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Saul Bellow: The Hero in the Middle

Saul Bellow has been something of a resident alien among recent American novelists. While his work is soaked in American experience, it does not appear to develop out of the tradition of any of his immediate predecessors in American fiction. He has said some kind words about Dreiser, but he is not a direct descendant of Dreiser or of any of the other naturalists. His work does not emerge out of the generation of Fitzgerald and Hemingway, nor does it spring from the social realism that Bellow grew up with in the thirties. Critics, trying to locate Bellow in a literary context, usually link him with French or Russian novelists or with a Jewish tradition that is not specifically American. While Bellow has certainly been more cosmopolitan than most American novelists, he has not simply turned away from the American tradition. From the beginning of his career, he has consciously tried to avoid what he sees as the extremes of the modern American tradition and at the same time to contain those extremes as the central conflict within his own work.

Bellow has described American literature as a "succession of encounters between rival claimants".¹ As Bellow sees it, the "unfortunate result of this progress by contrasts in American literature is that it always produces exaggeration".² From his point of view, this impulse toward exaggeration was built into origins of modern American fiction. It was in part generated by a reaction against the "orthodox optimism" of post-Civil-War American life and its expression in literature. As Bellow puts it, the early "realists and naturalists in their anger and moral zeal turned Horatio Alger inside out".³ While the conventional novel of the late nineteenth century specialized in contrived triumph, the novelists of the naturalist and realist tradition moved to the opposite pole of inevitable defeat. They looked straight through that

cliché of the "smiling aspects of American life" and discovered what has become in its turn another cliché, "the destructive element". Reality came to mean bad news and a little later worse news. The best novelists of this emerging modern American tradition found their authority in death. We see the proof of their commitment to reality in the way they drive or follow their heroes into its arms. McTeague, Clyde Griffiths, Frederick Henry, Gatsby (the list could go on indefinitely) all discover the real to be the image of their own mortality.

With their polarized view of reality, the naturalists and realists were inevitably committed to polarized views of the self. Over and over they return to two conflicting notions of the self, which doubtless correspond to conflicting elements within themselves and in a broader sense within American culture. On the one hand, the "loss of self" which Wylie Sypher describes in modern European literature was also taking place in American fiction from the nineties onward. The naturalists and realists see the ordinary self (the self of mass or collective man unredeemed by any ideal pursuit) as submerged in total paralysis. It simply drifts in a death-like trance at the lowest possible level of consciousness. In contrast to this passive image of the ordinary self, the external environment which surrounds it represents overwhelming force. At times the force is social or natural, at times it is anonymous. There is nothing of the melodramatic glamour of any Second Fall into the quotidian in all of this. In the United States the finite has a plainer face. Hurstwood worries about the price of liver. George Wilson gathers dust beside his eternal gas pump.

But the early naturalists and realists never totally surrender themselves to the image of the doomed ordinary self. While they show this self as being absorbed in its environment, they also retain a deep strain of romantic individualism. The heroic or ideal self of popular nineteenth-century American fiction was not simply killed off. The early naturalists and realists transform it into a sort of necessary illusion. They glorify the pursuit of the ideal or heroic self even though they see it as doomed. Their central characters are usually romantic artists of the self. They try to create their being in the image of their own idea of perfection. In order to undertake this self-creation they must turn from reality to illusion. In the work of Norris, Dreiser, and later Fitzgerald, this pursuit of the perfect self is only undertaken by central characters who have immense vital energy and are protected by their own ambition

or naivete from seeing the futility of their quest. The Hemingway hero senses the futility from the start and can only pursue his ideal self by willfully restraining his imagination and intellect. While the quest for the perfect self is no final defense against destructive reality, it does allow a sad residue of nobility. The heroic self can at least put up a fight against the forces that simply swallow up the Hurstwoods and Wilsons. Ironically this fight comes to mean power over and against nature and the ordinary self. The hero is drawn into a primal conflict with reality and pits the force of his individual will against the destructive force of the environment. The early naturalists such as Norris, Dreiser, and especially London were as fascinated by the ruthless pursuit of power and by maniacal striving as they were with the processes of dissolution and human impotence. In the next generation the brutal ferocity is gone, but Gatsby in his struggle for a Platonic self and the Hemingway hero in his struggle for mastery in the face of destruction are the legitimate heirs of Wolf Larsen, Frank Cowperwood, and S. Behrman.

On the surface this cosmic gloom and the simultaneous obsessions with self-perfection and power may seem paradoxical. If it is, it is an old paradox that can be traced back to the earliest beginnings of the American tradition and beyond. Probably Augustine and Pelagius came over on the same boat. At any rate the extreme pessimism on the dark side of Calvinism has always co-existed with an American version of the romantic quest for self-perfection. It is just these polar extremes which have held Bellow's attention throughout his career. He not only sees them as the shaping forces of American literature but of American history and culture as well. Most importantly he sees them as the continuing terms of conflict within the American psyche. While Bellow rejects both orthodox optimism and orthodox pessimism, both the idea of human impotence and romantic striving after self-perfection, the tension between these contrary forces supplies much of the drama of his work. His minor characters are for the most part grotesque incarnations of one or the other of these extremes. His central characters contain these extremes as the terms of their psychological conflicts. It is here that Bellow's efforts to create an image of the human self can best be seen in relation to the naturalists and realists. Bellow's heroes contain both the heroic self and the ordinary self. The roles which the naturalists and realists tend to assign respectively to their central characters and their minor characters, Bellow locates within his central characters as the basis of their conflict. His heroes are driven in pursuit of self-perfection

and at the same time paralyzed by immersion in a hostile environment of death. Life appears to them as a choice of nightmares, just as it does in the work of the naturalists and realists: on the one side a life of frenzied striving after an impossible self-perfection, on the other total surrender to death by immersion. Unlike the characters of the naturalists and realists, Bellow's heroes refuse this choice of nightmares. His characters move towards a comic resolution, and in order to achieve it they must discover both a new sense of reality and of self. In following them through their conflicts towards this comic resolution, we can see the extent to which Bellow incorporated some of the central assumptions of naturalists and realists into his work while at the same time moving beyond them.

The most consistent aspect of Saul Bellow's fiction is the psychology of his heroes. From Joseph, the dangling man, to Artur Sammler,⁴ Bellow's central characters all have pretty much the same psychological conflict. Each of his heroes hungers for what he instinctively knows is a decent life, for love, for human brotherhood, for communion with God. At the same time each is betrayed by the demands of his own ego, which insists upon absolute freedom, absolute power, absolute understanding. The traitor ego seeks to create an ideal self and flies beyond all limits. It will settle for nothing short of self-perfection. Joseph, Bellow's first hero, speaks of a "bottomless avidity" which drives him to prize himself "crazily" and to reject any life that falls one thousandth of an inch "short of its ultimate possibility".⁵ In varying degrees all of Bellow's later heroes have this same raging ego, endlessly barking "I want, I want". It drives them in pursuit of special distinction, personal destinies, separate and unique fates. In its most extreme form, it perverts the instinctive need to be at one with other men and with God into a desire to control all other men and to become God.

But while Bellow's heroes are ego driven towards a perfect freedom, they live the negation of their desire. They cannot create their own natures and for the simplest of reasons. They have *inherent* natures, finite and imperfectible. That is the message that external reality brings. The world keeps saying "death", and for all of their evasions, Bellow's heroes, on one level of their being, believe it. Joseph knows that "we are sought and expect to be found" (*DM* 122). Like it or not, Henderson finally acknowledges what all the corpses keep telling him, "Here, man, is your being, which you think is so terrific" (*HRK* 137). For Herzog,

too, "Death waits . . . as a cement floor waits for a dropping light bulb" (*H290*). All of Bellow's heroes believe in death, and they also believe that they owe it to themselves to be immortal. This conflict determines the way that they characteristically see the world. In their frustration they condemn all reality. The conviction that death is real comes to mean that all reality is death. Reality exists to annihilate them. Any hope, any consolation is an illusion, just as the desire for immortality is an illusion. As Sammler sees, the earth becomes a terror because it is the grave (*SP 182*).

For Bellow's heroes the recurrent image of this reality of death is the modern city. They see the buildings, the institutions, the multitude of unknown bodies as the substance of death itself. The city exists as a machine for mass-production and mass-murder. To be a part of it is to be swallowed into nothingness, to lose not only the hope of immortality but also the hope of a unique or individual life. Even Augie, who tries the hardest to familiarize his world, believes, in his worst moments, that Chicago means his non-existence:

Around was Chicago. In its repetition it exhausted your imagination of details and units, more units than the cells of the brain and bricks of Babel. The Ezeckial caldron of wrath, stoked with bones. In time the caldron would melt . . . as before the work of Egypt and Assyria, as before a sea. You're nothing here. Nothing. (*AM 458*).

And just as the ego is inevitably in conflict with external reality, it is inevitably in conflict with another part of the self. The flipside of "bottomless avidity" is bottomless contempt. All of Bellow's heroes despise themselves for falling short of perfection. Joseph is sure that he conceals some inner rottenness. Asa Leventhal is always ready to believe the worst of himself. Tommy Wilhelm continually addresses himself as the "jerk", the "hippo", the "clunk". And so on through to Sammler with his mellowed repertoire of self-insults. What lies behind this is a perverse urge for pure states. If the self cannot be perfect then let it be worthless. The essential dynamic of Bellow's heroes arises from the pull of these two extremes. On the most active level of their being, they are romantic egoists drawn to some pure and absolute freedom. Denied this pure state, they turn in disgust from their environment and from their own natures. While they yearn to romp with God, death and mass society which surrounds them whisper that they will be nothing in this world and the next. Here they come very close to Otto Rank's

description of the neurotic as *artiste manqué*. They all have the artist's impulse; they want to create themselves in the image of perfection, make themselves immortal. They fail to complete this act of self-creation because a part of them which corresponds to the ordinary self sees in destructive reality and in death the futility of all quests for perfection and for individual immortality.

As a primary defense, all of Bellow's heroes turn from what they think of as reality and attempt to live in a private world of protective illusion. They strike a coward's bargain and submit to the suffering of an interior life in order to escape greater suffering and death outside. For example, just after Henderson arrives in Africa, he stumbles into an understanding of his own flight from reality; he sees that he arranged to have himself abducted into illusion in order to make "death more remote" (*HRK* 74). Later, as the lion of death charges down on him, the same understanding returns with much greater clarity: "But oh, unreality! Unreality, unreality! That was my scheme for a troubled but eternal life" (*HRK* 307). In almost every Bellow novel there is a moment when the hero literally turns his face from death and looks out the window. The best example shows up in *Herzog*. In a powerful passage, Moses drifts back across the years to remember the death of his mother. He realizes that in dying she tried to convey the simplest message, "My son, *this is death*". Moses chose "not to read this text":

He came into her room when she was dying, holding his school books, and began to say something to her. But she lifted up her hands and showed him her fingernails. They were blue. As he stared, she slowly began to nod her head up and down as if to say, "That's right, Moses, I am dying now." He sat by the bed. Presently she began to stroke his hand. She did this as well as she could; her fingers had lost their flexibility. Under the nails they seemed to him to be turning already into the blue loam of graves. She had begun to change into earth! He did not dare to look but listened to the runners of the children's sleds in the street, and the grating of peddlers' wheels on the knotted ice, the hoarse call of the apple peddler and the rattle of his steel scale. The steam whispered in the vent. The curtain was drawn (*H* 234-235).

On one level this passage is literal description; on another, it has the symbolic force of a dream. As his mother is transformed into the common earth, Moses turns away to the subjective realm of random impressions, separated by his fear, like a drawn curtain, from death and the external world. This flight from death and finite reality into

subjectivity, which is so important a part of Moses' psychology, shows up in all of Bellow's heroes. All of them instinctively hope to keep themselves safe within their own thinking. By the time we get to *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, flight becomes a characteristic of the whole American culture. Over and over in that novel, the first moon shot represents society's mass rejection of this earth which is our grave.

As a fortification against death and a hostile environment Bellow's heroes literally hole-up. They are habitual lodgers, residents of a succession of narrow, locked rooms. When they are driven into the streets, they move instinctively towards the safety of blind corridor or subway. Joseph bleeds out his time in a "six-sided box" (*DM* 92). Asa Leventhal keeps himself secluded under lock and key. Henderson fiddles away in his basement cell. And so on through to Sammler in his West Side bedroom. They all discover that holing up is a lot like digging their own grave. They run from death in the streets to a metaphoric death within the walls of their own being. Of all Bellow's heroes, Sammler is most harried. His reality has little time for metaphor. It pushes him into a mass-grave in Poland, into a private tomb of the Mezvinski family, where he was "so to speak a boarder" (*SP* 90), and finally into the New York subway to re-encounter "death, entombment, the Mezvinski vault" (*SP* 120).

Bellow's heroes seek out a temporal hideout, just as they do a spatial. The past becomes another safe box, another fortification against death. Tommy Wilhelm, Henderson, Herzog, Sammler all retreat into the past partially in an attempt to resurrect their own dead within the memory. But here again the flight from death leads only to death. Instead of bringing the dead back to life, Bellow's heroes take up residence with them. Henderson sums it up: "the dead are my boarders, eating me out of house and home" (*HRK* 287). Bellow's heroes also seek a kind of personal immortality in the past. Over and over again they return to the scenes and memories of their childhoods as a permanent retreat against time. As a result there is a childishness about them which a number of critics have pointed out. Even Henderson, the six-foot-four-inch excommando, streetfighter, and hogpuncher, confesses that he has "never been at home in life", that all his "decay has taken place upon a child" (*HRK* 84). As children, as strangers to the world, Bellow's heroes can avoid choosing any fixed purpose in life. Like Joseph, they all long to give themselves away, to know their purpose, but at the same time they are afraid to commit themselves to any fixed state of being and drift

into "endless becoming". To mature is to admit change and consequently to admit death. To "be" is to accept limits and consequently to admit death.

Behind the walls, Bellow's heroes boil over in an inner fury of self-revenge and self-justification. They retreat from external strife into internal strife which is staged as an enclosed drama. The life of the mind becomes a substitute for creative life. One part of the self replays its experience before another critical self that continually analyzes and evaluates the performance. Joseph is so lost in this internal drama of consciousness that he objectifies a part of himself into the "spirit of alternatives". Much of the same thing happens to Asa and Herzog. Asa replays his self-conflict with Albee, his own double. Herzog, spends his days writing letters to himself. Even Augie March is at last driven to a life of interior labour, "Hard, hard work . . . And none of this work is seen from the outside. It's internally done . . . All by yourself! Where is everybody? Inside your breast and skin, the entire cast" (*AM* 323). This internal work builds nothing, leads nowhere. It is a treadmill of grievances as confining as the world it is meant to supplant.

But since perfect isolation is impossible this side of death, Bellow's heroes are periodically forced and attracted towards the society around them. Just as their interior lives become a kind of drama with the divided self as actor and audience, their public lives degenerate into theatre. Here again they are cast as actor and audience. The actor's main job is to put together a convincing disguise. This becomes a parody of their own desire to create an ideal self and of the heroic quest for self-perfection undertaken by the central characters in the fiction of the naturalists and realists. Over and over Bellow's heroes struggle to keep up appearances in order to hide what they consider their "real" but inferior selves: Tommy Wilhelm in his eighteen-dollar Jack Fagman shirt, Herzog in his macaroni sports ensemble, Sammler in his Kresge cap and seersucker suit, playing the war correspondent. Of course, the object is to play the fabricated self so well that it becomes genuine in the eyes of the world. But public life is a competition of actors, all trying to play their invented selves with more force than anyone else, and Bellow's heroes are not very successful in this free market of artificial souls. They live in continual fear that the rest of the cast is seeing through their disguise to the poor player beneath.

While all of Bellow's heroes make their reluctant appearances, the role they prefer is that of audience. They want to fix life within their vision, swallow up their environment in consciousness. Seeing is transformed into an alternative for living. Their compulsive visualizing is often close to being neurotic. Joseph and Asa spy on their neighbors. Herzog, like a peeping tom, peers through the bathroom window on his would-be victim, Gersbach. Even Sammler cannot resist the compulsion to "watch", as he returns to observe the black pickpocket enact his crimes. But what matters here is not so much the individual symptoms of Bellow's heroes as the social significance of these symptoms. Augie best understands and explains what this tyranny of watching and being watched means:

When has so much damage been done by the gaze, and so much awful despotism belonged to the eyes? Why, Cain was cursed between them so he would never be unaware of his look in the view of other men. And police accompany accused and suspects to the can, and jailers see their convicts at will through bars and peepholes. Chiefs and tyrants of the public give no relief from self-consciousness. Vanity is the same thing in private, and in any kind of oppression you are a subject and can't forget yourself; you are seen, you have to be aware. In the most personal acts of your life you carry the presence and power of another; you extend his being into your thoughts, where he inhabits (AM 335).

Social life becomes a conspiracy of appearances. Each individual is reduced to a series of impressions that he makes upon an audience of jailers; he is never free of the necessity of making the strongest and best impression. At the same time each is a jailer, measuring and evaluating the impressions his neighbor gives out. And for all the observation little of any substance is really seen. No one, or almost no one, has the courage to live without disguise. In Bellow's streets even death is simply another show. Joseph tries to help a "fallen man" that he stumbles across in the Chicago winter, but as the police arrive he quickly becomes one of the crowd of "onlookers", reluctant to disengage themselves as the ambulance carries off the body. Much the same thing is reported in *The Victim*. Allbee tells of seeing a man pinned by a train to the subway walls. He screams for help as he slowly bleeds to death. The crowd sticks to the rules; it is an audience, and it watches him die. By the time we get to *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, we find that the impassivity of the crowd has changed to fascination, almost gratitude, as it watches crazy Eisen smash the black thief with a sackful of bronze sculpture.

Because their external lives consist almost entirely of play-acting and passive observation, Bellow's heroes are filled with a sense of their own inconsequentiality. Their antidote is to seek out conflict. It works as a mental stimulant that for a moment relieves the interior suffering and produces an illusion of real existence. For example, Joseph continually seeks conflict in order to have consequences; "trouble like physical pain" makes him aware that he is really alive (*DM* 82). In one degree or another, all of Bellow's heroes use conflict in this same way. In *Mr. Sammler's Planet* it becomes one of the primary social forces. Almost every character in that novel is addicted to violent conflict, the square's LSD. Even gentle Sammler is hooked and compulsively moves toward danger because it momentarily ignites his consciousness. In fact Sammler has made the ultimate trip. Pushed almost to the point of death he recharged his own being by shooting a disarmed German soldier: "It was joy When he fired his gun, Sammler, himself nearly a corpse, burst into life" (*SP* 140). Everyone of Bellow's heroes would understand Sammler's joy, and his sudden burst of life. They are all passive; they are all filled with restraints and walled up love for their fellowman; at the same time they all have a hidden potential for extreme violence.

An important part of this climate of potential violence is an all-pervasive sense of betrayal. In their darkest moments Bellow's heroes are tempted to see society as a complicity of betrayal. Society brings people together for purposes of mutual exploitation. The blood guilt of mass murder hangs over it. The hero as an individual member of his society is an accomplice in this betrayal and at the same time a victim. For example, Asa Leventhal fears that the meaning behind social reality is betrayal, the blacklist and the crematorium. While he continually sees himself as a victim of betrayal, he just as surely sees himself as guilty of it. Treason becomes for Asa, just as for Joseph, "a medium, like air, like water" (*DM* 56). It determines his relationship with collective society and more importantly with those closest to him. Underlying all his relations with his wife, his family and his friends is fear and guilt. The rest of Bellow's heroes know this same fear and guilt. Over and over the love for father, brother, friend, wife is poisoned by the suspicion of mutual betrayal. Each of Bellow's heroes realizes that an obsession with betrayal is close to moral insanity. But this realization doesn't allow them to establish easy boundaries between the delusions of paranoia and reality.

Now if Bellow had stopped here, if he had allowed his heroes to die within the walls of their conflicts, his view of reality and of the individual's relationship to it would be very close to that of the naturalists and realists. But Bellow refuses to abandon his central characters to a futile and destructive quest for perfection or to an anonymous death within the ordinary self. Throughout his career he makes a desperate effort to push through this impasse, and in doing so he moves away from both the spirit and the law of the naturalist-realist tradition. The resolution that Bellow's heroes move towards springs from a triumph over the ego rather than the simple destruction of it. They go beyond their own striving for absolute perfection and in so doing experience the sense of a new reality. The external world comes to them not as a paradigm of death, but as a mystery. This mystery has little to do with hope or despair or with any intellectual formulation of these states. Bellow's heroes see that both pessimism and optimism are rackets, and their commitments, like Bellow's, are to something "far more rudimentary than any 'position' or intellectual attitude might imply".⁷ What they arrive at is not an explanation but a sense of mystical atonement with life and reality which is independent of any final judgment of good or bad. In spite of all their resistances, Bellow's heroes discover moments of freedom when they escape from behind the walls and encounter reality. This freedom comes first in "isolate flecks", instants of intense perception which they do not really know what to do with. It grows to an experience of their relationship with all other men and to the beginnings of a morality centered in a sense of duty to other men. In Bellow's other work, it leads finally to a fleeting sense of identification with God. At this point it must be emphasized that none of this brings any final solution. For Bellow "final solutions" always mean somebody's death. The inner divisions of his heroes are never totally healed over. Their instincts for withdrawal and their fears of reality are never completely overcome. They never find any permanent point of contact with God or with the world of other men. At best they accept the mixed condition of their humanity and, as Henderson puts it, they pick up some gains along the way.

One of the recurrent moments of freedom that Bellow's heroes realize springs from a sudden emotional acceptance of the inherent limits of life. It begins with a surrender to the knowledge that there is no way of beating these limits, that striving against them is futile. For a moment the self emerges from the ego, with its demands of absolute freedom,

and experiences reality. The two best examples of this process show up in *The Adventures of Augie March* and *Seize the Day*. Augie, the career auditor, makes a lengthy declaration to his friend Clem Tambow, which is probably the most important statement of his own beliefs that appears in the course of the novel:

I have a feeling . . . about the axial lines of life, with respect to which you must be straight or else your existence is merely clownery, hiding tragedy. I must have had a feeling since I was a kid about these axial lines which made me want to have my existence on them, and so I have said "no" like a stubborn fellow to all my persuaders, just on the obstinacy of my memory of these lines, never entirely clear. But lately I have felt these thrilling lines again. When striving stops, there they are as a gift. I was lying on the couch here before and they suddenly went quivering right straight through me. Truth, love, peace, bounty, usefulness, harmony. And all noises, and grates, distortion, chatter, distraction, effort, superfluity, passed off like something unreal (AM 454).

Augie goes on to explain that his "ambition of something special and outstanding", his struggles to know everything and to hold the world together by explanation carried him away from the axial lines of reality and into the walls of his own being. To return to these lines he has had to reject his own striving after self-perfection in order to be regenerated as "man himself, finite and taped as he is" (AM 455)

In the final scene of *Seize the Day*, Tommy Wilhelm has a similar experience, but it is presented in a far more dramatic way. With a lifetime of striving after "special distinction" behind him, Tommy ends up a bankrupt among the multitude. As he hurries along Broadway, he is swept up in "the inexhaustible current of millions of every race and kind" (SD 115). The crowd carries him into a "dark and cool" chapel where a funeral is taking place. He joins the line slowly moving towards the coffin and "the face of the dead". As he gazes down upon the corpse of a stranger, all of his resistances suddenly dissolve. He begins to cry and is soon carried "past words, past reason, coherence" to the "source of all tears". In the midst of this powerful emotional seizure, the chapel music, like the tide of death itself, floods through Tommy and he sinks "deeper than sorrow, through torn sobs and cries toward the consummation of his heart's ultimate need" (SD 118).

These two crucial experiences are of course similar in a number of ways. Both are essentially passive experiences. They are not achieved.

They simply come as a gift, when the ego is beaten and striving is abated.⁸ Both focus on an irrational, emotional acceptance of the limits inherent in human nature. Tommy and Augie have *known* all along about these limits, but momentarily, at least, they have stopped pounding their heads against them. Finally both of these experiences end in a mystical union with reality. Augie feels the force of "truth, love, peace, bounty, usefulness, harmony". Tommy encounters "the consummation of his heart's ultimate need". Paradoxically freedom comes with the acceptance of limits. For a moment both are at home in their own natures. Without the burden of infinite hopes or the obligation to perfect themselves they are free to know and feel their finite humanity. They are freed from endless becoming into being.

Scattered through Bellow's work are numerous moments of such transcendence: Joseph lying in bed and suddenly perceiving in the icicles and frost patterns on his window a "world without deformity or threat of damage" (*DM* 118-119); Asa Leventhal throwing open his window to catch a glimpse of "beautiful night" (*V* 66); Augie looking out upon the Ozarks with "original eyes" (*AM* 330); Henderson catching in the African dawn the "voice of objects and colors" (*HRK* 101) and the vision of a world alive. There is a recurrent pattern in each of these moments. they all come in passive instants when the brain surrenders its labour of ordering and interpreting. The conflict between the self and the world subsides. In a span of heightened perception, the imagination becomes one with the object world. As Herzog puts it, the individual is "easily contained by everything about him" (*H* 325). Reality is seen, not as a death trap, but as a living mystery, "some powerful magnificence not human, (*HRK* 101). In each case there is, as John Clayton points out, a momentary return to a state of innocence.⁹ The hero looks out through the eyes of a child or an animal, freed from the "protective chitin of melancholy, and by-product of [the] laboring brain" (*H* 313).

Just as Bellow's heroes break through to moments of union with the world of objects, they have isolated visions of their union with the rest of mankind. Here they see their fellow men not as a multitude that bears them down but as brothers. This vision can only come when the hunt for "special distinction" and a "separate fate" subsides. For an instant the individual steps out of the lonely obsession with individual uniqueness and experiences the sense of a collective soul that contains all men. This vision recurrently comes to Bellow's heroes when they are most painfully

aware of their own self-confinement and feel the walls of their own being crushing them. The first example in Bellow's work shows up in *Dangling Man* when Joseph records a strange dream that is set in a "low-pitched long room", a kind of "vault" (*DM* 120). He has come to reclaim the body of a victim of some massacre, and he walks among rows of baskets in which the corpses are lying. Suddenly he is filled with a guilty sense of his own complicity with victim and murderer alike. This is the first of a series of underground visions in Bellow's work which focus on the inescapable bond that links men. In the *Victim* it comes with more positive force. Asa emerges from a similar nightmare in which he is lost in a subway corridor. In a state of semi-consciousness he experiences a moment of "great lucidity", "a rare pure feeling of happiness" (*V* 169). He is convinced that he suddenly sees the truth in all its simplicity: "But it was supremely plain to him that everything, everything without exception, took place as within a single soul or person" (*V* 169). Tommy Wilhelm encounters much the same truth. As he thinks upon the Babel of individual wills that surrounds him in New York City, he realizes that "there is a larger body and from this you cannot be separated" (*SD* 84). He recalls that his first sense of this "larger body" came in the "underground corridor" beneath Times Square: "all of a sudden, unsought, a general love for all these imperfect and lurid-looking people, burst out in Wilhelm's breast. He loved them...they were his brothers and sisters. He was imperfect and disfigured himself, but what difference did it make if he was united with them by his blaze of love" (*SD* 84-85). Bellow returns to this idea of humanity as a "larger body" or "single soul" in *Herzog* and in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. Herzog explains to his friend Lucas that "brotherhood is what makes a man human. . . . Man liveth not by Self alone but in his brother's face. . . . Each man shall behold the Eternal Father and love and joy abound" (*H* 272). While Sammler doubts that human brotherhood has much relevance in everyday action, he nonetheless has a deep sympathy for the "belief that there is the same truth in the heart of every human being, or a splash of God's own spirit" (*SP* 189).

The concept of humanity as a "larger body" or a "single soul" is central to the morality that is implicit in all of Bellow's novels. All of his heroes want to embody what in the simplest terms can be called "true nobility". The meaning of this quest is explored most fully in *Henderson the Rain King* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. Henderson's whole life moves towards the recognition that nobility is real. It is a part of the human

mixture, a capacity within everyman for "high conduct". As Henderson puts it "the eternal is bonded onto us. It calls out for its share" (*HRK* 318). And Henderson knows, as do all of Bellow's heroes, "that there will never be anything but misery without high conduct" (*HRK* 264). The problem is that the eternal is by no means the only thing that is "bonded on to us". The ego carries us after power; it demands that we make ourselves interesting, original, unique, perfect. It makes the creation of the self a pursuit of madness. As Sammler puts it "human beings, when they have the room, when they have liberty and are supplied also with ideas, mythologize themselves. They legendize, they expand by imagination and try to rise above the limitations of the ordinary forms of common life" (*SP* 147). What is needed is the recognition that the self cannot be created out of nothing; it must be created in imitation of models.¹⁰ If we are following the ego we choose debased models or debase the models we choose. If we are giving the eternal its share we choose proper models. "archetypes of goodness" (*SP* 136). What this good is, we know instinctively. It does not come as prize for a lifetime of philosophical inquiry; it is not something we dream out of the darkness in spite of ourselves. It is simply following our best instincts and "trying to live with a civil heart. With disinterested charity. With a sense of the mystic potency of humankind" (*SP* 136). One expresses a "civil heart" and "disinterested charity" by serving his fellow man and by having the courage to contain his own suffering. None of Bellow's heroes is satisfied that he has or can act out his own capacity for nobility. Given their mixed humanity certainly none of them could purely embody it. Elya Grunner probably comes closer than any of Bellow's central characters. In the concluding passage of *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Sammler looks down upon the corpse of Elya, his friend and benefactor, and tries to sum up his life:

At his best this man was much kinder than at my very best I have been or could ever be. He was aware that he must meet, and he did meet—through all the confusion and degraded clowning of this life through which we are speeding — he did meet the terms of his contract. The terms, which in his inmost heart, each man knows. As I know mine. As all know. For that is the truth of it — that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know (*SP* 313).

That *Mr. Sammler's Planet* should end in prayer indicates the growing importance of the religious sense in Bellow's work. The heroes of his later novels all experience what Sammler calls "God

Adumbrations" (*SP* 237). Since *Seize the Day*, the force and significance of these "adumbrations" have increased with each subsequent novel. None of Bellow's heroes arrives at any intellectual belief in God. It would even be inaccurate to say that any of them achieves or has faith. God is not a conclusion. He has nothing to do with proofs or convictions. Bellow's most recent heroes simply experience *in isolated moments of illumination* a sense of God's presence. In fact this mystical sense of God's presence frees them from the necessity of proofs, explanations, intellectual constructions and from the mental burden of holding the world together. As Herzog puts it "Synthesize or perish! Is that the new law? But when you see what strange notions, hallucinations, projections, issue from the human mind you begin to believe in Providence again" (*H* 322). As Herzog ceases to strive to order reality, he discovers that he doesn't have to: "God ties all kinds of loose ends together. Who knows why" (*H* 305). God is also seen as the deliverance from the imprisoned self caught in the snares of the ego and the will. Tommy Wilhelm, Henderson, Herzog and Sammler all pray to be released from their own wills into the will of God. The clearest sense of this prayer being answered is seen in *Herzog*. In his final pilgrimage to Ludenville he feels himself within the "hollowness of God", momentarily content with his life, "satisfied to be, to be just as it is willed" (*H* 325, 340).

No one who has read Bellow with care will make the mistake of believing that his central characters achieve any state of final beatitude. Even within "the hollowness of God", Herzog knows that "the bitter cup [will] come round again, by and by" (*H* 326). The ego cannot stand much of reality, of humanity, of God. For Bellow's heroes the moment of mystical union can never become a place of permanent residence. It is at best a corrective to the pure states of ego-mania and despair and to the illusion that these states correspond to reality, a reminder that the true country lies beyond the American Eden and also beyond the American Wasteland. In refusing his claim to these mystical estates, Bellow, inevitably, has been accused of selling his heritage.

Through the late sixties and early seventies, Bellow's reputation began to slide among the young and among some of the older critics who praised his first work. The more hostile bluntly accused him of selling out to the middle-class. He had betrayed the tradition kept alive by the naturalists and realists, the tradition of shouting "No, in thunder" as the phrase now has it. But no one need worry about Bellow's integrity.

He has not slept with the "fat Gods". In fact he offers the most sustained and most penetrating criticism of contemporary American life of any novelist of his generation. Bellow's sin is that he has refused to be a prophet. But who can really blame him for this in a country where prophecy appears to be the one resource that is infinitely renewable. It is difficult to "speak in thunder" without announcing either the New Jerusalem or the "abomination of desolation". But as Bellow has remarked, "Prophecy is nice work if you get it".¹¹

NOTES

1. Saul Bellow, "The Writer as Moralism," *Atlantic Monthly*, 211 (March, 1963), 59.
2. Bellow, "Writer as Moralism", 59.
3. Bellow, "Writer as Moralism", 59.
4. This article was written before the publication of *Humboldt's Gift*.
5. Saul Bellow, *Dangling Man* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1944), p. 88. Subsequent references to Bellow's novels will be cited in the text to the following editions: *The Victim* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1947); *The Adventures of Augie March* (New York: Viking Press, 1953); *Seize the Day* (New York: Viking Press, 1956); *Henderson the Rain King* (New York: Viking Press, 1959); *Herzog* (New York: Viking Press, 1964); *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (New York: Viking Press, 1970).
6. A number of critics have discussed this pattern of alienation and flight from death in Bellow's heroes. For example see Keith Opdahl, *The Novels of Saul Bellow* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1967), pp. 2 ff., 34-35. John Clayton, *Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man* (Bloomington) Indiana University Press, 1968), 49ff., 97ff.
7. Bellow, "Writer as Moralism", 62.
8. Several critics discuss this surrender of the ego in Bellow's heroes. For example, see Opdahl, pp. 5-6, 14, and Clayton, pp. 115 ff., 135-136.
9. Clayton, pp. 180 ff.
10. Bellow explicitly subscribes to the idea that "all things that come to much" are suggested by earlier models in "Distractions of the Fiction Writer" in *The Living Novel: A Symposium*, ed. Granville Hicks (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 17.
11. Bellow, "Writer as Moralism", 61.