

## INTRODUCTION

Ihab Hassan has said of Saul Bellow that "praise now comes as naturally to Saul Bellow as the light of day." (1982, 267) A Nobel laureate in 1976, winner of three National Book Awards, two Guggenheim Fellowships, one Pulitzer prize, and many other honours besides, he fills our expectations of a major novelist and aligns himself with the central tradition of Western literature. For his achievement, though deep in the American grain appears more and more universal in its apprehensions of reality.

Adhering intuitively to "the axial line of existence" (Bellow: 1953 : 283) Bellow's quest for that reality has taken him through many climes of his life and our age. Born in 1915 in Lachine, Canada, he was the fourth and last child of Russian Jewish emigrants from St. Petersburg. He came with his parents to Chicago in 1924, settling down on Division Street. Like Augie March, fictive Chicagoan free style and city-bred, Bellow has remained faithful to the genius of that place, though he has travelled far to Stockholm and Paris, Kyoto and Jerusalem. A literary intellectual, read widely in history and philosophy, sociology and anthropology, he yet refuses to render the rough texture of American experience into abstract schemes or parodic games. A Jew by birth, who grew up speaking Yiddish and Hebrew, French and English, he maintains both his old-world heritage and complex new-world fate without constraint to his vision.

Bellow's work changes, develops over six decades. But his fidelity to some vital concerns, some "friendly truths", gives that work continuity, marking it with the seal of an original temper. For the centre of that novelistic temper is not fashionably "hollow", nor, despite all our "distractions", does the centre break. Quite the contrary: "Out of the struggle at the centre has come an immense, painful longing for a broader, more flexible, fuller, more coherent, more comprehensive account of what we human beings are, who we are, and what this life is for," Bellow declares in his Nobel speech. The centre, then, radically affirms being.

The character of Bellow's evolving style, like that of his social perceptions, partly derives from the situation of the serious writer whose feelings must run counter to the dominant culture, for whom art and authority must remain disjunctive. Thus the most affirmative of American novelists must also dissent, giving scope to his opposing self when the world attempts to seduce or dissolve that self, as mass society and modernist thought, respectively, threaten to do. Resolutely, Bellow resists as well as himself. "One can seduce the public by giving them precisely what they want. Or, with the authority of art, one can risk their displeasure by telling them what is really in their hearts and hope that somehow or other, one will get through" he remarks. It is, of course, the system of urbanization, mechanization, faceless bureaucracy, large industrial and business corporations, multi-nationals, mass media and other means of manipulating individual lives by remote control, has

resulted in vague feelings of anxiety, alienation, meaninglessness, futility, along with an acute personal sense of isolation, loss of identity, impotence, lack of freedom and contingency.

When placed against the deep-rooted American tradition of free and assertive individualism – the ideals of the pioneer, the frontier adventurer, the self-made man – the need for a philosophy which can comprehend and come to terms with the peculiarly modern predicament of angst and individual impotence, without altogether abrogating traditional values, is understandable. Existentialism by its emphasis on the individual consciousness, personalized values and subjective ethics can claim to offer modern man a modern form of salvation. This is evinced by its emotively loaded, quasi-religious vocabulary e.g. despair, crisis, dread, choice, commitment, freedom, transcendence, authenticity.

Bellow has used existentialism in his fiction because it vindicates the individual despite his limitations and failures by insisting that he can transcend facticity in his own consciousness. Bellow by paradoxically making the ineffectual individual both creator and arbiter of his own values, his existentialism allows the individual to retain the lost vestiges of his human dignity through a neo-stoic affirmation of the self in metaphysical revolt.

My aim in this paper is to depict in the light of the major novels of Bellow that they have worked within the motion from the feeling of seclusion of the hero to his final accommodation with society

or community. Through four successive chapters, each dealing with one novel at a time, I would like to show that Bellow's characters despite the variousness of mood and style of his work, remain much the same. And they face problems, which are reducible to a single problem: to meet with a strong sense of self-the sacrifice of self-demanded by social circumstances. Alienation, a sense of separate and unconciliating identity must travel to accommodation. Bellow's inspiration is finally in other, deeper sources, but as the novels have worked themselves out they have dealt in the terms presented by the history in which the characters have found themselves. The dialogue between alienation and accommodation is what first of all they are about.

In my dissertation which deals with some of the major novels, of Bellow, I would like to point out that there are certain attitudes and insights which have given his work an aspect of originality that's entirely his own. The first three novels carry strong echoes from Dostoievsky, Kafka and Camus, and their slender, tight structures give little idea of the direction his muses were to take eventually. However, even then, it was clear to some discerning readers that Bellow was seeking to break away from the European existentialist despair – a distinctive badge of the fashionable 'wastelands' of the day. And though some of the earlier heroes like Joseph. Asa and Augie are all weighed down by despair, and that imagery of suffocation, engulfment, entrapment and drowning are persistent, they do make efforts to break out into open air and

sunshine. For Joseph, the dangling man, the highest ideal construction is the one that unlocks the imprisoning self. Asa Leventhal in *The Victim* remains a haunted persecuted figure so long as he keeps his spirit under lock and key. Similarly Augie March in *The Adventures of Augie March* graduates to a humanist epiphany which makes him conceive of himself as a servant of love, a neophyte. That is, in the luminous mystery of responsiveness, acceptance, he tries always to align himself with the axial lines of existence truth, love, peace, bounty, usefulness and harmony. He experiences darkness, which no human being evades. Still after all his tribulations, hearing a servant girl laugh, he thinks that's the animal that rides in him, the laughing creature, forever rising up and so he refuses to lead a disappointed life. We can see how this big, comic book restores wonder and a certain blatancy to fiction and despite its excesses, sets an example to post-war novelists intent on accommodating themselves.

Again, Bellow's apotheosis of man's ordinariness, and his radical distrust of all those seeking a unique destiny has a refreshing candour about it. Almost from the beginning, he was seeking to make the point that there are private little blessedness and graces that are worth more than all the clever philosophies put together.

Bellow's early heroes' dangle as victims but Joseph, Leventhal and Augie are intensely aware of themselves as victims. In this dissertation, I have made a modest effort to show that it is precisely Bellow's commitment to the fact of his heroes who have developed self-

awareness that has led him to exploit the introspective space between history and personality, the precious human space in which morality, humour, grace and creativity may conceivably exist. "In fact, the steady current of development from Bellow's earliest work to his latest can be appreciated partially in terms of his painstakingly honest efforts to widen that space between – to present victim man with valid opportunities to enlarge his human capacities." (Rovit: 1975 : 161) Joseph, Leventhal Augie Henderson, Herzog and Sammler are continually victimized, but they are not victims; for want of a better descriptive term, we could call them survivors.

Bellow shows his readers that man at his worst and best, regardless of circumstances can do more than lament his fate; if nothing else, he can give thought to his conscience and responsibility to others. The crux of all his writing, he insists, "is believing in human beings, and this caring or believing or love alone matters. (Bellow: 1957 : 20).

Saul Bellow seeks fictional answers to fundamental questions about human existence and action in our day: "Why were we born? What are we doing here? Where are we going? In its eternal naivete the imagination keeps coming back to these things." His novels from *Dangling Man* (1944) to *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), are imaginative responses to the challenge of being human in today's complex and chaotic world.

Saul Bellow writes that man today, even more urgently

than in the past, has to discover who and what he is. "The great question", writes Bellow, "seems to be when will we seek new and higher forms of individuality, purged of old sicknesses and corrected by a deeper awareness of what all men have in common?" Each of Bellow's protagonists (who are different manifestations of contemporary man) travel in search of humanness, the search gathering, momentum, height, and complexity as one fictional stage succeeds another.

Bellow had to use and develop fictional forms to dramatize this search. This thesis will modestly attempt to understand how some of the novels of Bellow are put together; while doing this Bellow's suggestion is accepted that art has "something to do with the achievement of stillness in the midst of chaos." Bellow himself cannot explain how the artist achieves this stillness, this form, and this order: "I don't say that the novelist knows what order is, but he relies on his imagination to lead him towards it." In a work of art the imagination is the sole source of order. There are critics who assume that you must begin with order if you are to end with it. Not so. A novelist begins with disorder and disharmony, and goes toward order by an unknown process of the imagination.

Each of Bellow's novels demonstrates that the Bellow protagonist is always in search of the human. The novels clearly suggest that they are projections of Bellow's own arduous climb toward true humanness. Each novel marks a stage of the Himalayan ascent, the quest and the humanness manifesting themselves in richer and

increasingly complex forms. This dissertation itself assumes the form of a quest, for it is a journey through and an exploration of the fictional universe that Bellow has created.

The quest begins in the foot hills with Dangling Man.