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## SAUL BELLOW'S VISION BEYOND ABSURDITY:

### *Jewishness in Herzog*

#### I.

The observable American situation today calls for narrative treatment of such themes as alienation, lack of communication, the search for one's identity, the logical absurdity of existence. The existentialism of Sartre and the sociological observations of Riesman are at once the substantiation and the code of the attitude of writers since the Second World War. Apparently, man is alienated from God, from any meaning in history, from any philosophy of purpose. He is ignorant, finite, and fallible. He is left to his own puny self to work out his destiny. In addition, in America, he is beset by a society that forces upon him meretricious characteristics of success and a debilitating lack of communication between himself and his family, friends, and colleagues. His search is for self-identity, some measure of distinctive individuality, but the search is frantic, ludicrous, and tragically comic as in the novels of Kerouac and Baldwin, and the dramas of Kopit and Albee. In a world gone haywire, solidity and purpose are seemingly impossible.

Out of this cauldron has arisen with some fanfare a small coterie of writers whose origin is American-Jewish, and their recent capture of the American imagination has now become a well-established phenomenon. In the beginning, the temporary fame of the best-seller list had been almost the sole evidence of this occurrence; more recently, however, some American-Jewish writers, like Bernard Malamud and especially Saul Bellow, have had quite a bit of critical attention bestowed upon them. They are now considered significant figures, representative of their Jewish origins as well as of American fiction in its totality. Thus they are important to the American-Jewish community.

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Why Jewish fiction in America has come to reflect the emotions and concerns of the non-Jewish public and of the non-Jewish scholar and critic has attracted the conjectures of a number of literary postulators. Two views typify these critical perspectives. George P. Elliot's view, woven into his review of Malamud's *The Fixer* (*New York Times Book Review*, September 4, 1966), sees American-Jewish fiction as losing some of its clannishness, and talking more directly about humanity's crimes against humanity, without leaving the impression that it is exclusively a Jewish experience. When the Jew is less obviously a Jew, implies Mr. Elliot, he commends himself more effectively to a larger public. A Jewish critic, Leslie Fiedler, however, cannot see how a Jew can escape the mystique of being born into the tribe. His interpretation of the appeal of these books finds the fictional Jew as retaining his identity, as representing a unique past history that flows into contemporary times. And it is, indeed, because of the special current conditions in America that this tribal experience metamorphoses the recognizable Jew of fiction into the "mythic American" (*Ramparts*, II, Autumn, 1963).

While no claim can be made that mythic vision is the possession solely of Jewish writers, it is no accident, it seems to me, that Jack Ludwig (*New York Times Book Review*, July 17, 1966) exemplifies "fantasy" — the modern form of mythic legend — by listing Malamud's *A New Life*, Mailer's *An American Dream*, and Bellow's *Herzog*. These works are "attesting to the richness fantasy contributes to American experience." It will be noted that all three are works by American-Jewish writers.

These voices cry with the anguish of what is seen and what is remembered perhaps willy-milly, of the past, because to the Jew the past is inescapable. Even Philip Roth, for example, who disavows deep Jewish consciousness ("Writing about Jews," *Commentary*, XXXVI, 1963) cannot escape: he has his "Eli, the Fanatic" story to symbolize the powerful prevalence of the Jewish past. The fact that there is a past that the American Jew is related to (even if only to consciously reject it, the rejection is made over and over again because the past will simply not die, as Weidman accidentally shows in *The Enemy Camp*) is a fact

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that represents a modicum, at least, of permanence that the Jew can offer to his fellowman in a world of flux. He can, of course, offer much more that is positive and vital, but it is upon this flow of time into the cantankerous present that some possibility of some sort of redemption rests. What the American-Jewish writer can contribute to contemporary American literature is a vision beyond absurdity.

This is precisely Bellow's achievement in *Herzog*. Bellow looks constantly in three directions. Malcolm Bradley remarks in an article on Bellow (*Critical Quarterly*, VII, Autumn 1965) that "all his fiction has been with the relative status of historical and environmental determinism," but he is also "attentive to immediate conditions of modern American life." To this may be added Bellow's consistent concern for the future. From this coalescence of the Jewish past and the American present emerges the figure of Moses Elkanah Herzog.

Oblique testimony to the magic of Saul Bellow in composing *Herzog* may be culled from the memoir of the original of the protagonist that Maurice Samuel wrote (*Midstream*, XII, April, 1966). Samuel recounts what he knew of the real-life Moses Herzog, and his account includes some of the same names as in the book, several of the most memorable incidents, and references to the same family relationships that Bellow hardly fictionalized. Samuel also compares Bellow's Herzog with James Joyce's Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*, demonstrating similar Jewish responses to similar environmental stimuli. Yet, what emerges from Samuel's article is not Bellow's lack of originality, but rather his overlaying of experience and reality with a touch of comic fancy and tragic imagination. With deep sympathy and creative understanding, he sees meaning in the parts and in whole of the life of Moses Herzog.

First of all, Moses Herzog is a professor of Romantic literature, and Bellow has made this intellectual pursuit into a parallel of his creature's personal life. He is at once the sylvanic Emerson formulating epigrams out of nature; but he is also like a protagonist in a Poe horror story, narrating the beginning of the disintegration of his own personality. He is another tumultuous Byron finding surcease in writing and women; and the perceptive

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Coleridge finding bridges among many literatures and minds. All these strains come together in a series of adventures that are illogical, absurd, and purposeless, the life of the post-bellum American.

The only principle of movement in *Herzog* is movement itself — incessant, frantic, and without purpose. In the narrative it operates on the planes of both space and time. Spatially, from the very beginning, the story hurtles headlong from locale to locale: “He had carried [his] valise from New York to Martha’s Vineyard, but returned from the Vineyard immediately, two days later he flew to Chicago, and from Chicago he went to a village in Western Massachusetts” (1).<sup>\*</sup> His lawyer, Sandor Himmelstein, scolds him, “Don’t be such a rolling stone, Prof. Start leading a normal life. Where the hell haven’t you been — Canada, Chicago, Paris, New York, Massachusetts” (p. 90). The climax of movement without purpose comes at the looney sequence in Chicago that bounds with mad inexorability from the acquisition of an old useless gun to do murder to the coincidence of being caught with the weapon in a minor automobile accident while he is on an outing with June, his little daughter. All plans and acts are aborted — the murder, the outing, the showdown with his estranged wife, everything.

Temporally, through alternations of present-time and remembrance of this past in a stream of consciousness, and of point-of-view from third person to first person and back again, Bellow achieves the feeling, like that of a poem by C. C. Cummings that the dislocation of the individual’s life in our society may be mirrored in the dislocations of narrative time movement. There are times we, the reader, don’t know where we are or when, but at that moment neither does Herzog exactly. Time is kaleidoscopic, disoriented, then suddenly sequential, but the

NOTE: <sup>\*</sup>All page references to *Herzog* are to the first edition, New York, Viking Press, 1964, and are included in parentheses in the text. Because of Bellow’s unusual use of punctuation, especially the ellipsis, I have given the punctuation as found in the original with the exception that my interpolations of ellipsis are enclosed in square brackets. Italics in all passages quoted herein are Bellow’s.

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cycles of action are not necessarily chronological. Confusion seems to reign, but out of the chaos of movement emerges the picture of a pathetic, desperate, chaotic soul.

The desperation is seen mainly through Herzog's dealings with the people around him. Through the agony of his relationships with Daisy, Madeleine, his paramours Sono and Ramona (especially Ramona), the vile Gersbach and the gentle Willy, and the trusting June, we witness Herzog's desperate attempt to grasp at something lasting, and his failure to be able to do so is the source of the pathos in his bungling and, at times, stupidity. Little by little, we watch his suffering loneliness deepen until he is bereft, indeed, fearful, of a normal human emotion. "Not able to stand kindness at this time," he pathetically says to himself (p. 98); and again, "To tell the truth, I never had it so good," he wrote, "but I lacked the strength of character to bear such joy" (p. 169).

The bottom of his despair is perceived in his incessant letter writing on all subjects to persons living and dead, finally even to God Himself. The letters, of course, are never sent, and the whole business is abortive and tragi-comic. But these letters are a salutary form of suffering: they are confessionals that relieve for a moment Herzog's overburdened heart and mind. They give opportunity for ordered thinking, and some of them are well-reasoned and erudite. Above all, they are the written word, the one form of permanence which, to a professor of literature, has any hope of defeating the fluxional and ephemeral.

Thus it becomes evident that Herzog, sunk in a quagmire of ludicrousness, looseness, and loneliness, is representational of the modern American "on the road." The nature of this society, however, holds out no hope of rescue. Succor must come from elsewhere, and Bellow never lets his reader forget that Moses Herzog was a Jew. In this connection with the past, rescue is conceivable.

## II.

Perhaps the best way to understand Moses Herzog as the archetypal American Jew of his generation is to consider him as the progeny of the generation of Abraham Cahan's David

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Levinsky. The careers of Levinsky and Moses Herzog's father, Jonah, while not identical, do have similar major characteristics: emigration from Eastern Europe to New World; "the desperate and frightened, but obstinate" fight to make a living (p. 140); the neglect of religious ritual and law learned in the old home; the drift to assimilation, not through ideology, but because of economic necessity and social pressure; finally, memory of what was lost and the consequent suffering.

Levinsky, unlike Jonah Herzog, became rich, but also came to learn that money was surprisingly no assurance of happiness. He looked with much longing at a new "Temple," the City College of New York — the secular temple of modern learning. It represented the new freedom, the new learning, the new life. This Temple stirred him as the vision of the ancient one stirred his religious fellow immigrants, but it was equally unattainable. Busy making money, he had to leave that to the next generation. Though he is completely secularized, there is, however, potent memory. He is moved by a visit to a synagogue, and in the midst of bewailing his loneliness and unhappiness, he is ready to trade all his worldly wealth for the happiness and comfort of his youthful days in the dark and grimy *yeshiva*.

Levinsky never marries, but he represents nonetheless the parent generation that produced the Moses Herzogs of American-Jewish history — the first generation born on these shores of the East European immigration. Moses was given the chance by his father to devote himself to the new Temple (not City College in his case; but the University of Chicago, indeed more radical and secular). With the naive pride that made him seemingly better intellectually than the previous generation, Moses, typically, intoxicatedly shucks off the vestiges of Jewishness. He craves clothes *moderne*, having had enough of the other kind. Though he loves *yiddish* he prefers to avoid using it (yet is bothered by Gersbach's misuse of it). He marries a Jewish girl, but divorces her to marry an *avant garde* convert to Catholicism. Assimilation seems to be his desperate goal, certain that among non-Jews like University intellectuals and casual lovers he can come to belong.

The hope is vain. Throughout the novel, he cannot avoid dis-

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appointment and memory. He meets Nachman, a boyhood pal from the days in Chicago's Sangamon Street, and Moses recalls inwardly, "We did play in the street together. I learned the aleph-bet from your father, Reb Shika" (p. 131). This encounter sets off a passage of memory of his late father and mother, of his brothers and sister in the cold, poverty-stricken circumstances of an even earlier period of his boyhood in Napoleon Street: "My ancient times. Remoter than Egypt. No dawn, the foggy winters. In the darkness the bulb was lit. The stove was cold. Papa [with his] bad cough. . . . Napoleon Street, rotten, toylike, crazy and filthy, riddled, flogged with harsh weather" (p. 140). Yet in the middle of these moments of remembered suffering, Herzog has the vision of himself and his brothers praying together, "the bootlegger's boys reciting ancient prayers."

The culmination of this introspection is a revaluation inward and backward, where love and belonging were once: "Here was a wider range of human feeling than he had ever again been able to find. The children of the race, by a never-failing miracle, opened their eyes on one strange world after another, age after age, and uttered the same prayer in each, eagerly loving what they found. What was wrong with Napoleon Street? thought Herzog. All he ever wanted was there" (p. 140).

It is this world which holds the possibilities of the reclamation of Moses Herzog, and almost despite himself, the realization evolves in him. He wonders, for example, what will happen to his little June when the time comes to "relinquish" her to the adult world. Will she "become another lustful she-ass? Or a melancholy beauty like Sarah Herzog [his mother], destined to bear children ignorant of her soul and her soul's God?" (p. 274). Herzog is struck with the sense of loss, not only of his own past, but of the spirit of his parents, indeed, of the God of his parents.

With his gift, or curse, of self-examination, — recrimination, and — evaluation, Herzog sums up: "Herzog's folly! [his \$20,000 derelict in Ludeyville] Monument to his sincere and loving idiocy, to the unrecognized evils of his character, symbol of his Jewish struggle for a solid footing in White Anglo-Saxon Protestant America. . . . What a struggle I waged! — left-

