Chapter - VI
CONCLUSION
What we have seen so far of Saul Bellow's work gives some idea of the worth of his themes and the skill with which they have been presented. We have seen a whole procession of men leading lives of "quiet desperation," compulsive thinkers in search of a philosophy or, at least, a formula for living that would keep growing doubts at bay, that would ease the curse of self-consciousness. They find their moments of illumination, some "momentary stay" against confusion. The conclusions they reach are not novel - in the main, they can be summed up as the idea that one finds happiness or peace not in seeking it for oneself, but in trying to make others. No man is indeed an island, nor can he be, and the individual realises himself to the extent that he identifies with the community. But this idea, as it occurs in Bellow's work, is neither merely sentimental nor traditionally metaphysical. The Bellow heroes arrive at it the hard way, through experience, through trial and error, and this is what makes it valuable. One may well describe it as an existentialist conclusion at the end of a long road. It comes with the quality of "felt life." It comes gently, unobtrusively and modestly as a small clarification rather than a grand illumination, giving it all the greater credibility. To some extent it is like E.M. Forster's "only connect," as the answer to the problem of how to live. As we
see, Herzog after his trials attains his moment of vision when he says: "I will do no more to enact the peculiarities of life. This is done well enough without my special assistance." 1

The Bellow characters, mostly solitaries, grope and search till they are teased out of thought and, finally, as all men must, who intend to live on, come to some small saving discovery - that no man is an island, that "there is nothing good or fair alone," that it is only through a species of self - forgetfulness and learning to care for others that an individual can feel good about his own life. One can see that these insights are not new, they represent largely a return to certain old values, they are only a kind of re-discovery of old truths. But, because they have not been easily accepted from somewhere, but have been searched for "with blood, sweat and tears," these spiritual re-discoveries become valuable. They are no longer cold common places. As Chesterton says, when a man is no longer young, he finds all the dead proverbs and sayings come alive. That is exactly what they do in Bellow's novels which, in the final analysis are reaffirmations of the "horror and the boredom and the glory" of being human.

In the ten years between 1945 and 1955 the Jewish writers in America came forward as the producers and

1 - Saul Bellow, Herzog, p. 340.
spokesmen for an influential and modern literature. Saul Bellow was a second generation Jew who had access to new ideas and moral challenges because of his upbringing in America. One of the strong trends in literary criticism has been to identify "blackness" or "Jewishness" as a dominant factor in the writing of black or Jewish writers. The Jews had brought something new into American fiction; instead of just being a recording instrument recording the chaos around him, they try to present a personal approach and a personal manner of writing. Bellow, as has been pointed out by Walter Allen, "has two approaches to his material - the introverts' approach and the extroverts'; his eye is on the universe, the social system as well as on the individual, the personal nightmares and the external chaos." Bellow who is a very urban novelist, nevertheless, is also conversant with the darkness of the soul. His attempt to synthesize the contradicting element of subjectivity and objectivity, introvert and extrovert, the dream and the real, fantasy and realism, are responsible for the effectiveness of his philosophical stand that only by submitting to reality can one transcend it. He says, "perhaps humankind cannot bear too much reality, but neither can it bear too much unreality, too much abuse of the 'truth'." This capacity also makes


3 - A Nobel Prize Winner Speaks on Art and Man, (A text of the speech delivered by Bellow on Dec.12.)
him one of the richest and the most exciting talents of this century.

Bellow's emphasis on the sense of community, or the duty of the individual towards the community, has often been treated to his being a Jew. This, I believe, is to limit an intelligent, imaginative writer to some kind of inner compulsion from an external circumstance. The idea that everyone is involved in all mankind, need not be traced to a Jewish background. The best of Christian writers and those from other religions have always emphasised this social responsibility. This need to recognise a "neighbour" in any suffering individual, to be conscious of a universal brotherhood. The emphasis on Bellow's Jewishness on this score seems exaggerated and narrow. That we find our comfort, our happiness and even our significance only in our positive relationship to others, to mankind is neither a prerogative or a peculiarity of Jews alone. It is there in Bellow's novels - because Bellow is a man of a certain kind, not because he is a Jew. It is unnecessary to invoke his Jewishness as certain critics have done.

However, Bellow has said of the Jewish feeling within him that, "it resists the claims of the twentieth century apocalyptic romanticism," it rejects the belief that man is finished, and that the world must be destroyed. The world is, on the contrary, sanctified in Bellow's work.
Moreover, there is no literature of the "hollow man" in Jewish culture. A Jew is a descendant of the old Testament heroes; not figuratively but literally. Therefore one Jewish writer after another, rejects the devaluation of man, knowing in his heart even if he rejects God, that a man is a profound holy mystery. Jewish culture is essentially affirmative. Bellow is not only a part of the affirmative Jewish tradition, he is self-consciously a part of it. He knows that Jewish writers have said 'yes' in the face of suffering, and he longs also to say 'yes'. Thus he stands in a more complex relation to the tradition.

Bellow's life has thus far been a very representative American life, a life still intimately in touch with immigrant experience, a life deeply immersed in the vast complexes of modern America, a life in which position and identity have continually to be discovered and defined, never inherited and assumed. Thus, the influence on Bellow's fiction of the American cultural tradition is strong. The spirit of America as seen in Bellow's fiction, is largely the spirit of the individual whom he wishes to defend. Bellow is clearly a part of the American tradition, out of which come the magnificent individualists of his novels.

But it is worth stressing that although Bellow is very responsive to the immense flexibility and openness of American life, he is a pertinent critic of some of the
dangers inherent in this society- "We Americans are in the
grip of a boundless desire." and "we are not sure what
satisfaction is," he says.

Bellow admits that society with its increasing
materialism threatens to suffocate the soul with its
profusion of things. But he asserts that the human spirit is
inextinguishable. Society may move towards its death with
false concepts of progress and prosperity - but somewhere,
somehow, the human spirit will start to disengage itself, to
protest, to assert its need for true values, for real
freedom, for genuine reality. This sense of the abiding
human spirit as an essence of its own right which can take
issue with a whole society, a whole state of affairs, we may
fairly call Russian. In the great Russian novels, society
even when brilliantly described and realised is seldom felt
to be the ultimate condition and container of man. So often
there is the sense of extreme human needs for reality.
Therefore Bellow often refers to the great Russians -
Tolstoy, Dostoevsky. Most importantly, it was the Russian
writers who questioned and opposed the nineteenth century
European ideals of materialistic pleasure and comfort as the
measure of human progress.

Bellow admits to the influence of Dostoevsky in his
early work and some of the gestures and arguments of his
characters do recall that figure who refused memorably to
accept the progress of society, who stood out against the
strong drift of material progress and happiness, in order to assert the independence of the human spirit.

Thus the two streams of Jewish and American humanism join in the novels of Saul Bellow. And this mingling of Jewish, American and Russian experience is the tradition behind Bellow's writing which affirms human dignity and possibility. The synthesis achieved by Bellow is significant because perhaps that is what is needed when there is conflict everywhere. The fiction of Bellow being the product of the amalgamation of Jewish, Russian and American experience draws on the "traditional values and habits of feeling of the various racial and religious stocks that make up the population of the United States," and holds high promise for the development of fiction itself in unpredictable directions.

Thus, Bellow's image is that of a priest bringing value to the world, a mad world which rejects the individual. Bellow defends him. But the effect is of a priest in the presence of a hostile mob and a ticking bomb. However, in saying that human life can go on, Bellow feels that he is not struggling so much against the current modern life as against the current of modern literature.

Summing up the values of Jewish fiction, Mark Shechner says:

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4 - Walter Allen, op.cit., p.352.
"By and large the values of this fiction have been neither traditionally Jewish, nor comfortably American; it has tended to speak for those ironic middle grounds that are illuminated by the light that fulfillments shed upon hopes, and real fates upon millienarian destinies."  

Bellow also uses the backdrop of war, brutality, depression and unemployment - like other writers of America. He affirms, but if he affirms so hard, it is due to the despair which he attacks within him. Bellow sorrows over a world from which nobility and dignity seem to be missing. The affirmation of man is thus also directed against Bellow's own tendency to despair. This tendency is seen in nearly all his fiction - thus we have the lonely, despairing and alienated heroes.

Moreover, traditions and materials from which an intellectual identity might be formed were in shambles and the writers who emerged on the scene were orphans from tradition, each responsible for his own identity. Joseph in Dangling Man is a representative symbol shorn entirely of family names. The intellectual was thrown into disarray, disillusionment with ideology and politics, isolation from one's own past as from an increasingly affluent society and an inhibition about embracing America.

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Out of a general mood of depression, expendibility, radicalism, alienation and intellectual pride that characterises modern writers both in America and England came the distinctive voice of Saul Bellow in the early forties. He wrote fiction which was private, aggressively interior or inward looking, aloof in tone and hinting a spiritual orphanage. It has been remarked that this world view was derived from European writers, Sartre and Camus - the masters of psychological estrangement. Bellow's distinction lies in the fact that without accepting any of the prevalent and customary ideologies he still asserts a bright future and a better understanding of reality.

Moreover at the heart of Bellow's idea of salvation for mankind is simplicity, to return from the periphery to what was simple and true. Bellow has been described as a highbrow with muscles and his contribution has been in the direction of enrichment of American fiction. In a world where the air is thick with apocalyptic vision, Herzog retains his sanity by his ability to laugh and by his acceptance of reality;

"I am pretty well satisfied to be, to be just as it is willed, and for as long as I may remain in occupancy." 6

Bellow is an optimist, and his comic tone in the middle of serious problems, makes it possible for him to

6 - Saul Bellow, Herzog, p. 340.
affirm life. Herzog is full of humour, in spite of its seriousness, especially when Herzog thinks of his bootlegger father, and how he himself used to be particularly fond of the fake White Horse labels, which were stuck on the bottles. There is comedy also in the fact that just when Herzog's mind has cleared of the mental fog, his brother Tom wants to take him to a psychiatrist. Similarly Bellow's other novels too are rich in comic element. Some critics find a positive, affirmative joy, a mood of radiant reconciliation in his work. Bellow shows us contemporary man in all the comedy and anguish of trying to cope with the disorderly mess of modern life pouring in from all sides. Yet, he does provide a ray of hope through his novels. The obstacles to learning to go beyond the self and be concerned for others make up much of the substance of Bellow's novels. Bellow's characters and he himself pays "allegiance to life."

In the concluding evaluation it may be said; not that Bellow had a specific message to convey through his novels, though as far as formulae for living are concerned, as they emerge from the novels, the protagonists seem to arrive at an accommodation by subordinating themselves, by learning to care for others, by learning to accept life without reaching after its meaning. Their "momentary stay against confusion" is a small discovery, and it is not a forced conclusion, but achieved in the course of living. Even so, novels based on ideas as themes face an ever-
present danger in that characters and events may become thinly allegorical or two-dimensional. As it is said, the message may swallow up the medium. Bellow has most skillfully avoided the danger by giving individuality and specificity to the characters. While there are incidents that may admit of a symbolic explanation, they too are in such low key that they do not obtrude like signposts. Bellow's work indeed constitutes, in Arnold's sense, truly "a criticism of life" under the conditions set for it by the laws of truth and beauty.