

CONCLUSION

Saul Bellow is most concerned 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 told his Paris Review interviewer: "To be an intellectual in the United States sometimes means to be immersed in a private life in which one thinks, but thinks with some humiliating sense of how little thought can accomplish." (Rovit: 1975 : 16) Bellow's fictional thinkers find it impossible to accomplish almost anything. From Joseph in Dangling Man, unable even to cash a cheque as he drifts aimlessly while waiting for the Selective Service to select him, to Humboldt Fleisher of Humboldt's Gift the supernova who blazes across the literary firmament only to darken into a self-destructive obscurity. 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. 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 a protagonist's religion to the human community. Bellow's heroes lift themselves out of their malaise by discovering within themselves an essential force for life.

To know the cause of his anxiety, his failure, his rage is the Bellow protagonist's deepest desire. If Bellow has a mean side that revels in the joys of the page, he has a serious side too, almost inspite of himself, as his imagination seeks the thread that unifies experience and thus explains it. In even a novel such as *Augie March*, defined from the very first as episodic, Bellow is finally moral, seeking a pattern, a meaning, an explanation of cause. Augie after all "seeks a fate good enough," and his life is strewn with traps. His cheerful nature is increasingly tested by blows. And at the end, the reader is reminded that the whole book is a reminiscence by a rather saddened individual seeking to retain his buoyancy. Every Bellow wanderer is caught up in the "urban clutter" of noise, dirt, and smell, and each is forced to recognize that all dreams of escape – geographic or spatial are sentimental nonsense. Spring season or pastoral life, Africa or Mexico, moon or ocean bottom – not one guarantees relief from inner demons or outer pressures. Man must struggle at home for his emotional life, Bellow insists, and in an age that is complex, hostile, and increasingly proud of being revolutionary. But for Bellow, the times are "more disheveled than revolutionary." (Kulshrestha: 1972 : 9) Every Bellow hero, from the dangling Joseph to the beleaguered Artur Sammler, each is, like Moses Herzog, a displaced, intellectual

victim whose survival depends on his rejecting these exploitative forces. Each tries to wrench from urban disorder a measure of moral coherence. Herzog has only to glance from his window to be reminded that the city amid dust clouds and clamour, demolishes and rebuilds itself unendingly, while in his head his blood pounds as relentlessly "for order."

Bellow's characters are inseparable from their ideas. Bellow often has sought a plot that would contain a number of ideologies and has imagined a quest that is mental as he seeks to dramatize nothing less than the act of thinking. And yet there are too many thoughts finally for the plot line to be easy, since it is an idea after all which provides the shapes of a novel. We're accustomed, if truth be told to nothing serious ideas for they often contain the novel's theme. What can we do if a dozen ideas find their way into extended statement? If sensation is so rich in a Bellow novel that it dazzles the protagonist, so, too, is the thinking, forcing us to sort it out, distinguishing among ideas that are playful or meant to be rejected or viewed as a source of salvation. Alfred Kazin points out, Bellow gives us situations whose vividness is that we share them, "though ... so much ordinariness no doubt invites condescension and even Surprise." (1976 : 8) We might add that it invites misunderstanding, too, for with so much grand theorizing in the mouths of Bellow's eccentrics, we might miss the quiet, realistic point Bellow is making. Bellow's fiction often finds its key in a highly specific, exceptionally modest aspect of daily life – the fact, say, that leisure, however

ambitiously conceived, can lead to ennui (*Dangling Man*) or the way summer heat and loneliness can make one jumpy (*The Victim*). Augie March might well have begun with the observation that few Americans know how to listen or the fact that without a sustaining national ideology Americans create their own theologies, becoming side street messiahs. In novel after novel, Bellow, like Henry James, portrays a special but ordinary phenomenon – a certain light or mood or psychology, the “sense” of a character such as Augie March, or the way a mediocre man in America tries desperately to “seize the day” or be outstanding.

Such phenomena are particularly mis-leading because of Bellow’s belief in the moderate. Bellow portrays our essentially undramatic daily life, mixed as it is, so that extremes seldom obtain and moderation seems a prime virtue. Successes are often diluted, failures are usually tempered, and we know so little about any occasion that a moderate tone is best.

If such modesty creates a problem in Bellow’s plot, however, he is successful in surmounting it. When at his best, he’s also successful in achieving order within his chaotic imaginative world. It is fascinating to note that Bellow often describes the victory of his protagonists as a clearing away of the extraneous. “He leaves his protagonist ready to begin issues defined, emotions controlled, the oppressive diversity of the world somehow controlled, the oppressive diversity of the world somehow stilled.” (Kumar & McKean: 1968 : 51) Bellow terms the obstacle on its head in short, by making the

confusing richness of his world the source and mainspring of his plot. Like the readers and the author, the protagonist struggles toward clarity. "I feel that art has something to do with the achievement of stillness in the midst of chaos." Bellow has said, "I think that art has something to do with an arrest of attention in the midst of distraction." (1967 : 190) One of Bellow's most important means of arresting attention is his use of reminiscence as all of his first person novels dramatize a character reviewing his disorderly experience, seeking an order within it. As Bellow wrestles with the recalcitrance of his material, so, too does his protagonist.

Bellow writes what we must call a novel of perception or revelation in which the protagonist desires more than anything else – more than getting the girl or the job or the whale – to see. One of Bellow's greatest tasks is to invent plots or situations that will permit this revelation. Joseph's diary, Leventhal's interviews, Augie's passive listening again and again Bellow presents the Jamesian conversation, two people grouping to see. Thus Henderson goes to Africa and Herzog reviews his experience. The Bellow protagonist is desperate for insight.

He stares and stares at the world, like a child staring at a corpse, seeking to penetrate its surface appearance. When critics complain of Bellow's plotlessness, they mean that the real activity in Bellow's novel is this act of looking and that it seems to belong to Bellow as well as his characters. Every time Bellow describes a scene,

he seems to hope that his imagination will supply the metaphor of image that will unlock the mystery. His protagonists tend to hold still. If the use of nostalgic recall permits Bellow to dramatize the protagonists quest for clarity, it also permits him to dramatize his own desire for revelation. But however active the host of characters and memories, it is the visible world that fascinates the hero. If he's not on a couch or at a rooming house window, he's on a train or in a cab or on a plane, looking and looking and looking.

Bellow sought an image of good. His fiction teems with images for the destructive or evil: could he imagine a similar concrete, figurative expression of the good?

Characters such as Augie March attempt to demonstrate the validity of love in a world of force. Tommy Wilhelm never turns nasty in the face of humiliation and is the kind of gentle person a Darwinian world crushes. In Africa Henderson found the cow people, and in the character of Mr. Sammler, Bellow seems to have worked out a combination of benevolence and strength. And yet what is crucial is that the essence be found in the world, as a tangible, physical principle. Tommy Wilhelm feels suggestive tugs deep within him, but these are interiors. Bellow sought an image of the spiritually benevolent in matter itself, finding it perhaps in a passage in Henderson. Among the Arnewi, whose cows express something of the gentle, benevolent principle Bellow would imagine, Henderson becomes convinced, he says, "that things, the object world itself, gave me a kind of go-ahead sing." I felt the world away under me,

"he says, "some powerful magnificence not human." It's a light, a "mild pink color, like the water of watermelon," and it creates in him as "I snuckered through my nose and caressed the wall with my cheek," a serene confidence: "a state as mild as the color itself." (Bellow: 1959 : 100 – 102)

One of Bellow's greatest problems grown from precisely such perceptions. Bellow's imagination carries him beyond the perimeters of our common human experience and even our common belief, for the most part, so that he's left with the problems of working both the experience and its implications into his plot.

The perception of an essence is more or less static. Bellow's task has been to dramatize this act, to send his protagonist on a quest to Africa or about the streets of Chicago. It's also to put obstacles in the way of the search – distractions, difficulties, dangers, perhaps in our society, as in Humboldt, or in the protagonist's own character as in Humboldt, or in the protagonist's pain – the dim, monstrous, urgings from inside as religious yearning. Thus Bellow has worked a metaphysical bias into the texture of his work. Certainly the sense he conveys is that the physical world is permeated with something beyond our sense. The protagonist's painted awareness of the mystery of his being adds another dimension, a depth and richness to a simple scene. Even when Herzog gets off a subway he sees a crowd of people dying. "On faces, on heads, the strong marks of decay: the big legs of women and blotted eyes of men, sunken mouths and inky nostrils." The crowd becomes a reminder not only

of mortality, but of the simple, incredible mystery of our species. The protagonist is obsessed with the felt strangeness of humankind, the cipher of human consciousness: "Signs in almost every passing face of a deeper comment or interpretation of destiny – eyes that held metaphysical statement." (Bellow: 1964 : 178 – 179)

Bellow's affirmative stance, at times nearly ostentatious may ignore some darker reaches of the spirit, and so lend itself to popular simplicities: Yet in refusing disappointment on behalf of us all he defends is human sense and presence, as Herzog does in his letter to God. Certainly Bellow, despite a certain impatience that could narrow his judgement, possesses distinct clairvoyance about discovering issues, questions, problems before they are seen by most others. In many of his public pronouncements, Bellow also tries to avoid the extremes of optimism and pessimism, the black and white of paranoia. In assigning to his heroes the task of self-creation, of awakening the soul to itself amidst time's miseries, he proves himself a new Gnostic; but this Gnostic holds no contempt for the world or its infinite particulars, alights neither nature nor history. Heir of a central vision and art's high mystery, Saul Bellow joins those generous forebears, who believe that the universe could deliver itself to our listening.

Saul Bellow is our most important contemporary writer because his world-view, untrammeled by either excessive optimism or pessimism, genuinely explores the possibilities open to man, even

as his works register powerfully the pressures that have come to change the quality of life in modern times. Bellow's world-view is valuable to mankind in that it helps man to "make a clearer estimate of... [his] condition," without bringing in false increments of optimism or despair. The process of affirmation in Bellow's fiction is invariably realised through a powerful depiction of the characteristic tensions, trials, and tribulations of the modern world. It is this awareness of pain and suffering that life inheres which makes for tempered affirmation in his fiction. The crucial point to note is that the wasteland image assumed in Bellow's works is by no means the final picture of life, and his vision goes beyond it. In fact, Bellow's ultimate affirmative reality is like life itself -mixed, though "the melioristic side" that makes survival possible with dignity and values is eminently brought out. This study has examined the complex sensibility informing Bellow's world-view in relation to both the operation of the wasteland myth in Bellow as also his uneasiness with the facile pessimism of the wasteland vision.

Much of the existing Bellow criticism concentrates on the quality of Bellow's affirmation. While one school of critical opinion argues that his rhetoric more than the material of his fiction conduces to his affirmation, the other views his affirmation as the product of a genuine confrontation with the real. The present study focuses its attention on the essential affirming world-view of Bellow that emerges in relation and opposition to the wasteland motif that

is unmistakably present in his works. Bellow's novelistic affirmation is usually characterized by a sort of religious vision which brings into harmony life on this earth with the eternal beyond. However, the wasteland mood, part of the Bellow consciousness, tempers his affirmation and eventually leads to a vision of a life which is punctuated by sacred mystery.

The city remains a major thematic preoccupation with Bellow and, particularly in his later fiction the use of the city motif acquires a sharper focus and vivacity. The six novels discussed project the city as a veritable wasteland teeming in spiritual squalor and evil. The malevolence and soul-crushing aspect of the Bellowian wasteland is manifested in the individuals who people it. Some of the characteristic wasteland symptoms noted in Bellow's characters are neurosis, fragmentation, willful celebration of negative death-instincts, lust and heartlessness. Not only does the Bellow-novel project a wasteland ambience, but its structure in entirety accords with the wasteland myth. The motifs of renewal and rebirth which are part of the rejection of the wasteland are adroitly woven into the texture of the Bellowian fiction. The affirmation earned by the protagonist becomes possible because of his awareness that his deeper consciousness can cope with such monstrosities and even employ itself for the good 'of the community. This shift in the protagonist's consciousness bespeaks Bellow's unambiguous rejection of the wasteland vision and his espousal of a balanced and sanative vision.

In *Henderson the Rain King*, Bellow internalises in his protagonist the "city-vexation" and leaves him to sojourn, for the most part, in the deep wilds of Africa which, no less than Henderson's New York, is shrouded in a wasteland ambience. To declutter his 'consciousness, Henderson voyages into his deeper self and discovers therein great reserves of life and spiritual strength. It is this "moral self-exploration" which assures Henderson a life of dignity and purpose. As Henderson gradually moves towards sanity" the motifs of renewal and rebirth bring in images of fertility and life underscoring the possibilities of meaningful existence.

Herzog presents an urban landscape, putrid with decay and death and haunted by evil. The protagonist, showing signs of disintegration, craves for some proof that life has meaning and thus prove the wastelanders reality- instructions wrong, Herzog comes to clarity only when the awareness dawns on him that there is God, and hence, hope for this universe, Bellow's rejection of the wasteland ideology is articulated through the images of fertility and resurrection which emerge in succession at the end.

Mr Sammler's Planet projects the city as a modern-day "Sodom and Gomorrah." The protagonist searches for human nobility in the modern world and discovers it in his cousin Elya. At Elya's death, Sammler prays to the Almighty for sending Elyas and thus making earthly life tolerable. Beginning on a dark muffled atmosphere, the novel moves towards a state that is reminiscent of the pastoral.

The "Chicagoland" of *Humboldt's Gift* comes to us as a place of deep distractions but it is always characterised by ambivalence. Seeking answer to the death mystery, Citrine, the protagonist, discovers that immortality is our human lot and the dead and the living can always commune with each other through love and forgiveness. Initially assuming chaos and disarray, the novel ends on a note of quietude and reconciliation, and the possibility for meaningful earthly existence is brought out through the symbol of the spring flower which survives against a backdrop of waste.

More than his' other novels, *The Dean's December* shows Bellow intensely preoccupied with the vexations characteristic of the modern city life. Alternating between two locales-Chicago in America and Bucharest in Germany- the novel effectively makes the point that the wastelanders peopling these cities are away and beyond redemption. However, Bellow's protagonist Corde, in coming to terms with the forces of history and seeing the human condition as it is, assures himself of personal redemption.

More Die of Heartbreak represents the city as an expression of the destructive powers of Eros, Thanatos, and Mammon. The protagonist, a Holy Knight figure, searches for love in the wasteland of decadent values and discovers the sources of love in himself, when his consciousness comes to near clarity. Avoiding the solipsistic world of plants and the death-celebrating human world, he goes to the Arctic cold zones to observe how life-forms survive against all odds and thereby derives spiritual stamina to face civilisation again.

Beginning on a mood of lassitude and indecisiveness, the novel moves towards resolution and clarity. In using the symbol of Phoenix at the end, the novel makes an unambiguous statement about the immortality that Benn achieves against the waste of the modern world.

In the treatment of the cityscapes, it is shown that Bellow's fiction originating in a mood of wasteland moves steadily towards an affirmative stance that crystallises a radiant mood beyond both pessimism and optimism. Bellow's differences with the modernist thinkers establish the correlation between his fictional stance and his avowed public position regarding affirmation. Bellow faults the existential philosophers, psychologists, literary modernists and their contemporary "epigones" for glorifying the wasteland ideology and making it some kind of a modern-day "church." The whole gamut of Bellow's major fiction is examined in order to show the consistently evolving anti-modernist stance. The juxtaposition of fictional materials and public statements of Bellow clearly points to the fact that he does not put much faith in the wasteland and his deep moralistic concerns help him to steer clear of both excessive optimism and pessimism and posit hope in certain "enduring" and "essential" human values, which are not accounted for by the wasteland vision.

The affirmative stance of Bellow discussed with reference to the city and his quarrel with the wasteland ideologues leads us to examine the complex sensibility that is behind this balanced world-

view. Bellow's evidently manifest romantic-transcendental sensibility is to a large extent part of his redeeming vision. His vision is shown to have affiliations with the romantic and transcendental movements. A tough-minded romanticism and a transcendental strain of thought that is strongly tethered to human reality constitute Bellow's romantic transcendental sensibility. The figure of the Romantic quester and the motif of renewal are typical of many of the novels discussed here. Bellow's romantic - transcendental sensibility has a strong practical orientation in that the remedy it suggests emerges only after giving due consideration to the presence of evil and, more importantly, to a technologised society of masses that has become a modern reality. In essence, Bellow's belief in the regenerative quality of life powerfully manifested in the dialectic of his fiction effectively counters the wasteland vision.

In *Henderson the Rain King*, *Herzog*, and *Humboldt's Gift* there is an ostensible use of the motifs of renewal and resurrection and the quester figure often associated with romantic literature. Bellow's romantic-transcendental sensibility, while deeply humanistic in its concerns also establishes the relationship in which man stands to the eternal. Returning from Africa with the aim of serving his society, Henderson is seen experiencing an exuberant transcendence that places him and his world around in touch with the world of the spirit. Before embarking on his plan to employ his consciousness usefully for his society, Herzog attains to a serene transcendental mood, which reveals the source of the eternal mystery

pervading life. Having made amends to Humboldt by reuniting him with his mother in a more spacious grave, Citrine attests to the immortality that is our essential nature. Sammler, while acknowledging through his prayer Elva's meeting of "the terms of the human contract," also shows how Elya acted as the instrument of the eternal in bringing happiness and cheer to many. Uncowed by the horrors of the wasteland city, Benn goes to the distant North Pole to observe lichens and thereby discover the essential immortality that pervades human life. The only novel that does not capture this sensibility substantially is *The Dean's December*. However, Corde in clearly seeing for himself the "imminence of the last days" attains to a kind of liberation in his consciousness. Haunted by a sense of despair, apocalyptic-sounding *The Dean's December* yet projects a vision different from the wasteland vision, in the earnest effort it makes to come to grips with reality and to remedy the situation.

Herzog, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, *Humboldt's Gift* and *More Die of Heartbreak* are overtly Jewish in tone and moral outlook. The protagonist of each of these novels journeys through his essential Jewish self and brings back "the remedy that will cure him of the wasteland disease. Though it has a Gentile for a protagonist, *Henderson the Rain King* is evidently Jewish in tone and sensibility and the particular quality of love that pervades the work is nothing but Jewish.

The problem of the wasteland has haunted the imagination of religious, philosophical, and literary thinkers ever since the dawn

of time. However, the change from an agrarian to an industrialised way of life with its attendant evils of mass culture and crisis in human values during the modern era has made the image of the wasteland peculiarly relevant to our age. In modern times the vision of the wasteland despair is remarkably brought out in T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner, not to speak of many of the contemporary literary artists across the Atlantic. The great modernist writers referred to often viewed modern life as a wasteland without much possibility of a redemption. There is no denying that their perception has a grain of truth. But, more often than not, they tended to exaggerate in projecting despair of modern life. Their genius came up with brilliant metaphors which crystallised their deterministic views of reality. These metaphors hold sway over the minds of the masses at present, and contemporary artists solemnly accepting the modernist verdict perpetuate a facile kind of pessimism in their works. Saul Bellow began his literary career at a time when the tide of modernism was still strong in the enlightened world. His initial works have much in common with the modernist spirit, but here also the typical Bellowian moral tone and earnestness point to the fact that, reality being a "multiverse," life would forever be a mosaic of multitudinous experiences. Even from the beginning of his career, Bellow has consistently opposed the tendency in contemporary literature to sell itself to the wasteland ideology. This opposition does not emerge out of any misperception of life's perils. In fact, Bellow's wastelands come to us with the terrifying reality of a nightmare. They are there in his works as living presences

demanding instantaneous action from the protagonists so that compared to Bellow's forceful portrayal of the wastelands, the wastelands of the modernists pale into insignificance. Whereas the modernists portray a wasteland situation but are categorical in denying any remedy, Bellow, without disengaging himself from the angst of modern-day living, genuinely explores reality and discovers for us certain persisting human values. Saul Bellow, in this discovery of the "essential" and the "enduring" in being human, sustains the tradition of humanism in western literature which had earlier found nourishment in Dante, Shakespeare, Tolstoy and Dostoevski.