

## A REVELATION OF COMPLEX VISION OF HUMAN LIFE

### IN SAUL BELLOW'S 'HERZOG'

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#### ABSTRACT

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'. In 'Herzog' he arrived at a form into which he could pour almost every theme he had worked with, into which he could release all the questions that had tormented him. It was a form which allowed him to transform his limitations into fictional assets; above all, it was a form that could present his increasingly complex vision of what being human means in our time. Like Henderson the Rain King, Herzog also is a culmination (they form twin, though not identical peaks) and marks, according to Bellow, "the end of a literary sensibility". Then this paper aims at a revelation of complex vision of human life through many confrontations of Herzog which involve intensive soul-searching examination enabling him reach a viable position to live a life founded on dignity and integrity. Confronting darkness and emerging as an intellectual survivor he lends a very comprehensive view of life.

**KEYWORDS:** Complex Vision, Confrontations, Literary Sensibility, Soul-Searching, Comprehensive

#### INTRODUCTION

From his first novel Dangling Man to his last fiction Saul Bellow has created an almost unbroken series of protagonists doing mental battle with themselves and the world. All his protagonists are trying to recover from a crisis of middle age in which man is overwhelmed by a happening which makes a mockery of his life and affirms his mismanagement of his life. Tommy Wilhelm, a salesman loses his job. Henderson, whose only vocation has been to exercise his vitality, is seized by the dread of his imminent death. Herzog a student of Romanticism has been undone by his wife's love affair with his best friend. All these men are impulsive, self-dramatizing types and they are impatient with their adversities. They are constantly oppressed by the thought of madness, death and they are always anxious for self-preservation. Ordinary life repels them and they try to invent new formula to confront the terrors of society and also for their marginal existence. The various encounters and experiences they stumble upon, force them to come out of the self and they learn to accept the fact that they belong to the world. Moses Herzog, the protagonist of Herzog also longs for companionship.

Herzog is the portrait of a modern hero, Moses Herzog, a great sufferer, a joker and an intellectual survivor. Although disintegrated, he sees himself as a survivor both of his private disaster and those of his age. The novel proclaims that love still counts, justice still exists, intellectual and emotional courage still matter. Herzog's journey through the mind renders him the answer to the piercing question which matters not only to the hero but also to the readers of this magnificent novel. Herzog is a wanderer in the mind as well as in the heart. Herzog is a great representation of the modern

man and he touched a nerve in readers all over the world. In speaking about his novel Herzog, Bellow said that: “Herzog is, to use that heavy German term, a Bildungsroman – any Bildungsroman concludes with the first step. The first real step.” (Bellow) In this sense all his novels are Bildungsromans.’ Throughout the novels his major characters are striving “to be” rather than to exist in a state of becoming. All of Bellow’s characters wander physically or mentally unfit to take their first real step. Moses E. Herzog races through the landscape of his mind and across the vistas of America in quest of emotional well-being. Like Joseph, Tommy Wilhelm and Eugene Henderson, he is also: “a chopped and shredded man.” (DM 164) His struggle is not only with himself, he has to fight a battle with a brutal society, a society that worships suffering. He feels disintegrated due to various unfortunate happenings in his life and he needs to put his fragmented psyche together again. To do this he must take the inward journey of re-experiencing his life. Only by this process he can come to terms with his past and learn from it, and this education will enable him to remove his guilt and also resolve many of his conflicts. Although the novel is told in the third person, the narrator’s voice so closely synchronizes with Herzog’s that with very little effort the reader is able to go into the protagonist’s consciousness. The reader’s position in the novel is: “we view Herzog and view Herzog viewing Herzog” (Fuchs83)

Like Bellow’s previous novels *The Adventures of Augie March* and *Henderson the Rain King*, *Herzog* traces the impulsive journey of the protagonist in his quest to gain self-knowledge by experience. Herzog is the intense account of an intellectual in an acute emotional crisis striving desperately for clarity, balance and coherence in life. Herzog’s difficulty in maintaining order in his chaotic life is mainly from his attempt to solve his emotional problems intellectually. His pre-occupation with self-development enables him to go deep into his self, while at the same time he keeps up an effort at communicating with the outside world. His letters function as an internal monologue, much like Joseph’s journal. In them he works out not only his quarrel with the world but his mental quarrel with himself, as Joseph does by constructing an alter-ego. Through this silent dialogue with the people in his life, philosophers and world leaders, alive and dead, he tests and rejects their philosophies. As it was with Augie, every character in the novel offers Herzog advice on how to live his life. The letters also allow Herzog challenge these reality instructors without confronting them. The novel abounds with reality instructors - his wife, lawyer-friend, lover, even dead philosophers whose views Herzog turns over and over in his mind. Whenever real problems become too painful he retreats into intellectual play. He frantically tries to create a viable condition by which he can maintain the dignity of self and define his character. By his letters Herzog is trying to reach out to the world. He cannot allow his emotions to remain locked inside himself, and through his intellectual approach to his problem, he reaches for the external world by communicating in the form of letters. Herzog is a very sensitive and perspective person and he is extremely vulnerable to the hypocrisies of inhuman behavior of people. His idea of perfect co-existence has been to respect the rights of others and to be good, but he becomes disappointed when he finds that there is no real sense of justice in this world. He wants to re-establish many of his vague ideas regarding the goodness of man. Herzog recognizes the need for the world to reach a survival point. He wants to renew a sense of human value and regard for one’s fellowman, although it is very difficult to cope with their own suffering with nobility and individuality.

Herzog blames the world for its complete detachment from the suffering caused by the Holocaust. The whole world watched and allowed these injustices to take place. The fact that people allowed the Holocaust to occur horrifies Herzog as much as the event itself. Herzog looks back to a pre-war time and recalls his emotional connections to family members. These memories provide Herzog with an image of genuine human relationship – connections based upon love, family, community and compassion as opposed to the relationship of his present time. All through the novel he recalls

several figures with whom he was associated: his childhood friend, his mother, his father, and his brother. At the same time, he also recalls some disturbing and traumatic experiences of his past. In one scene he recalls being raped as a young child. When he recollects this horrifying experience he becomes greatly worried about his child's safety. This inward journey is an attempt to establish ties with his family, community and nature in order to move towards a sense of content. Some of Herzog's letters address the suffering of the modern world. He expresses his horror at the brutal mechanization of the modern world in a letter to his colleague Shapiro:

To realize that you are survivor is a shock...As the dead go their way, you want to call them, but they depart in a black cloud of faces, souls. They flow out in smoke from the extermination chimneys, and leave you in the clear light of historical success-the technical success of the West. Then you know with a crash of the blood that mankind is making it – making it in glory though deafened by the explosions of blood. Unified by the horrible wars, instructed in our brutal stupidity by revolutions, by engineered famines directed by “ideologists” (heirs of Marx and Hegel and trained in the cunning of reason) perhaps we, modern mankind (can it be!), have done the nearly impossible, namely, learned something.” (Herzog 75)

According to Herzog, rather Bellow, technology corrupts, and as it puts its hold on to us it decreases traditional moral values. The Romantic age which valued beauty, mobility and integrity has passed. Herzog's world is an age of spiritual exhaustion. Bellow links the increasingly technological world with a loss of human values. Although technology has eased life, it has put human beings under its control. Herzog is the victim of the pressures of modern life and this victimhood is partly due to his inability to control his environment. Herzog as representation of everyman asks himself and wonders what it means to be a man in this city.

During the course of his reflections, Herzog comes to accept that life is life only when man understands death. As a young man he was afraid to face his mother's impending death. As in Bellow's other novels, the experience of someone else's actual or threatened death brings relief to the protagonist. In Herzog, the scene of child murder acts as a catharsis for the protagonist. It both cleanses him and allows him to recognize his own mortality by placing someone else's life in danger. He experiences a kind of re-birth in which he celebrates the ordinary. Release from mental strife brings peace. As a contemporary hero he has not been able to reconcile himself with society, but he has reconciled himself to the ambiguous nature of life and to his own ambiguous nature.

Herzog's epistolary style enables him to recall his past and bring repressed emotions to the conscious mind. His letters are both symptoms of neurosis and the means for cure as well. Through the letters the reader is drawn into Herzog's intense consciousness and experiences and the loneliness of a man whose pen friends are distant and speechless. His final letter addressed to himself is an endeavor to make philosophical sense of these emotions. Herzog's letters mean that the emotions are vital in their connection with the humans, but also in their power to reveal spiritual truths to man. They relieve the accumulating pressures of the mind. Into them he puts his needs, his resentments, and his sentiments and through them he expresses his beliefs and his faith. This epistolary form has advantages peculiar to it. It places the reader in the position of a confidential friend, thus creating a connecting link between the writer and the reader.

Herzog's mind is a representative modern mind, crowded with ideas, metaphysics, values and necessary facts which he reveals through his un- mailed letters. His mind is compelled to take on itself the burden of the whole world, the problem of mankind, but as a physical being he is one of the struggling and powerless men of the contemporary world.

Moses is like a historian who wants to bring change.

You think history is the history of loving hearts? You fool! Look at these millions of dead. Can you pity them? Feel for them? You can nothing! There were too many. We burned them to ashes, we buried them with full dozens. History is the history of cruelty, love, as soft man think.... If the old God exists he must be a murderer. But the one true god is Death? (290)

Moses implies that humanity is responsible because the whole world watched and allowed these injustices to happen. Moses agrees with Nietzsche that deep pain makes one noble. Bellow suggests that Herzog is in deep pain - if he can overcome this, it can lead to nobility. Herzog like Bellow finally views himself as an intellectual survivor. One of the key lessons that the Bellow hero learns is that life is ambiguous. In this novel, Bellow once again expresses his optimistic view of life. In acknowledging his humanity, Herzog accepts his own ambiguity his virtues and his sins as well as those of others. He emerges from his torment as an intellectual survivor because he has now experienced a truth he previously understood only intellectually. What is obvious in the novel is the struggle, sought by all of Bellow's protagonists, to resolve conflicts within the self and to confess that existence is indeed wonderful. Herzog fully comprehends the relationship between himself and the world. He understands that the world is radically human and if he has to gain self-knowledge, he cannot afford to lock himself up in a narrow sphere of inner consciousness and evade the world physically or intellectually. He must understand and share experience with others, work in the world and participate in the world situation in order to have a place as a living being in the world. He has: "the senses to respond, the emotions to care, and the mind to probe his surroundings, his people and himself. He also has the conscience and the vision and vitality to try to turn everything into a human reality." (Malin186)

Herzog is also aware that to expect complete logic in human relation is impossible. When he suffers he realizes that some of the emotions he experiences are fake and this kind of feeling is the result of an intensely rational approach to life.

## CONCLUSIONS

Moses Herzog is presented as modern day Moses, who has some desire to change the world. He even had the goal of providing a cure for the modern condition. Bellow's fiction records an inward journey in which the protagonist searches his heart and mind in order to reach a desired outcome, intellectual survival. Herzog moves both inwards and outwards and he seeks to recover his sanity and clarity by sorting out his thoughts and emotions. The novel is about Herzog's struggle to gain control over his thoughts and mind. Herzog is survival literature and Bellow uses Herzog's recovery to present an optimistic picture to the modern world. Bellow examines how an individual or community can overcome suffering. It is noticed that various factors like nihilism, betrayal, pedantry, individualization, romanticism lead to Herzog's downfall but he rises above his circumstances. His struggle to overcome his suffering sends the message of strength, spirituality and rediscovered identity. While Herzog's suffering reflects the condition of the post-war world, his survival and resistance of victimization send an optimistic message to a world recovering from the horrors of the war. Herzog is super sensitive, a great sufferer who thinks he has been untimely knocked down by the world, betrayed by those he loved. Like Henderson, he views the chaos of his personal life as a matter of his misplacement and like Henderson he sets out on an exploration of the meaning of his life. Henderson hurls himself into a physical journey whereas Herzog's wanderings take place within himself. The real action in the novel is internal. Herzog knows that he must change from within. He must

change his internal perspective in order to re-integrate his fragmented self. At the end of the novel Herzog is a compassionate human being who has faced deep trauma and suffering and through a complex inward and outward journey, has risen above that suffering to become a true intellectual survivor. He has demonstrated that despite the worst form of betrayal by those whom he should be able to trust, wife, friend, therapist, he can learn to form meaningful and spiritual relationships with other human beings. He has proved that even in the face of mass commercialization and city growth, an individual can still experience a spiritual belonging with nature and God. This is the surest signal of intellectual survival for Herzog.

Herzog represents moral values in relation to the other characters who are integrated in a money-oriented society, appearing as caricatures. Michel Zeraffa when discussing "Alienation and Subjectivism," makes comments which are pertinent to the way Bellow conceives his work concerning the level of action, so that we think it relevant to quote him here:

The heroes are victims of the split between the ideal and reality. They are consumed by the desire not only to know the cause of their torment but also to end it by devoting their energies to reconstructing these two apparently irreconcilable domains, or levels of existence, into some harmonious whole. As against this, the secondary characters are conformists. They are integrated into a contingent social world from which they submit without a word (1976: 153).

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