CHAPTER-VII
CONCLUSION

Saul Bellow's stature in large measure owes something to the depths to which he plumbed the modern condition. He addressed the disorder of the modern age, with all its horror and darkness as well as its great hope. Though intensely identified with the United States, his heroes are preoccupied with dilemmas arising out of European intellectual and cultural history. Bellow's fictional world is at once cerebral and sensual. His concern is with the interconnections between art, politics, business, personal sexual proclivities and passions, the intellectual, and the making of culture in modern times. He is heady, like German writer Thomas Mann, revealing the limitations and powers of the self. Few contemporary American writers deal with such weighty issues as masterfully as did Bellow.

He is important because he both preserved and enhanced qualities that are present in the great fictional works of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries yet he fully participated in the tumult and uncertainty of the modern era. Though he often opposed the political left and espoused "traditional" cultural positions, Bellow was not primarily a polemical writer. His main concern was not with maintaining social or cultural order but was more spiritual and philosophical in nature. In this, he differed from the group of "New York Intellectuals" that centered in the 1940s and 1950s on the journal, Partisan Review. Although Bellow was for a time friendly with members of this group he took pains to distance himself from it and to stress his essential independence of any creed or ideology, as his paramount concern was for the individual. This theme is especially prominent in his short fiction, whose smaller canvas gives heightened emphasis to
Bellow’s stress on the struggle of the individual for self-definition and development against the background of the sundry obstacles the world has in store.

Often described as America’s best contemporary novelist, Bellow earned enormous critical praise and a wide readership as well. His popularity is, perhaps, surprising, because his novels do not contain the usual ingredients one expects to find in best-selling fiction—suspense, heroic figures, and graphic sex and violence. In fact, his novels are difficult ones that wrestle with perplexing questions, sometimes drawing from esoteric sources such as the anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner and the psychology of Wilhelm Reich. One of America’s most erudite novelists, Bellow often alluded to the work of philosophers, psychologists, poets, anthropologists, and other writers in his fiction. He once stated that the modern novelist should not be afraid to introduce complex ideas into his work. He found nothing admirable about the anti-intellectualism of many modern writers and believed that most of them failed to confront the important moral and philosophical problems of the modern age. Opposed to the glib pessimism and the “complaint” of the dominant tradition of modern literature, Bellow struggled for affirmation at a time when such a possibility was seen by many writers as merely an object of ridicule.

In contrast to many American writers, who produced their best work when they were young and then wrote mediocre or poor fiction as they grew older, Bellow is known for the consistent high quality of his work. Moreover, his fiction reveals an immense versatility. In his work, one finds highly structured Flaubertian form as well as picaresque narrative, naturalistic realism, as well as romance.
Bellow earned a reputation as a master of narrative voice and perspective, a great comic writer (perhaps the best in America since Mark Twain), and a fine craftsman whose remarkable control of the language allowed him to move easily from the highly formal to the colloquial. Most important, his novels illuminate the dark areas of the psyche and possess immense emotional power. Bellow once complained that many contemporary authors and critics are obsessed with symbolism and hidden meanings. A literary work becomes an abstraction for them, and they contrive to evade the emotional power inherent in literature. Bellow's novels do not suffer from abstraction; they deal concretely with passion, death, love, and other fundamental concerns, evoking the whole range of human emotions for his readers.

Saul Bellow's mature fiction can be considered as a conscious challenge to modernism, the dominant literary tradition of the age. For Bellow, modernism is a "victim literature" because it depicts an alienated individual who is conquered by his environment. According to him, this "wasteland" tradition originated in the middle of the nineteenth century with the birth of French realism and culminates in the work of Samuel Beckett and other nihilistic contemporary writers. This victim literature reveals a horror of life and considers humanist values useless in a bleak, irrational world. Modernism assumes that the notion of the individual self which underlies the great tradition of the novel is an outmoded concept, and that modern civilization is doomed.

Saul Bellow's vision though keenly aware of human suffering and pain does not accept the finality of the wasteland view of reality but rather discovers certain enduring values even in the present disfigured times. Although the wasteland myth is unmistakably employed in all of Bellovina it does not cancel out the presence of an affirming vision in
him, which evolves as a result of the persona's understanding that the seamy side of life does not really cancel out the beatitude and bliss that are part of life. Bellow's attitude to the modernist wasteland ideology and his espousal of a melioristic vision is consistently developed in both his non-fictional and fictional works. However his later fiction comprising *Henderson the Rain King, Herzog, Mr. Sammler's Planet, Humboldt's Gift, The Dean's December* and the later *More Die of Heartbreak*, in both its obsessive concern with the problem of the wasteland and its refusal to yield to the wasteland despair merit special attention in any study of Bellow's mature vision.

The themes of Saul Bellow are hardly original: they include the old established counterclaims of the individual versus society and the individual in self-conflict. What Bellow offers is a clarity of vision concerning these issues that is, above all, honest. In all of his writing, Bellow faces squarely the timely issue of personal effacement and consequent degradation that every social trend seems to manifest. He never draws away from the frightening implications of an impersonal, mechanical society.

The distinctive achievement of Bellow, however, lies in his depiction of the individual in such a society, for it is the plight of the man, not society that is emphasized throughout his work. In Bellow's world, society is rendered in an almost naturalistic manner—as an almost unchanging, indifferent, yet powerful background against which his protagonists in all of their sensitive awareness, their vitality, their frustrating absurdities, are seen. This juxtaposition of a static society and the organic individual informs all of Bellow's novels. That is, how does the individual in all of his individuality, with his dreams, aspirations, and idealism, along with his ever-present awareness of
society as a naturalistic reality, find a place for himself, establish a personal and a unique identity, and still maintain an honest integrity of self?

Bellow’s work is filled with instances of intellectual struggles against the perils contemporary society confronts him with: rootlessness, breaking up with tradition, isolation, loss of the sense of personal identity, social alienation. His way out seems to be in the tedious, never ending analysis, mental interpretation and re-interpretation of every aspect. His novels are seldom masterpieces of action. In Herzog (intended in its own creator’s words to be “a comic novel”), for instance, almost nothing happens from the point of view of the chronological action outside the mind of the main character – the novel is an intricate network of thoughts and ideas gravitating around the fundamental contemporary issues: politics and morals, love and power, sex, individualism and collectivism.

Bellow believes that modern fiction moved “from external action to internal movement”, a process which he traces back to Proust and Joyce, who dropped narration altogether. Bellow’s novels are not easy to define as they propose extremely various themes, thoughts, characters, typologies, imagery in an attempt to grasp the universal condition of the contemporary individual. It is tricky to put a label on any of Bellow’s character or novel or even on the author himself because there are lots of powerful well-represented dualities. It appears that the changing of perspective, the multiple points of view, the acceptance of opposite stands are keys to understanding the complexities of the modern intellectual. A paradoxical figure, Herzog can be briefly characterized as “rational student of irrationality, skeptical believer, calculating, middle-aged innocent, self-effacing egotist, erotic intellectual, Montreal-born, Russian-Jewish American”.

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Bellow managed to create a true modern hero out of a character who practically does nothing but think. In a subtle way, the action of the 19th century novels moved into thinking and then back into action as the world of ideas becomes connected with man's actions: "to think - even though it is possible only to think about oneself - becomes synonymous with to act" (Rovit, Bellow) (1967: 181). In a way it is a mandatory process for the writer to stand a chance in his attempt to shape society. Here again Bellow is dualistic. On the one hand, there are instances proving his belief that thinking alone is enough for the survival of the individual, not necessarily followed by action: "Experienced people begin at a certain point to keep their own counsel and refrain from telling their stories to one another" (Bellow, Bellarosa Connection) (1989: 14), and six pages later: "Deeply experienced people - this continually impresses me - will keep things to themselves". On the other hand, in the novel, Herzog, thought without action leads nowhere: "One can think of such things - and think and think - but nothing is resolved by these historical meditations. To think doesn't settle anything. No idea is more than an imaginary potency, a mushroom cloud (destroying nothing, making nothing) rising from blind consciousness". (Bellow, Bellarosa Connection) (1984: 24). This is one of Bellow's greatest achievements as a writer, to have managed to allow opposites to co-exist, not to take definitive sides. The true novel of ideas "becomes art when the views most opposite to the author's own are allowed to exist in full strength. Without this a novel of ideas is mere self-indulgence, and didacticism is simply axe-grinding. The opposites must be free to range themselves against each other, and they must be passionately expressed on both sides. It doesn't matter much what the writer's personal position is, what he wishes to affirm. He may
affirm principles we all approve of and write very bad novels". (Bellow, Where Do We Go From Here: The Future of Fiction) (1962: 220).

What sets Bellow’s novels apart from those of his major contemporaries, such as Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, and Norman Mailer, is primarily the treatment of the hero. The critical consensus is overwhelming in its assessment of the Bellow protagonist as a sensitive, thinking being who contends with the soul-destructive forces of modern society. Though often a victim and a spiritual alien in a materialistic world, Bellow’s protagonist is nevertheless capable of dignity, sympathy, and compassion.

In his critical essays as well, Bellow calls for a more positive vision of humans as glorious sufferers wounded by their own aspirations and ideals in a world that has lost its belief in both. Bellow’s vision of humankind’s conflict with the world is not presented as a journey into chaos, as such a conflict is often portrayed in contemporary works. Unlike his contemporaries, Bellow does not locate his hero in a world where meaning and purpose are nonexistent or, at best, random. In Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow (1973) or Barth’s Giles Goat-Boy (1966), for example—or even in the works of the South American Magical Realists such as Julio Cortázar and Jorge Luis Borges—reality is a virtual factoid, a fabulous construction, an existential hall of mirrors against which the hero or antihero bumps his psyche.

By contrast, Bellow’s world has substance. The settings of his novels—New York, Chicago, or even the countryside—are fully realized, authentically felt places. These environments, in fact, thrust the hero into a kind of moral laboratory in which to test his or her own values and gradually come to terms with life. For Bellow, it is not the world that is illusory but the hero’s ability to achieve certainty of comfort and intellectual
ease. The hero, in fact, must always strive to understand his or her place in the order of things. "The fault, dear Brutus," as William Shakespeare wrote, "is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings."

The hero as underling, what Bellow himself called the greatness of humankind’s “imbecility," is explored in the novels not with naturalistic gloom but rather from a point of view that is, above all, genuinely comic. Bellow is one of America’s supreme comic novelists. His vision of humankind’s plight entails an awareness of the contradiction between desire and limitation, between aspiration and ability. Such a contradiction has been, throughout Western literature, a vital source for the comic temper. It is interesting to note that among the novelist’s other pursuits is his translation from the Yiddish of Isaac Bashevis Singer’s “Gimpel Tam” (1945; “Gimpel the Fool,” 1953), a work spiritually akin to Bellow’s own point of view. Gimpel is the schlemiel, the loser with the soul whose place in heaven is assured by the genuine humility of his earthly naivété, a humility amounting to a holiness through submission. The Bellovian hero is the intellectual schlemiel, aggrieved by the madness of contemporary life but unable to submit with Job-like serenity, as Gimpel does.

Bellow is thus at odds with the naturalistic writers who preceded him and from whose tradition he emerged. Those writers, such as Dreiser, saw humans as basically victims, creatures irredeemable by any imaginative aspirations because the weight of social forces—dramatized as economic imperatives or as ethical and emotional bankruptcy—keeps them down.

The problem for Bellow’s heroes is not the lack of imagination or the inability to feel but the reverse. Protagonists such as Tommy Wilhelm in Seize the Day, for example,
suffer—like Gimpel—not only because the world is a pitiless place but also because they refuse to submit to the pitilessness, striving instead for some humanistic ideal. Tommy Wilhelm wants sympathy; he demands it as a human being. Yet his expectations lie fallow in the stony ground of his father’s heart and in the heartlessness of Tamkin and the commodities exchange.

Another intellectual schlemiel, Moses Herzog, whose name in German suggests the word “heart,” is a scholar of Romanticism who writes letters to the world to keep from going mad. His alienation from the world can only partly be explained as neurosis. Much of it stems, as does Tommy Wilhelm’s, from his own moral insight, which places him above the world while keeping him enthralled by the demands of the world. Ultimately, what places Bellow in the mainstream of classic novelists—if one can label a contemporary as “classic”—is his concern with a theme common in the work of the great novelists: the inherent contradiction between the hero’s potential as a human being and the moral value of his actual experience. Such a theme, sometimes expressed as the conflict between illusion and reality, has been characteristic of great literary works from Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote de la Mancha* (1605) and *Don Quixote of the Mancha* (1612), whose hero with windmills in the belief that they are giants, to Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857; English translation, 1886), whose heroine finds the illusion of romance stronger than the reality of daily life.

All of Bellow’s protagonists joust, metaphorically, with windmills. A seeker such as Charlie Citrine in *Humboldt's Gift* has a romantic, imaginative point of view which is counterpoised by the hardened realism of his mistress and of his mentor, Humboldt. The huge, corporeal reality of Sorella Fonstein in *The Bellarosa Connection* contrasts
ironically with her own spiritual delicacy; even the freneticism of Augie March betray at
ground level Augie's sense of human decency.

Finally, Bellow is one of the great wordsmiths of the American novel. His prose
style varies with the nature of the protagonist and the dilemma. The euphoric,
Whitmanesque breathlessness of The Adventures of Augie March simmers into the quiet
restraint of Seize the Day, expands into Moses Herzog's tempered frustrations, and dilates
into the metaphorical considerations of Mr. Sammler's Planet. In each work the prose is
often a startling mix of erudition and slang, of the analytically precise and the casually
colloquial; yet it is also effective and always right. His work is irresistibly entertaining,
containing accurate portrayals of contemporary life dramatized by dialogue of unerring
naturalness.

Among his numerous honors, Bellow received National Book Awards for The
His crowning achievement was the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1976. Most of his fiction
concerns a search for self-realization in a confusing, often hostile world. Bellow's heroes
rarely know what they want but know what they do not want: they are chronically
dissatisfied with the complacency, inertia, and materialism around them. Bellow was also
inspirational as a teacher. He is most closely identified with the University of Chicago.
The fact that Bellow was married five times reflects the quixotic spirit seen in Augie
March, Eugene Henderson, and other autobiographical creations.

Bellow will be best remembered for his example to writers attempting to discover
and declare their identities, often as members of disadvantaged minorities. Bellow
expressed—and was shaped by—the adventurous, iconoclastic, and fiercely democratic spirit of twentieth century America.

Bellow's first two novels owe a large debt to the wasteland modernism that he would explicitly reject in the late 1940s. *Dangling Man* is an existentialist diary that owes much to Fyodor Dostoevski's *Notes from the Underground* (1864). The demoralized protagonist Joseph is left "dangling" as he waits to be drafted during World War II. A moral casualty of war, he has no sense of purpose and feels weary of a life that seems boring, trivial, and cruel. Excessively self-conscious and critical of those around him, he spends most of his time alone, writing his journal. He can no longer continue his past work, writing biographical essays on philosophers of the Enlightenment. Although he is alienated, he does realize that he should not make a doctrine out of this feeling. The conclusion of the novel reveals Joseph's ultimate failure to transcend his "victimization"; he is drafted and greets his imminent regimentation enthusiastically.

Bellow's use of Socratic irony reflects his anxiety to give credibility to his affirmation and to bring it within the realm of the possible. The irony confronts the protagonist with the error implicit in his way of life and suggests, through implication, the desirability of cultivating a changed or a more balanced outlook. Thus, Herzog realizes that in seeking revenge on his divorced wife and her lover—in seeking justice—he had restored to a greater anarchy than what he had condemned in existing social systems. "Social organization," he acknowledges, "for all its clumsiness and evil, has accomplished far more and embodies more good than I do, for at least it sometimes gives justice. I am a mess, and talk about justice" (1965: 220). Sammler, in spite of his altruistic inclinations to "do something," is held in check by the sobering thought that "it
is a dangerous illusion to think one can do much for more than a very few” (1970: 228).

Evidently, Bellow maintains, unlike R.D. Laing, Norman O. Brown, M. Foucault, Norman Mailer, and Sylvia Plath, that a recognition of limits, of the errors of one’s sensibility, and of the existence of an entity greater than oneself is a surer mark of authenticity than the inflation of the ego to a point where it begins to act as a counterword. As case studies of the particular subtleties of particular crises, his novels significantly confront the problem of an individual’s survival in modern society without the rhetoric of nihilism, “avoiding the absurdity of empty rebellion” (1966: 72). His belief that “There may be truths on other side of life” dissuades him from an uncritical acceptance of despair, alienation, and meaninglessness, “I’m not all ready to stop hoping,” he says, because “There may be some truths which are, after all, our friends in the universe.” (1966: 73). To Bellow, such “friendly” universal truths are an integral part of the “natural knowledge” of the soul. They may be blurred temporarily by ignorance or evade by explanations but cannot be completely destroyed. Bellow’s novels are dedicated to their rediscovery – to their anxious but tenacious affirmation in the lives of his protagonists.

Bellow’s image of the artist is of the late nineteenth century: a kind of priest bringing value to the world, a mad world which rejects the individual. Bellow defends him, and in so doing cites Whitman: “The priest departs, the divine literatus comes” (12). But the effect is of a priest in the presence of a hostile mob and a ticking bomb. As an answer Bellow tells the writer to care about his characters: such a manifestation of love is an antidote for our culture (1957: 18).
That this is despairing hope is clear, as is the fact that Bellow’s yea is more meaningfully a nay. Clear also is his intent: to combat “widespread destruction” as well as his own “depressive tendencies” through his craft - therefore the Adventures, therefore the overflowing style and possibility of love and freedom for an individual.

*Seize the Day* is Bellow’s finest novel. He is able to fuse the psychological naturalism of *Dangling Man* and *The Victim* with the lyrical, cosmic quality of *Augie March*. This is a lyrical novel of high intensity in which the concrete, everyday world is intensely present. The world is to be suffered and to be loved. The New York of *Seize the Day* is there – every agonized breath of it. How acutely we feel the weight of Tommy’s gross body, the pressure of the crowded broker’s office; but acute too is the spring of Tommy’s unsatisfied love, his yearning for a true life in the false city. More than with Joseph or Asa, we suffer with Tommy and we long for his deliverance largely because he seems so rich in potentiality of love and imagination. In the materialistic brutality of the city Tommy’s story hints at a world of beauty and mystery.

The richness of Augie’s style is not lost in *Seize the Day*. The third person narrative cannot be as exuberant and lyrical as Augie’s first person narrative, but the language of Tommy’s thoughts and perceptions is metaphorical and slangy. It is filled with questions, abrupt transitions and unexpected insights:

On that very same afternoon he didn’t hold so high an opinion of this same onrush of loving kindness. What did it come to?...... It was only another one of those subway things. Like having a hard-on at random... (238).

How old-old this Mr. Rappaport was! Purple stains were buried in the flesh of his nose, and the cartilage of his ear was twisted like a cabbage heart. Beyond remedy by glasses, his eyes were smoky and faded. (85-86).
The perceptions are fantastic; they have an intensity and clarity which makes them seem to grope out toward a realm of psychological or metaphysical reality.

A long perfect ash formed on the end of the cigar, the white ghost of the leaf with all its veins and its fainter pungency. It was ignored, in its beauty, by the old man. For it was beautiful. Wilhelm he ignored as well. (87).

This is Bellow's mature style: rich in perception, rich in value. It stretches concrete images until they point to a place beyond worlds. Such style is illustrated in a passage describing a passing mood of Tommy's. Tommy Wilhelm has just denied wishing the death of his father: when his father dies, he will, he feels, be robbed. Tamkin, half-fake half-guru, asks, "You love your old man?" Wilhelm grasped at this. "Of course I love him. My father. My mother--"as he said this there was a great pull at the very center of his soul. When a fish strikes the line you feel the live force in your hand. A mysterious being beneath the water, driven by hunger, has taken the hook and rushes away and fights, writhing. Wilhelm never identified what struck within him. It did not reveal itself. It got away (92-93).

It "got away," as did the truth in Asa's dream and in his moment of near discovery at Harkavy's, as did the moments of understanding of Joseph and Augie. Intangible truth avoids Tommy Wilhelm just as final understanding of the novel avoids the reader. Perhaps it is largely for this indication of a significant pattern in human life -- indication without definition -- that we read Bellow; surely it is this sense of something common yet mysterious and ungraspable that makes this novel so much like-life. Everything is ambiguous: the Ansonia Hotel can look like marble or sea water, a glass of water like an angel's mouth; Tamkin is charlatan and wise man; Tommy is masochist and seeker after truth; his end is death and new life. The conclusion of Bellow's Library of
Congress address may rightly be quoted here: "Modern writers sin when they suppose that they know, as they conceive that physics knows ... The subject of the novelist is not knowable in any such way. The mystery increases, it does not grow less as types of literatures wear out. It is ... Symbolism or Sensibility wearing out, and not the mystery of mankind" (12). We have seen in *Augie March* Bellow's belief that life is mysterious, that it cannot be reduced to formula; we see this belief more fully dramatized in *Seize the Day*, as in this passage comparing hidden truth to a fish that gets away. If life contains such mystery it cannot be trivial; the human being must be a significant creature.

And Tommy himself is significant. The novel offers a qualified hope, a movement toward community and toward affirmation of the common life, perhaps more real than *Augie March*, where it seems willed and artificial.

It appears that in writing *Henderson the Rain King* Bellow consciously decided to plunge his character into the Darkness. But with laughter. The laughter is not dark – far from it. It is almost the laughter of Herman Hesse's immortals - a laughter which encompasses but does not get trapped in death. It is the Buddha declaring "All is well." Life is not just an arena where you raise cheers by raising an idol; it is also the cellar under the palace, where beauty in the form of terror waits. "I believe when the fear has subsided you will be capable of admiring her beauty," Dahfu tells Henderson as they look on the lioness Atti. Bellow, like Nietzsche, sees beyond tragedy to comedy, beyond terror at the dissolution of ego to joy at embracing the world.

The personal and colloquial are combined with the lyrical and philosophical.

This king ... tells me I should move from the states that I myself make into the states which are of themselves. Like if I stopped making such a noise all the time I might hear something nice. I might hear a bird. Are the wrens still nesting in the cornices?
saw the straw sticking out and was amazed that they could get inside." *I could never take after the birds. I would crash all the branches. I would have scared the pterodactyl from the skies.* (284).

The religious statement about a reality beyond ego is particularized in the wren.

We are reminded of Whitman's "And I know ..."

That the spirit of God is the brother of my own ...  
And that a keelson of the creation is love,  
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,  
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,  
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd stones,  
elder, mulelein and pokeweed (1968: 25).

Again and again the slang and American rhythms serve as ballast for the metaphysics:

"Heavenly Father, open yup my dumb heart and for Christ's sake preserve me from unreal things. Oh Thou who tookest me from pigs, let me not be killed over lions. And forgive my crimes and nonsense and let me return to Lily and the kids." (256).

The style functions here the way Tommy's mediocrity functions in *Seize the Day*: Bellow asserts the sacredness of the common life and, the profane individual. And although the ending of the novel seems more wish than achievement, he affirms with less strain than in Augie March.

Henderson is not the first novel by Bellow to be symbolical. But the symbolism is more visible here, and it is of a different kind. It is not the psychological symbolism of the sports jacket or gun in Herzog; it is more like the symbolism of myth. There have been antecedents in Bellow's fiction: the symbolic use of the colour yellow in the *Victim* becomes more than a correlative for Asa's anxieties. It is transpersonal, universally valid as signifying the Darkness. (Here, white carries the same weight.) But more than in any
previous piece, the symbolism is used schematically. What the Arenewi or Wariri represent, or the lioness, or the tomb-house, does not matter so much as that they do represent. Like Ahab’s doubloon or the whale itself, they demand a search for equivalents, for a near allegorical reading. The texture, then, is symbolical-allegorical even if we cannot read the novel as consistent allegory. Indeed, Bellow’s image in life in *Henderson the Rain King* is of a highly patterned reality with symbolic meanings. So much so that Henderson’s affirmation does not seem an affirmation of our world, only of his; not of America but of a mental, metropolitan Africa.

Just as, after *Augie March*, Bellow retrenched with *Seize the Day*, returning to a real city environment, a naturalistic base for metaphysical operations, so after *Henderson* Bellow returns to the city in *Herzog*. But the novel is as hermetically sealed off from society as Henderson. What is real is the mind of Herzog, a kind of mental *traveller*. The novel is full of ideas, as if Bellow were trying consciously to create an American philosophical-social novel, the lack of which Philip Roth had decried in “The Cult of Experience in American Writing.” But the ideas are really corollaries of Herzog’s alienation and masochism and of his desire to become human. So we don’t get a reliable picture of contemporary America – only of Herzog’s mind. It is exciting to see this mind concern itself with ideas, to see an intellectual bringing ideas into his emotional life. But largely we feel about the idea-filled Herzog (just as Bellow means us to) the same way Herzog tells about Nachman, his visionary friend:

Herzog could still see him as he had been at six. In fact he could not dismiss his vision of the two Nachmans, side by side. And it was the child with his fresh face, the smiling gap in his front teeth, the buttoned blouse and the short pants that was real, not this gaunt apparition of crazy, lecturing Nachman. (133).
It is not the "crazy, lecturing" Herzog who is real; it is Herzog as a child; it is the world of his Montreal-Jewish childhood which is most real in the novel. That world and a few vivid scenes: Mady putting on her make-up, the trials in the courtroom, the death of Herzog's mother, they have the power and the intensity, not of myth, but of ordinary life experienced in a state of heightened consciousness; they have the perception of Bellow's naturalistic fiction, pulsating with reality beyond the here-and-now.

Herzog represents a conscious effort by Bellow to write of an intellectual cut off from friends and country who struggles, largely with success, to return to community. But just as Henderson can make contact only by letter with Lily and by dance with a symbolic Child, so Herzog can experience only joyful communion in the woods of Massachusetts. Once again, Bellow has been able to forget the hardboildom of the Hemingway school which Joseph attacks in *Dangling Man*. Once again, he has created a character most beautiful in his longing to be beautiful. We feel in the complex tone of *Herzog*, a mysterious human soul in whom coexist poetry and prose, absurdity and bitterness, irony and intellectuality, passion and sorrow, guilt and dignity: a style well fitted to a fiction attempting to affirm the value of human life. In Bellow's next novel the hero will begin with a sense of community and struggle to live in and create a community—to make in our society a community in which a man can find fulfillment. Irving Howe writes, "One wants from Bellow a novel that will not be confined to a single besieged consciousness but instead will negotiate the kind of leap into the world which he proclaims, to savor the world's freshness and struggle against its recalcitrance, perhaps even to enter politics in the Aristotelian sense" (1964: 26).
In the final analysis Bellow's central theme, the defense of man, and the psychic core from which this theme derives, have been constant: the six novels blending the naturalistic, the picaresque; the philosophical, the psychological; the comic, the depressive – have been six ways of pointing at the same thing: six shafts to one mine. What varies is the human ore particular to each novel – Joseph's world, Tommy's world, Herzog's world. It is his sympathy with this manifold humanity, the apprehension of the mystery inherent in living human beings--a mystery which signifies their value – for which we read Saul Bellow.

Bellow's protagonists struggle to break through to life and to achieve their possibilities; their human potentiality; and, most importantly, their individual potentiality. But they must do so without the loss of a moral and intellectual humanism basic to their views of themselves. Bellow's heroes, then, find the complexities of their dilemma not only in an alienation from society; they are confronted by a kind of treason within themselves, which creates an even more insoluble problem.

As Robert R. Dutton has rightly put it, "Philosophically, the heroes of Bellow are in the Sartrean position of the en-soi versus the pour-soi: the being-in-itself versus the being-for-itself. Unlike the stone whose being can never transcend itself, and which is therefore complete and whole in itself, a being-in-itself, man, blessed or cursed with an imaginative consciousness, is forever in a state of self-transcendence, or in a state of being-for-itself, as well as being-in-itself. Through his imagination, man would be something other than what he is or what he seems to be; for what he is, or seems to be, is an irritatingly unsatisfying and discomfiting mystery, a mystery to which depth and breadth are given with every stretch of his imagination" (1982: 212). Bellow's novels are
narrative dramatizations of the fact of this dilemma of existence; they are a working-out
not to a resolution, but to a revelation of a human condition.

Bellow the critic has spoken on this issue. In “Distractions of a Fiction Writer”, he
maintains that novelists in the past have often failed to catch the positive factor in this
human equation of the en-soi versus the pour-soi. He feels that they have too often
depicted the consequent seeming absurdity of man (1957: 2-3). This is not to say that
Bellow is crying out for a new optimism, especially one founded on false postures. But
neither would he accept a useless and hopeless pessimism.

What Bellow urges, as well as what he attempts to create in his novels, is a
depiction of man as subangelic. But to define what subangelic man is, just what the term
means, and, equally important, what it does not mean, it is a difficult task. The difficulty
lies in the fact that the term has nothing to do with the figure observed; the meaning is to
be found within the observer. Hence, all definition is subjective. “Subangelical,” when
applied to man, is an attitude toward man, not a description of man.

Bellow speaks of the subangelic as the “nobler assumption” that is based on the
concept that man at least has the power to “overcome ignominy” and to “complete his
own life.” We can conjecture that by “overcome ignominy” Bellow means that any
depiction of man should grant him the power to rise above the indignities of complete
subjection to unseen and unknown forces, to give him a nature not totally in the chains of
a miserable naturalistic impotency. Furthermore, Bellow would say that this power must
be granted to man, not only because the lack of it closes debate, and not only because its
alternative is unthinkable, but also because there is good reason to believe that man
actually has the power to complete his own life. It may be true that this power is difficult
to find through a scientific dissection or through an objective, cold analysis: its validity is
to be discovered more easily in active man, in man involved. In any case, no matter what
a laboratory experiment indicates and no matter what a sociological study might
conclude, the nature of man is finally defined by no one but himself, and that definition
must include the power of the imagination (1957: 4-5).

In his struggle against the dehumanizing forces and standing as the eternal
sentinel for the human and the durable values, Herzog in Bellow's novel, is a universal
figure. Bellow has come to profess certain ideas he holds so dear in his heart. Herzog
makes it clear that the idea of the self has undergone significant changes. Man's function
now is to discover new areas of potentialities under changed circumstances because man
is still capable of realizing his potentialities, despite the fact that "... people can be free
now but the freedom does not have any content. It's like a howling emptiness" (39), man
has to assert his individuality in the face of nothingness. This is in fact the main issue of
contention between Herzog and the reality instructors, both in history and in time.

In spite of the irony inherent in the utterances, Herzog here echoes his creator and
is all serious in clearly opposing the idea of Void and Nothingness propounded in the
present century. Through his protagonist, Bellow probably laments that anything that
brings down more 'disgrace and dreariness' upon human beings is taken as truth which
shows anything except evil is taken to be illusion and not truth. Likewise, Herzog refuses
to believe that the modern age is worse than any other, he will not endorse pessimism.
Such popularization of nihilistic ideas infuriates him. He rages against Heidegger, when
he finds him to talk of the fall:
Dear Doctor Professor Heidegger, I should like to know what you mean by the expression the fall into the quotidian. When did this fall occur? Where were we standing when it happened? (49)

The above instances testify to the fact that for Herzog the potentialities of human life must be perennial.

Bellow’s characters have selves and interact with a society and a culture that Bellow created in detail after careful observation. In some of his works, especially Mr. Sammler’s Planet, Bellow’s attitude toward that society and that culture borders on scorn, but his attitude has been earned, not merely stated in response to limitations on his own sensibility. The interaction between self and society in his work occurs against the backdrop of moral ideas. This is not to say that Bellow was didactic; rather, his work is infused with his sophisticated understanding of moral, social, and intellectual issues. In addition to preserving a rich but increasingly neglected tradition, Bellow enriched that tradition. After the exuberant opening words of The Adventures of Augie March, he also added new possibilities to the prose style of American fiction. In short, his work offers some of the benefits that readers in previous centuries sought in fiction—most notably, some ideas about how to be a person in the world—yet it also offers a technical brilliance that Bellow keeps in rein instead of letting it control his work.

One of the most potent characteristics of Saul Bellow’s style is his portrayal of man’s struggle to incorporate his ideas into his life. The protagonist of each of the works mentioned is invariably well-read, intellectual, deeply sensitive and anxious to achieve something very big. In addition to these staple of character, the situation is usually one fraught with complex social trouble. The protagonist of Herzog desperately strives against depression and loneliness and tries to find a way to gain access to his daughter.
again after losing her in divorce. His relationship to his ex-wife is acidly bitter and anything but simple as it involves old friends and betrayals of his own. There is no innocence but what is left in the protagonist’s nearly perfect memory. He considers the sublime with the same frequency that many people blink. And he is always attempting, with acrobatic emotionality, to put everything back together—the broken American life, notions of the highest order (the sublime), and the past—all of it. It is a valiant struggle and it is one that we all deal with to some degree. We are all pressed to align our ideas with reality. Bellow’s characters happen to high very intellectual ideas and very tawdry “real lives”, which makes the task of alignment exceedingly difficult and profoundly interesting.

The retrospective method of narrative in his novels meshes perfectly with the theme of reconstruction of a whole reality, one where ideas match with life. In each work we see this theme played out to something like a natural end-point, a near-miss, a grand failure whose consequence is a deeper sense of what life is and what it is not.

Saul Bellow’s fiction contains three interrelated contradictions. First—Bellow takes a stand against the cultural nihilism of the twentieth century: against Dada, against the Wasteland, against the denigration of human life in modern society. Yet Bellow is himself essentially a depressive; and his imagination is as horrified by the emptiness of modern life as is Ionesco’s. Second—Bellow rejects the tradition of alienation in modern literature, and his fiction emphasizes the value of brotherhood and community; yet his main characters are all masochists and alienatees. Third—Bellow is particularly hostile to the devaluation of the “separate self” in modern literature, and he values individuality nearly as highly as did Emerson. Yet in novel after novel he is forced
to *discard* individuality, not simply because the individual is insignificant in the face of terrible forces, but also because individuality is undesirable, a burden which keeps the human being from love. The state of grace which his heroes approach is an anonymous state which is the polar opposite of the individuality Bellow loves and wishes to defend; but it is a state which enables Bellow to keep faith in the human being and in the possibility of his union with others. Bellow's fiction in general is moral fiction; it is not concerned with style for its own sake nor even with psychological revelation for its own sake; it considers such moral-metaphysical problems as the demarcation of human responsibility (*The Victim*) and the relationship of the individual to the world of power (*Herzog*). Always it is concerned with the question of goodness—the failure or success of the sympathetic heart. It believes in man and in the potentiality of holiness and joy within the common life, the possibility of meaningful existence. To this extent it is *Jewish* fiction (38). The influence on Bellow's fiction of the American cultural tradition is strong, although sometimes hard to distinguish since that tradition is so much a product of eighteenth century enlightenment, humanism and nineteenth century romanticism, and it is parallel in many ways to the Jewish cultural tradition.

The spirit of America as seen in Bellow is largely the spirit of the individual whom he wishes to defend—the individual's significance, his freedom. As Fiedler says in *Waiting for the End*, "[it] is the dream of exile as freedom which has made America; but it is the experience of exile as terror that has forged the self-consciousness of Americans" (1962: 73). Beneath the dream of a promised land is the nightmare of confrontation with death, the absurd, and the subterranean forces in the psyche. Yet it is also true that Bellow's defense of human dignity is peculiarly American. In its negation
American literature still affirms human dignity (39). As John Jacob Clayton has rightly observed,

Our literature is full of rebellious innocents combating a hostile, brutal, or indifferent world. From Natty Bumppo to Billy Budd to Daisy Miller to Nick Adams to Holden Caulfield our heroes are purer than the world around them. And so, while horror and alienation are integral to American fiction from Irving and Cooper to the present, yet it is a fiction which believes in the significance of the individual. But integral also to American fiction are a return to society and an affirmation of human possibilities (40). Perhaps the most intense “accommodationist” in American literature is also the most intense champion of the individual: Whitman is able to sing both of the dynamic nonconforming individual and of the union of such individualists into a community of love. This is truly America as Eden. Bellow is clearly a part of this tradition, out of which come the magnificent individualists of his novels: out of the transcendentalist glorification of the individual, out of the Hucks and Ahabs of our fiction come Augie (Huck) and Henderson (Ahab) (1968: 41).

Bellow is like the American romantics, particularly in their mixture of realistic detail and fable or parable using symbolical or allegorical machinery. It is a mixture which derives partly from the attempt to “reconcile high principles with low fact”—a problem Bellow finds in American writing generally, particularly in Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. It is very much Bellow’s own problem as well. Bellow’s heroes are not only alienated; they alienate themselves. Filled with guilt, they loathe themselves and, in most of the novels, need to heap suffering and indignity on their own heads. Joseph, Asa, Tommy, Henderson, Herzog—all are moral (social) masochists. Their literary ancestors are in the fiction of the underground, especially in Dostoyevsky. Bellow borrowed, for instance, the entire plot of Eternal Husband for The Victim, and in all his novels he uses Dostoyevskian imagery.
Bellow is close to the underground tradition he attacks (61). There is more similarity than appears between Bellow's overtly masochistic heroes and Augie. Augie is not a typical Bellow hero; Bellow produces enough noise and gaiety with the role of the picaro to mask alienation, self-hatred, and masochism. But in spite of him, hints of them appear (76).

One of the important ways in which Bellow's heroes show alienation is in their attempt to go beyond human life: to live detached from mortality and weakness. In his analysis of the [man] who makes himself into an image, Bellow is extremely close to the analysis of Sartre in *Nausea* or Genet in *The Balcony*, writers from whom Bellow separates himself in his defense of human dignity. To be "human" is, throughout Bellow's fiction, terrifying. And so his heroes turn themselves into ideal images in order to protect themselves. At the same time they turn the world into one in which they can live safely. This double creation of a self and of a world is a constant theme in Bellow. Bellow's heroes are moral masochists, cut off by despair and self-hatred from those they love, cut off from humanity by their need to go beyond human life—to be more than human. They create ideal versions of themselves, and then, unable to live in these images, they only hate themselves more, and create a version of reality in which they can live. A self and a world: but the "real" human being and the "real" world don't go away.

More important than the construction of ideal selves and worlds is the need for such constructions. Here again Bellow's analysis is close to that of Sartre and Heidegger. Sartre's man, for example, runs from the terror of a world of pure existence, a world not in relation to human constructs but beyond categories; he runs into a safe ego, an *en-soi*, and refashions the world into his likeness. Bellow's characters do the same. They cannot
face the terror of pure being; they cannot face the terror of their own being or of the death they feel they deserve (97). Thus Bellow wants to be able to affirm the possibilities for the individual to live a meaningful life in our civilization, and so he attacks the literary tradition of despair and alienation and the negation of Self. But he himself despairs, both because of what he sees in the culture and because of his own temperament. We find his characters weighed down by guilt, masochism, and the burden of themselves imposed upon reality. They fear the Darkness and set up a world in which they can live, a self to sustain them. But this strategy is crippling; it is a terrible burden. And so Bellow sees elimination of selfhood as the way to redemption of the individual. The state of grace which Bellow arrives at as a solution is an anonymous state in opposition to the individuality he loves and would like to defend; but it is a state which allows him to keep faith in the value of the human being and link him spiritually with others.

Each of Bellow's novels reads like an autobiography. Each autobiography is of a different life. The names of his heroes are often the names of his novels—'The Adventures of Augie March', ‘Henderson the Rain King’, ‘Herzog’. Bellow's characters seem to join us to their landscape. Their dream becomes ours. Bellow's novels are not stories whose lines have been chalked out, and the chapters simply coloured in: they are a process of discovering, revelations which are incomplete for the author as well, until the last page is reached. In each book, it is as though some wonderful actor is creating himself through roles that are wholly imaginary. If there is a single common factor in the central characters of Bellow's stories, it is that they are all hunted men. They are harried, they are pursued by their own limitless unease.
Bellow’s enterprise has always been to locate meaning in the tawdry, to put the life of the cities in touch with the humanistic, philosophical traditions of which the cities are the deformed children. In *Herzog* he succeeds because his central character is so much, so familiarly, the prey of the absurdities against which he wrestles. Herzog, a student of history, is frozen to the bone by his yearning for a myth of redemption, penance, and permanence.... Herzog desperately tries to maintain an innocence in the face of his career’s and civilization’s wreckage, and that innocence finally succeeds because it manages to establish itself in a field of irony, of self-doubt and moral decision based upon self-doubt. As Frank Mc Connel has put it, “Herzog and Bellow, good Talmudists that they are, understand the value of scripture, even the scripture of the absurd, as the first of human technologies and last, most apocalyptic of human hopes” (1975: 298).

*Humboldt’s Gift* is an exuberant comedy of success and failure, in which Bellow deals directly, for the first time, with the writer’s life in America, including, implicitly, his own. It is his funniest book and his most openly affectionate, even in its satiric side glances. It speaks most movingly of aging and the felt loss of the sorely missed dead. It even proposes—and this will make some readers restive—a supernatural dimension beyond the crowded comic stage on which its characters collide. Books are of course the chief events of a book-writer’s life, but with a master like Bellow the books are like battles in the life of a great general, filled with captured truths, dazzling strategies, difficulties overcome and even a few dearly fought losses. His first two novels, *Dangling Man* (1944) and *The Victim* (1947), caught the tensions of wartime and postwar America.
With *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), he made a stylistic breakthrough into the pungent colloquial idiom of his later fiction.

What many regard as Bellow's masterpiece appeared three years later. *Seize the Day* is a stunning, excruciating short novel about the downfall of Tommy Wilhelm, a loser who dreams of a quick killing on the market. Like the great short novels of Herman Melville, *Seize the Day* is at once lyrical and gritty. Bellow's evocation of New York's upper Broadway, with its cavernous shabby-genteel hotels and benches filled with old pensioners, established him as the most powerful poet of urban America. He knew this subject backward, but his next novel, *Henderson the Rain King* (1959) is about Africa, which he had never visited. In a feat of vivid imagination he produced a romance about an eccentric millionaire on a spiritual journey. It remained a special favourite of his. Of all his characters, Bellow has said, Henderson, the quixotic seeker of higher truth, is most like himself. His next novel, *Herzog* (1964), was a best seller, NBA winner and the kind of book that goes beyond literature. Moses Herzog is a big, character—comic, tragic, ridiculous, profound. As cuckold, Jew, composer of unmailed letters to everyone from Willie Sutton to Spinoza, Herzog is both a great outsider and a great Everyman who touched a nerve in readers all over the world. With *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) many felt Bellow had in fact mishandled his great power. Always a conservative in the best, classical sense of that word, Bellow in this novel shrinks his usual humane magnanimity to a narrow, almost paranoid view of the social turmoil of the 1960s. With the confidence born of a mastery that few American writers have achieved, Bellow sees very few in *Humboldt's Gift*. "The nice thing about this book," he explains, "which I was really struggling with in *Herzog*, is that I've really come into a cold air of objectivity about all
the people in the book, including Charlie. It really came easily for me to see him as America saw him, and thereby America itself became clearer” (1975: 34). It seems clear that Bellow is talking about himself as well as Charlie.

(i)

The moral pattern of all his work, first sketched out in *Dangling Man*, most vitally realized in *Herzog*, is clear enough. Perhaps the best résumé of that pattern is Bellow’s play, *The Last Analysis*, which delightfully transposes virtually all the major themes of his fiction into a farcical key. Every one of Bellow’s heroes suffers, like Bummidge in the play, from “humanitis”—which, as Bummidge’s secretary explains, is “when the human condition gets to be too much for you”. As Robert Alter has pointed out, “The term is appropriately mock-clinical: being human is a difficult business in Bellow’s view, but he sees it as an evasion to paste down the difficulty with a quasi-scientific label like “neurosis” which implies that the problem can be handled by a professional, a therapist” (1969: 96). Every man is his own analyst, Bummidge suggests, and this is pretty much the condition of each of Bellow’s protagonists.

One might say that there is a stubborn core of innocence in all Bellow’s heroes. Each is a kind of Huck Finn with no faithful Jim to guide him, a person in some ways impressively knowing about the world, yet always looking at it with eyes of youthful wonder, insisting upon grasping it in his own way. The irrepressible desire for life, however deadening the experience has been, which characterizes Bellow’s protagonists, is the expression of this innocence, or, from another point of view, the means of preserving it. The opposite of innocence as the word applies to Bellow’s heroes is not worldliness or corruption but simply thinking you know what the score is. Bellow’s
innocents at home and abroad are always looking about in perplexity: there doesn’t seem to be any scoreboard around.

Saul Bellow’s heroes are walking syntheses of modernism—in American-cut clothes. They catch on so readily because they seem better pictures of ourselves than we have had taken before. But they are modern with a difference: they think themselves problem-solvers rather than illustrators of dilemma and are full of surprise and anger when “natural” solutions fail to work. Some critics take Bellow’s tongue-in-cheek word for it that these heroes are passive. After all, they seek everybody’s advice and follow almost anybody’s lead. But this public meekness deceives; at home they are hurriers, worriers, and scramblers. Even when spinning their wheels, they are high-energy men. Bellow’s heroes incorporate layer upon layer of ideal human images from the past seventy-five years. At bottom is the portrait of the artist, hypersensitive, imaginative, and increasingly knowledgeable. The suffering candidate for sainthood whom [one can find] in Faulkner, Greene, and Silone lies immediately atop.

Crisis as the test of the soul and dynamics opposed to essences come from the war period. Civilian reaching for imaginative play after the decline of militancy indicates a late accretion. And, running through all the layers, intensity remains as the mark of being alive. Bellow has done the most encyclopedic job in fiction so far of absorbing and redirecting the cultural inheritance. No wonder that, like the Fifth Symphony in Howards End, he appeals to all conditions.

Bellow’s heroes are the heirs of modernism because they feel one of its major drives and problems: they want to be self-created, and fear that they may be. Bellow’s [characters] are accidental revolutionists. Merely following their own bents, trying energetically to give their lives the freedom and scope that modern literature suggests as possible, puts them out of touch with family and personal past. And the distance results
only in part from any individual act; much comes automatically with time—rapid change, and wide choice of interests.

Bellow shades identity nearer than any other contemporary novelist toward the logical meaning of the word. His brand exists more inside the skin. Though the hope of managing events or liking people never disappears, he aims primarily at getting emotions tuned. Results count and hurt, but so do simple feelings of stability or joy or control. Bellow's inner moments, unlike Virginia Woolf's, have the feel of persisting for a while. So he creates the strange sense at the end of *Seize the Day, Henderson*, and *Herzog* that some great portable revelation, just missed by the reader and unspecifiable by the researcher, has occurred.

Bellow assumes conditions to be fairly favourable and thus puts even more pressure on the soul to live up to its heroic calling. At the same time the situation gives nothing automatically. Everything, even minimum security, has to be fought for, won, and defended. The hero never gains sure control of himself or his surroundings, but he does orient by putting his problem in every possible perspective. Like the British tragicomic heroes, he wears out more problems than he solves. And in *Augie March, Henderson*, and *Herzog* doing so provides an energetic form of pleasure and a sense of heroic superiority which need never test itself against equals. The Bellow system at its working best is self-justifying and self-regulating.

The Bellow vision of the self-creating, self-vindicating man thus has both size and appeal it offers a way out of not alienation. After *The Victim* Bellow's heroes never lack a vision of this or some capacity for practicing it. Augie ventures, Wilhelm speculates in lard, Henderson goes on safari, and Herzog writes letters correcting the world. Even in
their deeper distresses, the protagonists can still draw on this attractive power. Though they often cannot use it in ways that will prove satisfying, they retain room for maneuver. They can be trapped, but not totally.

A saving respect for probability, event, other people, and ideas keeps Bellow from sounding like Thomas Wolfe. Bellow's awareness about the continuity of modernism accepts the facts, but its emphasis on intensity makes for a difficult balancing act. The realism of the age, beefing up hope, has to engage the evidence for despair. More than most, Bellow has shown himself able to teeter on these wide-apart rocks without falling into the creek. He can identify with pain almost as completely as Graham Greene without making a full commitment to its value. His endless balancing depends on seeming to make author and suffering hero identical while actually establishing crucial differences; it suspends the inner story in awareness of other equally dynamic processes—motives, alternatives, highs, lows, and conflicts-to-come. Though Bellow can say, "I suffer; therefore I am," with the best moderns, he hates more to stop after having said it.

At the heart of Bellow's work rests the conviction that man's problems derive from a profound dislocation of his social and political universe. While *Dangling Man* opens with the vision of a character intensely determined to put such dislocations to right, *The Victim* opens with the inverse picture of a middle-class magazine editor who appears unaware of any fundamental disharmony in his universe; Asa Leventhal's greatest concerns seem to be an illness in the family, a vacationing wife, and a dirty apartment. Despite his apparently contented surface, we soon learn that Asa has come perilously near falling spiritual prey to the same grey environment which Joseph was regarding when *Dangling Man* opened. Generally, in depicting man as a creature who can never or
only rarely know his essence, God, or ultimate truth, whose only choices are severely limited, to prefer lions to pigs or to stop writing letters, Bellow’s attitude is strongly compassionate. Man, often estranged, misunderstood, victimized by others and by himself, has a rough time. As James Gindin has pointed out, “The novel of compassion in contemporary terms, terms which frequently deny the possibility of a reigning truth by which man can be judged, plays close to sentimentality, close to the dissolution of all perspective in a wash of indiscriminate sympathy. In the same way, the drama of domestic problems, no matter how serious, can begin to sound like soap opera. Bellow is often close to sentimentality, generally insistent enough on man’s comic combination of heart and folly to seem trivial, but the density of his depiction of experience, the comic multiplicity of his perspective, the richness of his historical understanding, and his usual abolition of heroic pretense avoids both sentimentality and triviality” (1971; 306). In fact, some of his work, like *Herzog*, gains particular force from its flirtation with sentimentality, for he manages to incorporate a responsiveness to all experience, a refusal to inhibit tightly or exclude, that makes the fiction seem particularly rich and compassionate. In addition, the fiction defends the idea that history, the story of what has been and is, is a more rewarding study than philosophy, the account of what man means. And Bellow, even in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, is pre-eminently a novelist of human history, of the origin, the development, and the consequences of the Romantic sensibility in terms of contemporary urban man. At his best, Bellow avoids the fable, the metaphysically directed form, or the metaphysically essential statement about man, and shapes his material from the dense and complex historical flux that is also a central part of his subject.
It should not be surprising that Saul Bellow, most concerned as he is with the relation between ideas and life, worries about the place of the intellectual in contemporary America, a society that prizes its achievers while it patronizes and occasionally pities its thinkers. What is surprising is that Bellow, at least partially, agrees with the practical American's criticism: if the life of the mind has value, and it surely does for Bellow, its value does not lie in solving the problems of day-to-day living. Bellow’s intellectual heroes are acutely aware of the reasons for their alienation from the rest of society, but they are unable to think their way through to an accommodation with it. Thinking leads only to more thinking—not to action (29-30).

The predominant focus of *The Deans’ December* is America’s urban chaos and intellectual attitudes toward it. In a 1981 interview, Bellow states that he wrote the novel to impart the truth about “the deterioration of life in American cities” (1972: 28). This focus emerges as Corde reviews his troubled career in Chicago.

Corde learns that improper intellectual attitudes complicate the urban crisis. In his investigation of jails and centres for drug addicts, he experiences the despair of the blacks who are the dominant population. Corde concludes that the blacks form an “underclass”: they are a large social group incapable of assimilating prevailing values, and they are beyond the reach of education. In his articles and in conversation with city officials. Corde describes the black underclass as “economically ‘redundant’ (220) fallen farther and farther behind the rest of the society, locked into a culture of despair and crime” (237). He also designates the blacks “a doomed people.” Corde’s articles cause indignation because the urban community cannot accept such conclusions. As Bellow points out in a 1982 interview, there exists in the public and among intellectuals “a
scheme of evasion” with respect to problematic actualities (1972: 50). Bellow attributes this evasiveness specifically to liberal doctrine in *The Dean’s December*. Through Corde, he characterizes America as “a tender liberal society” that is unable to recognize catastrophic historical situations. For the liberal American, it is assumed that progress can be made in the eradication of any social problem. That an entire class of people does not respond to opportunity is a historical catastrophe. As Corde realizes, the avoidance of horrible situations is related to the liberal theory of human nature. He claims: “Our outlook requires the assumption that each of us is at heart trustworthy, each of us is naturally decent and wills the good.” Because of the assumption, Americans ignore the facts that might express the evil of human nature. When faced with such social evils as crime Americans find, in Corde’s words, “soft ways to institutionalize harshness (300). So that with us when people are merciless, when they kill, we explain that it’s because they’re disadvantaged” (332).

In *The Dean’s December* the protagonist discerns that liberal theories about crime do no justice to the facts. In a convincing representation of intellectual evasiveness, Bellow narrates the case of a black criminal named Spofford Mitchell whom Corde is investigating. Mitchell abducted and raped a white woman named Sally Sathers. After raping her, he locked her in the trunk of his car and drove around during the day, taking her out on occasion in order to rape her again. After holding the woman captive overnight, Mitchell returned her to the trunk of his car and drove to court to stand trial for a previous rape. Acquitted for lack of evidence, he came back to his car, raped Mrs. Sathers again, and then drove to a dump where he killed her. Apprehended and jailed, Mitchell confesses; but he receives a public defense—at the city’s expense. In an effort
to decide the meaning of such events. Corde visits the public defender, a lawyer named Varennes. Although he is determined to save Mitchell from the death sentence, Varennes is not sure why he would do so. Through Corde's interview with Varennes, Bellow portrays man lost in the abstractions of ideology.

Although Bellow's protagonists are unable to accomplish anything that significantly reshapes their world, a number of them do manage to save themselves from Humboldt's fate by coming to an accommodation with the world as it is. Often, this accommodation requires a new sense of self and of the protagonist's relation to the human community. Except for Joseph, who frees himself from despair by joining the Army, Bellow's heroes lift themselves out of their malaise by discovering within themselves an essential force for life. Although sumptuously fitted out with wealth and education for a successful voyage through life, Henderson sails with everything but a compass. Like the Flying Dutchman, he cannot arrive in a safe harbor until he is redeemed. Henderson is intensely aware of his need for redemption, but he does not know what will redeem him. "I want, I want" is his perennial despairing cry, despairing because the "I want" has no object. Even though its protagonist is a fifty-five year-old man, *Henderson the Rain King* is a *Bildungsroman*. Henderson progressively learns about and purges himself of the taints that separate him from a pure love. He must learn how to love in order to do good. Henderson's earlier loves are not pure; they are tainted with ego and with self-aggrandizement; hence his well-intentioned actions tend to separate him from those he loves.

Whether Henderson is redeemed by feeding his imagination on the lioness Atti or by feeding it on Dahfu, the lion-like King of the Wariri, is a question difficult, and
perhaps unnecessary, to answer. What is obvious is that Henderson’s purgatory completes itself in redemption. Henderson’s love for Dahfu, for Romilayu, for Lily, for the lion-cub, and for the unnamed orphan on the trans-Atlantic airplane is a pure generous love untainted by the self-asserting, self-regarding, self-destructive characteristics that contaminated the loves of the first fifty-five years of his life. The trek back to civilization in the grips of a burning fever is clearly meant to symbolize the final refining fire, and Henderson’s very human, very natural comedy concludes with a celebration of community joined by love. A tradition of moral action is part of the soul’s natural knowledge in many of Bellow’s characters. They don’t ask, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Instead they ask, if they ask anything, “how shall I be my brother’s keeper?” (1979: 37-8).

But there are occasions when tradition does not speak loudly, when the soul does not know what it wants. On these occasions, some of Bellow’s characters attempt to think their way out of their dilemmas. At best, they come to a clearer understanding of their situation. They also become aware of the limits of the intellect, because they cannot think up solutions. If Bellow believes that the intellect is a weak and ineffective ethical guide, what alternative force is it that enables Bellow’s heroes to act with decency? The answer is as yet far from clear. Tradition is part of the answer, but his recent writing indicates that his final answer may have something to do with mysticism. Mr. Sammler has taken to reading Meister Eckhart, and Charlie Citrine is studying Rudolf Steiner.

There may also be an element of Hasidism in Bellow’s mystical ethic. While rabbinical Jewry stresses that the moral leader of the community is the scholar, the man who has studied the Law in all its infinite variety of complications, the Hasidic Jews
believe that the spiritual leader, who may or may not be learned, embodies the Law in his behavior. Hasidim are both moralists and mystics; the Hasidic leader has been changed by God, and the sign of that change, the charisma, is his moral character. The natural knowledge that guides Mr. Sammler, and that Henderson, Herzog, and Citrine attain at the ends of their novels, is consistent with this Hasidic doctrine of redemption by God. They reach their knowledge of good and evil without extensive study; it is as if they discover something they knew all along. The sign that they have been touched by God is their warmth, generosity, concern, and love. They embody the Law in their behaviour.

Bellow himself is not a theorist. He is a novelist who is fascinated by theorists. The premise of his work is that the world is always going to hell, since each of us, over our lifetimes, is forced to suffer the gradual extinction of the world we were thrown into by birth, whatever world that was, sensations fade, friendships break apart, people we love leave us or die, and nothing ever completely replaces them. Existence is, ineluctably, a terrible thing. Bellow has a special disaffection for the modern world, because the organized obliteration of the past seems to him to be its singular obsession, and because he finds its rationalizations and consolations meretricious. Still, there is no cure for living, because the world, whatever we do or say, keeps on turning. Bellow is a nostalgist, and not in a simple sense. He is a nostalgist in the profound sense that almost every human being is instinctively a nostalgist. We hate change, because we fear death.

Most people, in Bellow’s fiction, give in. They pretend that the modern world, which really has no use for them, is their world all the same. Some people—the inner-city hustlers and their white counterparts, the big-shot lawyers and the gangsters—see right through the rationalizations and the consolations and grasp the essential fact that the
whole enterprise of modern life is backed by nothing. These are people blessed by a perfect lack of affection; they are the socially adaptive sociopaths, born survivors, good for all possible worlds. But then, finally, there are the lonely and self-conscious maladaptives, the sensitives whom modern life makes sick, they can't help it, and who react by building mad theoretical tree houses, which they try to inhabit at the cost of enduring the rest of their generation's contempt for their refusal to flatter the present. To the extent that there are heroes in Bellow's books, the tree house builders tend to be the ones.

*Henderson the Rain King* seems to be a turning point in Bellow's fiction, because in that novel for the first time Bellow declares the idea that the only way to overcome the feeling of absurdity in modern life is the revival of faith and spirituality. Henderson travels to Bellow's imaginary Africa to get rid of an internal voice that perpetually whispers, 'I want! I want!', and in that mysterious land, he regains the innate divinity that is neglected in his homeland – America. Therefore his journey seems to be a spiritual one, at the end of which he states, 'believe me, the world is a mind there is the noumental department, and there we create' (*Henderson* 157). Henderson has obtained some fundamental answers to fundamental questions. Unlike Augie March, he has earned his faith through pain and suffering. Henderson embodies Bellow's own faith in individual man, in mankind as a whole, and in America. Man is a noble savage, according to Bellow, capable of change. Henderson brings back Bellow's message of the highest importance to mankind. Mankind, like Henderson, is unkillable: "Nature has tried everything. It has thrown the book at me. And here I am" (277). That is what Lily meant.
when she called him unkillable. There is a vital current flowing through the generations; there is an evolution, as King Dahfu proclaims (200).

The protagonists of Bellow’s later novels also seek that ‘revelation’ and try to reach to Truth. After a lifelong attempt to solve human’s problems through thinking and reasoning, Moses Herzog comes to this point: ‘Go through what is incomprehensible and you conclude that only the incomprehensible gives any light’ (*Herzog* 172). Just by realizing such a thing, human beings would be able ‘to communicate with the mighty of this world’ (ibid. 173). This communication is not an orthodox one, however, and no churches or synagogues are needed for it; his protagonists communicate with God in this way:

In the mild end of the afternoon...he looked through the green darkness at the neat bright reflections on the bottom. He loved to think about the power of sun, about the light, about the ocean. The purity of the air moved him....Herzog sighed and said to himself, ‘Praise God – praise God’....His heart was greatly stirred by the open horizon; ... the white, fine, heavy sand; but principally by the green transparency as he looked down to the stony bottom .... Never still. If his soul could cast a reflection so brilliant, and so intensely sweet, he might beg God to make such use of him. (*Herzog* 97-98)

He is a man with a conscience and a deep sense of his dignity, who is in conflict with a society that has become indifferent to human needs. The casting off of selfhood has been the dominant movement in *Dangling Man, The Victim, Seize The Day* and *Henderson*. Once again, it is true in *Herzog*. When he finds his enemy bathing his daughter so affectionately, he realizes that even a wicked man like Gersbach can have the potential for goodness, and a good man like himself can have the potential for evil. This realization liberates Herzog from his romantic notions about himself and leads him to an understanding of the complexities of human nature. He realizes that:
... a man is somehow more than his "characteristics," all the emotions, strivings, tastes, and constructions which it pleases him to call "My Life." We have reason to hope that a Life is something more than such a cloud of particles, mere facticity: Go through what is comprehensible and you conclude that only the incomprehensible gives any light (266).

Saul Bellow never draws away from the frightening implications of an impersonal, mechanical society. The distinctive achievement of Bellow, however, lies in his depiction of the individual in such a society, for it is the plight of the man, not society, that is emphasized throughout his works. In Bellow's world, society is rendered in an almost naturalistic manner—as an almost unchanging, indifferent, yet powerful background against which his protagonists in all of their sensitive awareness, their vitality, their frustrating absurdities, are seen. Thus, it becomes an important issue for Bellow's hero "in all of his individuality, with his dreams, aspirations, and idealism, along with his ever-present awareness of society as a naturalistic reality" to "find a place for himself, establish a personal and a unique identity, and still maintain an honest integrity of self". The struggle of Bellow's protagonists is to break through to life and to achieve their human potentiality, especially their individual potentiality; however, they "must do so without the loss of a moral and intellectual humanism basic to their views of themselves".

Tommy in Seize the Day is a representative example of Saul Bellow's typical hero, a man trapped in the contradiction between desire and limitation, aspiration and ability. Such a hero experiences a conflict between head and heart. He is unable to reconcile the disparity between knowing and feeling. Tommy knows, for example, that Tamkin is not to be trusted, but he wants in his heart to trust him. Tommy sees his father's mean-spiritedness and contempt, but he wants his father's sympathy nevertheless.
A good many parts of *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* and *Humboldt’s Gift* are dedicated to the meditation of their protagonists on the mystical views of Meister Eckhart and Rudolf Steiner. Bellow’s most rational protagonist, Mr. Sammler, who has tried all his life to live sensibly, believes in the ‘Eternal Being’ with whom one can be in ‘contact’, on the condition of being extricated from ‘the prison of projections’, as he reflects in a Kantian manner here: “Things met with in this world are tied to the forms of our perception in space and time and to the forms of our thinking. We see what is before us, the present, the objective. Eternal Being makes its temporal appearance in this way. The only way out of ... confinement in the prison of projections” (47). To set himself free from that ‘prison’, he exercises Eckhart’s mysticism:

He wanted, with God, to be free from the bondage of the ordinary and the finite. A soul released from Nature, from impression and from everyday life. For this to happen, God himself must be waiting, surely. And a man who has been killed and buried should have no other interest. He should be perfectly disinterested. Eckhart said in so many words that God loved disinterested purity and unity. God himself was drawn toward the disinterested soul (95).

Charlie Citrine’s attempts to restore the memories of his dead friend, Humboldt induces in him a sense of imminence with the dead poet, and drives him to affirm, “I am obliged to deny that so extraordinary a thing as a human soul can be wiped out forever” (141). Almost in half of the novel we see Citrine’s “exercise in contemplation or Spirit-recollection (the purpose of which is to penetrate into the depth of the soul and to recognize the connection between the self and the divine powers)” (142-143). Even a sort of belief in incarnation is observed in one part of the novel: “I was drawn also to philosophical idealists because I was perfectly sure that this could not be it.... We had all been here before and would presently be here again. There was another place. Maybe a
man like me was imperfectly reborn. The soul is supposed to be sealed by oblivion before its return to earthly life" (89-90).

Those critics who had not heeded these passages or taken them seriously or even had regarded them as a kind of sardonic lampoon of idealistic and mystical ideas (especially in Humboldt's Gift) were quite shocked by his 'Nobel Lecture' in which he proclaimed:

The essence of our real condition ... is shown to us in glimpses, in what Proust and Tolstoy thought of as 'true impressions'. This essence reveals, and then conceals itself. When it goes away, it leaves us again in doubt. But we never seem to lose our connection with the depths from which those glimpses come ....We are reluctant to talk about this because there is nothing we can prove, because our language is inadequate and because few people are willing to risk talking about it. They would have to say, 'There is a spirit' and that is taboo. So almost everyone keeps quiet about it, although...everyone is aware of it.

To choose the right path, pursue a meaningful life, and attain dignity and grace seem to be Bellow's principal concerns, thus his protagonists like “to lead a moral, useful and active life” (Herzog 54), and believe that “everyone grapples... to get a final satisfaction or glory that is withheld” (Mr. Sammler's Planet 104). The Bellovian hero asks permanently Joseph’s question, “How should a good man live; what is he to do?”. These are questions asked in one way or another in all of Bellow’s novels. The answers involve a search within the self, an assertion of an identity that endures in spite of all that the world can do to annihilate it. Since Bellow knows that evil would not expire in the global scope by the inward struggles of his characters, the main endeavour of his protagonists is to empower themselves; “You must train yourself. You had to be strong enough to live with disintegration ... to be able to bear the tangles of the soul, the sight of cruel dissolution to sustain your dignity” (Mr. Sammler’s Planet 61).
As Sanford Pinsker has rightly observed, “Bellow’s work will continue to be read and studied by would-be writers and would-be critics, but perhaps most of all, by that infinitely precious band of common readers who know the Genuine Article when they see it” (1995: 95).