of "America's greatest writers of the twentieth century, equalled only by Hemingway and Faulkner," others see "an old fumbler with words caught in the web of his own verbal Narcissism." While his contemporaries keep mapping the modernist and post-modernist culture, casting, as he sees it, "artificial pearls before real swine," Bellow, since The Adventures of Augie March, has been writing "against the grain," of literary fashion. Bellow has always favoured the traditional modes of criticism. Therefore, he finds in The new English Department stars, the deconstructionists singularly silly. If they were as interesting as they think themselves to be I should have no objection to them. Let them inherit everything. The 'tradition', the whole works. But
Boredom has become wonderfully prestigious among the high brows. And the dullness of these people is infectious. Students are infected by it. Dullness makes them great public Philistines.\footnote{11}

Rejecting the modern trends of criticism Bellow claims for himself the narrative tradition of nineteenth century (Eastern) Europe. While rejecting ethnic or racial hyphenation, he insists upon the label American. He consistently portrays characters struggling with the Jewish heritage of suffering, physical and spiritual, as in Mr. Sammler's Planet (1970) or symbolic, as more recently in The Bellarosa Connection (1989). While the repeated and fashionable proclamation of the "death of the novel,"\footnote{12} has been put to rest by adding the label "post" to the label reading "modernism", with Bellow we see none of these. Bellow is traditional in more ways than one—"he practices the traditional way of narrative writing, and propagates the traditional values of humanity, hope, perseverance, peace, dignity, discipline, order, and God."\footnote{13} In fact Bellow has retained the "traditional narrative structure for rendering a hero's growth"\footnote{14} all throughout. As he feels that "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"? Thomas Loe, agrees with many critics in this regard and remarks that "the perspective of a larger tradition of form should help reveal how Bellow realistically and convincingly utilizes recognizable patterns designed to reflect the depth and complexity of psychic involvement necessary for dealing with the tensions of modern life." So the Bellow hero can justly be termed a schlemiel (persistently unlucky person) or Schnorrer (unfortunate beggar). If he is a victimised figure, he is a victim of his own moral sense of right and wrong, his own accepted obligation to evaluate himself by standards that will inevitably find him lacking.

Bellow emerged as a writer with _Dangling Man_ (1944), and _The Victim_ (1947). In this early phase we have three novella in the 19th century realistic tradition including _Seize the Day_ (1956). From _The Adventures of Augie March_ (1953), he is absorbed into the mainstream, and this middle part of his career ends with _Mr. Sammler's Planet_. In this middle part we see Bellow employing fantasy as the chief mode of narration; for the picaresque novel _Augie March_, the mythic novel _Henderson_ (1959) and _Science Fiction_ in _Mr. Sammler's Planet_. From _Herzog_ (1964) and _Humboldt's Gift_ (1975) upto _The Bellarosa Connection_ we have a reversal of
themes and style as Bellow becomes more sure of his art, employing multiple narrative techniques in comic mode. Bellovian strategy in the narration in the early phase is to externalise opposition as illustrated by the "Spirit of Alternatives" in the Dangling Man; the doppel-ganger in The Victim or the "reality instructor," Tamkin in Seize the Day. However the later Bellow prefers a more immediate Faustian approach forcing the seeds of evil and good, of the tragic and the comic, the transcendent and the contemporaneous, to germinate in the protagonist's inner spiritual soil. Humboldt's Gift, clearly expresses and illustrates the shift. From this novel onward, Bellow shows a primary concern with questions relating to the nature of reality and the nature of death. Asked about this change and the mode of perception it implies, Bellow said, "I feel it is time to write about people who make a more spirited resistance to the forces of our time.... I am not saying that, as a novelist I have suddenly become super ambitious. Not at all. What I am saying is that I think it is time for me to move on."17

Bellow's claim for his protagonist finds expression in three major concerns—that of our relationship to reality, language and death. Bellow implements each of these elements with a view to its dialectic dynamics, a technique
by which he manages to keep them from becoming dead theories. Thus, "reality" in Bellow cannot be thought of without its counterpart "appearances." Language finds its counterpart in "art", and "death" in "transcendence." Their fusion, their symbolic interdependence, creates the inner dramatic texture of each novel or story.

Reality in Bellow presents itself at three different levels. The basest of these, the "dog-food level of things" relates to the kind of external, purely material realities and physical comfort provided by America's social institutions and system. As Saul Bellow puts it: "Society feeds (the modern American), clothes him, to an extent protects him, and he is its infant. If he accepts the state of infancy, contentment can be his. But if the idea of higher functions come to him, he is profoundly unsettled." In the second phase, the external world is full of political turmoil like economic depression, reconstruction after war and civil strife, besides scientific advancements. Here fantasy seems the best mode to reach for the unattainable. However, Bellow is more enigmatic in his later fiction where "he has chosen to cast them into a comic mode," "to foster a complete defense of man." Bellow's style has evolved with the passage of time. He began, in *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, with a tight
conception of both language and structure, using Flaubert as his model. Both books are disciplined and spare. Bellow has said that he strove for a kind of correctness that would be acceptable to the Anglo-Saxon Protestant world that seemed to dominate American literature. But by the time he wrote *The Adventures of Augie March*, he had discovered rhetoric, he had gained confidence as a writer and as an American, and he had recognized the weakening of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) hold on literature in the U.S. The result is that the language of these novels shows Bellow's art turning into a fine piece of philosophic narrative. It is as larky as its protagonists and as diverse as the many levels of its discourse demand, ranging in its versatility from the talk of Jewish immigrants to the intercourse of University of Chicago intellectuals.

As the language expanded, so did the book and "*The Adventures of Augie March*" is a sprawling, picaresque work in contrast to the carefully contained earlier novels. Succeeding novels show a curbing of rhetorical extravagance but *Augie March* established "the essential mode of expression for the fiction Bellow has done since." After *Augie March*, *Henderson the Rain King* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* occupy the same ethos. With *Humboldt's Gift*, he moves more surely than ever before toward intuition and mysticism, towards a non-rational epistemology. In these
works. Bellow commands Dickensian comic energies in the depiction of character. Out of the chaos of experience and the tensions of conflicting claims, he has sought "to create a coherent and compelling vision of experience." In an interview to Gorden Lloyd Harper, Bellow contends that "art has something to do with the achievement of stillness in midst of chaos. A stillness which characterises prayer...an arrest of attention in the midst of distraction." He said in yet another interview with Alvin P. Sanoff, that as a writer he was preoccupied with "the way in which value is—or is not assigned to human life. A writer comes to feel that there is a way of grasping these horrors that is peculiar to poetry, drama and fiction. I don't admit the defeat of the human tradition."  

Saul Bellow explained the individual point of view through meaningful and essentially subjective technique. He could take up with confidence the vital areas between the private world of a single man and the confusing, overwhelming, futureless mass of the public world constituted by so many single men. A study of technique would therefore be infinitely helpful to understand the need and the quality of such a point of view which has not only gone deeply into his fiction, but has considerably influenced a lot of criticism. However, the phrase
"point of view" may call for an elaboration, for it begs a question—whose point of view? Since the scope of this dissertation is the fictional point of view, only that is dealt with. Technique, with Bellow, has such a skin and bone relationship with his conceptual vision, that he uses his verbal art to convey a clear message of altruism that evolves through the trappings of Ego— the Ego of his heroes. As a result the 'I' of the Bellow hero is not like the 'I' commonly found in modern fiction— "like stemming and emptying away as through a slice." Instead, the Bellow hero through divergence learns to accommodate himself in a society described by Bellow in The Sealed Treasure as "it forces certain elements of the genius of our species to go into hiding. In America they take curiously personal, secret forms."

Technique, therefore becomes a necessity. It is more the expression of his hero, and his verbal artefact. The word in no way implies that Bellow is only a capable craftsman, but, it means that the quality of tentativeness runs through most of his novels as if he were experimenting with each form, or with a combination of forms while trying to articulate his point of view. Both Joseph in Dangling Man, and Moses Herzog in Herzog writing their own life story, settling down to the difficult double objective of
writing, the novel for their author, and with a view of seeing themselves more objectively in the general context of human kind are indeed challenges posed by Bellow. They show an enormous responsibility for the form they create because the authorial interference appears to be minimal here. Thus the greatest display of Bellow's virtuosity is achieved in the handling of his point of view.

There seems to be a progression in Bellow's fiction, from the disciplined technique and realistic detail which is seen in his early novels like the Dangling Man, The Victim to Seize the Day—although Seize the Day was published after The Adventures of Augie March, critics are of the view that it was written along with the first two novels, as the three can be classed together in the category of realistic narration. As a result Seize the Day logically culminates the line of development begun with Dangling Man and continued through The Victim.\(^{28}\) With its formal vigour and realistic narration it always seemed a chronological peculiarity. This was confirmed by Bellow too:

I have always had trouble placing Seize the Day. Although chronologically it appears in 1956, between the The Adventures of Augie March (1953) and Henderson the Rain King (1959), I have been more inclined to group it with Dangling Man (1944)
and The Victim (1946). . . . My own feeling was that the novel was written earlier and held over, but I had no way of proving that.29

The fact that Bellow has demonstrated an overriding concern for the ordinary circumstances of daily reality is confirmed by his statement: "I think that the development of realism, in the 19th century is still the major event of modern literature. . . . realism specializes in apparently unmediated experiences."30 In fact Bellow's most obvious obstacle to plot lies in the fact that he is a realist—perhaps that is a reason why he wanted a plot in the first place. A novel such as Seize the Day reflects Bellow's need for distancing himself from his material. It embodies Bellow's struggle to control what amounts to a superabundance of material, a realistic world so weighty with detail that it is most oppressive. Plot in Bellow's work is hard won, wrested from a confusing density and multiplicity of people, ideas, events, and sensation. It is so hard won that we might well claim that the struggle is the plot, as all the protagonists "seek to move from the overwhelming richness of experience to some kind of peace and clarity."31 To Henrietta Buckmaster, Bellow said, "since I write in a realistic tradition, the question is one of bridging the gap, bringing your fact to a conclusion that will satisfy you."32
In *Dangling Man* he uses the diary form as the narrative, while in *The Victim* and in *Seize the Day*, third-person narration is employed. In this regard the Stockholm (UPI) report is worth noting. The Nobel citation said that Bellow has gone through two phases in developing his style as a writer. His first book, *Dangling Man* began a new style that explored the protagonist's mind rather than dramatic action. Other novels in this spirit included *The Victim* and *Seize the Day*, one of the classic works of our time. The Nobel jury further said that Bellow's second phase "began with *The Adventures of Augie March*, "which showed his style of mixing the picaresque with philosophic conversation with the reader."33

A mythic pattern is the focus in *Henderson the Rain King*, where he burns up everything academic and flares into something cosmic. Bellow employs fantasy as a tool to explore the nature of imperfections in life and to seek deliverance from the vexing tyranny of routine. Eugene Henderson the protagonist goes to Africa, in search of the 'missing link' of the soul. This flight into the fantastic world leaves the reader spell-bound. This point is substantiated by Ihab Hassan in *Radical Innocence*, wherein he says that Bellow, although essentially a writer of the mind, is also "a sustained fantasist of the real."34 This
genre also helps the protagonists to sharpen the blunted edge of the spirit of inquiry and contemplate on the limitless possibilities beyond logic and accepted realistic perspectives of the world as in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. These three novels (including *Augie March*) employ fantasy as its base, for narration, apart from other modes. *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, like *Seize the Day*, actually precedes *Herzog*, but for this study it is being grouped in the second category. Referring to *Henderson the Rain King*, Bellow said, "I agree with those critics who see *Henderson* as a novel that starts where *Augie March* leaves off," and referring to the style of *Augie March* Bellow remarked, "The great pleasure of the book was to be there with buckets to catch it. That's why the form is loose." Furthermore talking about the significant change in *Augie March*, he said, "When I began to write *Augie March*, I took off many of these restraints I think I took off too many, and went too far, but I was feeling the excitement of discovery. I had just increased my freedom, and like any emancipated man I abused it at once." Apparently, when asked as to what these restraints were, he said:

*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 variety of things I know intimately. 38

No doubt there is a dialectic in his works: a continuous polarity between chaos and cosmos, between disorder and order, liberty and rules, between the nostalgia of the Middle Ages and the attempt to envisage a new order. Hence Bellow feels that he had "to tame and restrain style" 39 and develop another style of narration to write Henderson the Rain King and Mr. Sammler's Planet.

The early period in Bellow witnessed, paradoxically, a crisis in the understanding of reality. As Malcolm Bradbury puts it: "The modern novelist had lost something of the nineteenth century confidence in reality, in progressive sequence, in the natural growth of relationship between individuals and their moral and social progress." 40 As a consequence, the novel "turned inward to examine... the complexities and anxieties of creative consciousness, the angle of vision, the point of view, the grammar of presentations." 41 This search for alternatives for reality
was moulded into a new form and technique determining the aesthetic of the story, into fantasy. Of course taking the phenomenal world as illusionary, and reality which depended upon our own ability to perceive it. In this stance Mr. Sammler's Planet is an attack on modernism indicating that Bellow had championed for additional values. Thus Augie March marked Bellow's discovery of his own voice. It was a supple voice, infused with the rhythms and idioms of Yiddish, a voice that was capable of articulating a moral vision and lofty philosophical speculation in the most colloquial of terms. "I loosened up", Bellow recalls, "and found I could flail my arms and express my impulses. I was unruly at first and didn't have things under control, but it was at least a kind of spontaneous event. It was my liberation."  

After the first liberation Bellow moves on to a second liberation with comic mode, and he is still with it till The Bellarosa Connection. The base of their humour is fashioned by a fine blend of pain and comedy, or, as Bellow remarks, "laughter and trembling are so curiously mingled that it is not easy to determine the relations of the two." In an interview he said, "I choose comedy, as more energetic, wiser and manlier. This is really one reason why I dislike my own early novels." Replying to a question as
to what function comedy plays in his works he replied:

Sometimes you think what else can you do but laugh at these things. Perhaps that's the only thing--there is mercy and forgiveness in laughter. But let me try to put it this way, the Victorians told us how important high seriousness was, the 20th century has proved how deadly low seriousness is. What can one do with low seriousness? One watches what goes on and is convinced that despite the preaching of the doctrine of high seriousness, it's low seriousness that's won. I don't want to become political, but when you watch our poor President Nixon on television, what can you think but that he has cheapened scandal and brought it into disrepute--what really, can you say about that? I really don't know. What else to do but laugh, and besides, it comes natural, or even try to explain it, because what comes natural is most mysterious and we owe it our loyalty--unless of course it is crime that comes natural.45

In all these arguments we are led to the assumption that with Bellow all these different narrations have a specific and sure development. Bellow always had a concept behind a work, "a working idea, a feeling a sort of
excitement." Bellow began writing as a realist, developing fantasy as a major tool to probe the depths of his protagonists' feelings, viewing comedy as a series of mistakes arising out of pain; yet his basic interest never changed. He is concerned with the psychological subtleties of life and, therefore, his technique required superior minds in his readers as well as in his characters. Bellow was conscious of it and so he feels that innovative forms are needed to explore the 'self' for, "we have barely began to comprehend what a human being is." So a critical analysis of his narrative patterns is required for a better understanding of his fiction.

Bellow's novels have certainly moved from a realistic framework to a more meditative, philosophical and transcendental, taking the narrative forms as the necessary mode of mediation between the world of process and the world of consciousness. The resulting perception is indeed, comedy in its seriousness. The narrative techniques which Bellow has employed from his early novels to the present have behind it the same intentions which have been noticed continuously. The memory, the epistolary method, the dramatized consciousness, all these devices are designed to heighten the desired effects and authenticity. They do so by locating experiences in the individual consciousness.
These narrative genres can be identified by the kind of events organised in sequence; the principle of combination followed, the function performed by the protagonists and the traits drawn upon to delineate the characters.
Notes

2 Leslie Fiedler, "Saul Bellow," *Prairie Schooner* 31 (Summer, 1957): 104.
14 Rovit 22.
23 Vinson 73.
24 Harper 54.
30 Harper 49.


Harper 51.

Harper 51.

Harper 52.


Bradbury 9.


Harper 53.


Allan Chavin, "Bellow's Alternative to the Wasteland: Romantic Theme and Form in *Herzog*," *Studies in the Novel* 3 (Fall 1979) : 327.