HERZOG
the Jewish past and the American present

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Saul Bellow's *Herzog* summarizes, as has often been stated, the whole of Bellow's world, and there are many resemblances between Herzog and the other characters in his previous novels. David Galloway has pointed out that in *Herzog*, "Bellow unites two traditions—the meditative, highly ratiocinative but essentially impotent victim and the comic, instinctual rebel."(1) It should be noted, however, Herzog has at least one important difference from the characters in the previous novels. He is an intellectual scholar. That means his response to his environment, his reflections of relationship with other people take place largely on an intellectual level. Being an intellectual, he is one step further removed from the reality surrounding Bellow's other characters, as he himself admits that "Anyway the intellectual has been a Separatist" (322).(2) This has led critics generally to explore and to concentrate on the ideas in the novel and to identify Herzog's human condition as the typical crisis of the contemporary intellectual. It is true that Herzog looks upon himself as a representative modern Everyman, as is clear from many statements to this effect, and this has been noted by many critics. Tony Tanner, for example, has stated that "Herzog's is a representative modern mind, swamped with ideas, metaphysics and values, and surrounded by messy facts. It labours to cope with them all. The book enacts that labour."(3) It seems to me, however, that too much emphasis has been put on the ideas and the universal predicaments which Herzog explicitly embodies, and that the particular of Herzog--that is, his Jewishness--has been undervalued. Herzog is not only an American but a Jew as well, and this should not be ignored or thought little of, because it is Herzog's being a Jewish American scholar that, to a great extent, determines his situations, causes his conflicts and leads

him to his own solution to his problems. In this paper, therefore, I would like to take into consideration Herzog's Jewishness, examining his background and its influence, his dilemma and his development through his predicaments.

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When the novel starts, we find Herzog is at the point of chaos both in his personal life and in his intellectual life. He is cuckolded by his best friend and is forced to divorce by his second wife Madeleine. He feels he fails in his role as a father, lover, husband, son and so on. He is alienated from other people as a failure and a loser. His life is a "catalogue of errors" (207) and he feels he is "going to pieces--breaking up"(7). His intellectual life is also in a state of confusion. His dissertation on "The State of Nature in 17th and 18th Century English and French Political Philosophy" led him toward an intense study of the concept of Romanticism, which became the basis for his highly regarded book "Romanticism and Christianity." Seeing himself in a historical context, he is overwhelmed by the importance of his role as a responsible historian and by the burden of correcting the misconceptions he encounters. During his retreat to Ludeyville he tries to complete a second volume which would lead his ideas to a synthesis and which would enable him to "improve the human condition "(107). However, in his search for this he comes to a deadlock. He abandons the project of completing the book, because he feels it is absurd to profess to have all the answers in his field of study while he is being unable to overcome the confusion of his personal life. Through the novel he writes letter after letter, never mails them though, to his relatives and acquaintances, to presidents and philosophers, in search for a synthesis encompassing his personal as well as his intellectual life.

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Herzog feels alienated and this is not merely the result of the divorce. He feels cut off not only from the American society, regarding his house in Ludeyville as a "symbol of his Jewish struggle for a solid footing in White Anglo-Saxon Protestant America" (309), but also from his family where he has grown up. His childhood family world is "the Holy Land" for him and, as Irving Malin has suggested, the very existence of the Holy Land makes

many Jews as well as Herzog feel alienated in many unholy places where they live.[4] Herzog longs to return there. It is the golden age for him.

> Napoleon Street, rotten, toylike, crazy and filthy, riddled, flogged with harsh weather - the bootlegger's boys reciting ancient prayers. To this Moses' heart was attached with great power. Here was a wider range of human feelings than he had ever again been able to find. The children of the race, by a never-failing miracle, opened their eyes on one strange world after another, age after age, and uttered the same prayer in each, eagerly loving what they found. What was wrong with Napoleon Street? thought Herzog. All he ever wanted was there. (140)

This is Herzog's Holy Land. As Galloway has suggested, this is where he gains the "richness and complexity of experience, heavy with love as well as deprivation,"[5] which causes him to rebel against the simplistic clichés of popular nihilism described as "comfortable people playing at crisis, alienation, apocalypse and desperation,...mere junk from fashionable magazines" (316–317), which he later encounters in American society. What has impressed him most of all in his childhood is the wide range of human feelings, the simplicity, and the positive acceptance of the world and life, and as we see later in this paper, his acceptance of life remains with him as a keynote of the novel.

It may not be so difficult to associate this acceptance of life at an emotional level with "heart," the key word which appears so often elsewhere in the novel. In his etymological study of the name Herzog, James Dean Young has pointed out that Herz means "heart; breast, bosom, feeling, sympathy; mind, spirit; courage; center; vital part; marrow; pith; core, kernel...He is Herzog, duke."[6] Herzog is the man of "noble heart," who becomes involved in the study of "the importance of the 'law of the heart' in Western traditions, the origins of moral sentimentalism and related matters" (119). He is filled with emotion and love, as he describes, "his odd sense of piety(much heavy love in Herzog; grief did not pass quickly, with him)" (119). Yet at the same time he is an intellecutal Jew who always looks for rational justification. In other words, he questions his Jewish "heart" or Jewish values in his attempts to transfer them to the realm of reason when he has come to crisis, and thus, has been "overcome by the need to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to make amends"(2).

Here we find Herzog's conflict. He feels he has "committed a sin of some kind against his own heart, while in pursuit of a grand synthesis" (207). This violation clearly consists of Herzog's believing that life is a "subject" which can be looked at with intellectual detachment. As a man of feeling, he clings desperately to the impulses of affirmation that come from his heart, the insistent voice of intuition, and yet he keeps struggling to arrive at a rational rather than an emotional basis for such affirmation. We might find this source of his conflict in Jewish tradition, as Irving Malin has remarked: "Jewish thinking and living can only be adequately understood in terms of a dialectical pattern, containing opposite or contrasted properties...Perhaps the most significant tension is that of intellect and feeling, head and heart."(7)

Then what kind of "head" does Herzog embody ? Though it is almost impossible to summarize briefly the various ideas and concerns appearing in the novel, Herzog's main thought has something to do with the misconceptions of the Romantic self. He himself has been very much *infected with ideas of the great possibilities inherent in the individual*, which derive from both his Jewish background and his being an American. From his father he has inherited the belief in the dignity of the individual, the majestic nineteenth century individualist concept. He looks upon his father as a king and almost overwhelmed by his dignity, recalling that "The way Father Herzog spoke of himself ! That could make one laugh. His *I* had such dignity"(149), which, in contrast, makes him feel that "I do seem to be a broken-down monarch of some kind"(39). The text he used as a class orator is also significant and suggestive. He took the text from Emerson's "The American Scholar," quoting "The main enterprise of the world,... is the upbuilding of a man. The private life of one man shall be a more illustrious monarchy...than any kingdom in history" (160). He notes that he is and was quite "in earnest about beauty and perfection. He believed his American credentials were in good order" (160), though, as we see later, Herzog's mind is divided on this issue of man's individuality and its values; his unfinished study is to overturn "the last of the Romantic errors about the uniqueness of the self"(39).

This is a dilemma, for the reality surrounding him, his own life and

the lives of people around him, stands too far from his ideas. Far from being an illustrious monarch, a solitary but outstanding individual, he feels himself "a broken-down monarch" (39), "a peice of human capital badly invested" (158). Besides this there is the condition of the modern age which seems to intensify his dilemma. God is dead. Mass society has overturned the concept of personal destiny, creating "displaced person." The definition of man is gradually dissolved, as Leslie A. Fiedler has pointed out: "If man seems at a moment extraordinarily lonely, it is not only because he finds it hard to communicate with his fellows but because he has lost touch with any overarching definition of himself."(8) Herzog himself questions like this:

> Well, for instance, what it means to be a man. In a city. In a century. In transition. In a mass. Transformed by science. Under organized power. Subject to tremendous controls. In a condition caused by mechanization. After the late failure of radical hopes. In a society that was no community and devalued the person. Owing to the multiplied power of numbers which made the self negligible. (201)

The suffering condition may be collective, but the solution must be individual even in a society which makes self negligible. While complaining that "Public life drives out private life. The more political our society becomes (in the broadest sense of 'political'--the obsessions, the compulsions of collectivity) the more individuality seems lost"(162), Herzog tries "to be a marvelous Herzog, a Herzog who, perhaps clumsily, tried to live out marvelous qualities vaguely comprehended(93). However, this turns out to be an impossible task, for his concept of individual self, which he holds so high, proves another form of bondage. Indeed he despairs at times, saying, "No true individual has existed yet, able to live, able to die. Only diseased, tragic, or dismal and ludicrous fools who sometimes hoped to achive some ideal by fiat, by their great desire for it. But usually by bullying all mankind into believing them (67), or cynically saying, "certainly anyone who takes dignity seriously, old-fashioned individual dignity, is bound to get the business. Maybe dignity was imported from France... It all belongs in the museum now" (193). Looking at his own life, he finds nothing but "the imprisonment of the individual in a shameful and impotent privacy,"(9) to use Bellow's own words on *Herzog*. Yet he cannot

help yearning "How I wish it ! How I wish it were so ! How Moses prayed for this !" when he wants to believe that "reason can make steady progress from disorder to harmony" (181–182). We see Herzog struggling to have faith, needing faith, unable to believe completely in himself and in man. In addition to this, his desire to be a new law-giver to mankind, his conviction that "the progress of civilization--indeed, the survival of civilization--depended on the successes of Moses E. Herzog" (125), eventually leads him to a dangerous point when he thinks, "If I am right, the problem of the world's coherence, and all responsibility for it, becomes mine" (155). He only deplores, "It was enough to make a man pray to God to remove this great, bone-breaking burden of selfhood and self-development, give himself, a failure, back to the species for a primitive cure(93).

Herzog cannot accept, however, the contemporary pessimistic view of the individual; the popular belief that man is finished, the self is non-existence or a joke, our civilization is in collapse and there is nothing for us but void. He attacks what he calls a cheap, unjustified pessimism, saying, "The canned sauerkraut of Spengler's 'Prussian Socialism,' the commonplaces of the Wasteland outlook, the cheap mental stimulants of Alienation, the cant and rant of pipsqueaks about Inauthenticity and Forlornness. I can't accept this foolish dreariness"(75). We find him skeptical towards "Amorphous, swelling, hungry, indiscriminate, cowardly potato love"(91), which he thinks conceals man from reality by throwing him into emotional fantasies. He also rejects the Reality Instructors who deny "heart" entirely, emphasizing that " 'We're all whores in this world, and don't you forget it '"(85). All of them seem to Herzog to point the way to pessimism and nihilism which he cannot accept, even though it might seem to simplify his own conflict to accept such philosophies.

At this point what is left to him is to arrive at a change of perspective. Now let us move on to examine how Herzog's Jewish heritages function to change his perspective of himself and of life.

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Having been exposed to Papa Herzog's suffering story, Herzog has been introduced to a great deal of suffering, as he recalls, "So we had a great schooling in grief. I still know these cries of the soul. They lie in the

breast, and in the throat" (148). He calls himself "this Jewish art of tears" (267), and is called "a real, genuine old Jewish type that digs the emotions" (84). However, he does not succumb to his own suffering. On the contrary, he regards his suffering as "a more extended form of life, a striving for true wakefulness and an antidote to illusion" (317), just as people pinch themselves to feel awake. Through suffering he gains an awareness of the human situation. In the courtroom that he attends, he is horrified not only by the sheer evil of the murder case in which a woman, without any tear or remorse, killed her child while her lover lay on the bed, watching and smoking, but also by the bureaucratic impersonality of the proceedings. In his heart he weeps in protest against the mass organized indifference of "the lawyers, the jury, the mother, her tough friend, the judge," whose calm restraint is "inversely proportionate to the murder"(237). With the passionate indignation, he is "wrung, and wrung again, and wrung again, again "(240). We find the richness of his Jewish past still kept in his compassionate, long-suffering heart cannot find a place, which, in turn, makes him aware of the mandates of his heritage and of his heart. He complains, after he gets out of the court, that he experiences "nothing but his own human feelings"(240) in which he finds nothing of use when he wants reasons. However, it seems more significant here to notice that he can admit that human feelings are of importance when he comes to accept fully that "human beings would not live so as to be understood by the Herzogs" (238). This is the passionate testament to the existence of "primodial feelings of a certain sort"(238). M. Gilbert Porter sees this as the realization that intellectual affirmation is unattainable. Porter then suggests that this realization "paves the way for his move toward a transcendental affirmation of the heart."(10) Thus this courtroom scene is very important in terms of the dramatic structure of *Herzog*. It serves as a turning point for Herzog. Being exposed to the appalling murder case, he cannot but become aware of his Jewish heart, which he has not regarded as anything substantial before.

Another Jewish traditional aspect should be added here concerning the courtroom scene. It is a sense of family. As has been pointed out by many critics, it is obvious that Herzog thinks highly of family. He regardes

family as sacred. In Ramona's room before his love making with her, he thinks that he "could be a patriarch, as every Herzog was meant to be. The family man, father, transmitter of life, intermediary between past and future, instrument of mysterious creation..."(202). His family feeling was nurtured in his childhood and it remains quite uncontrollable and strong, and he himself identifies this concern as a Jewish quality, saying, "It was painful to his instincts, his Jewish family feelings, that his children should be growing up without him"(23). It is this role as a father that he feels his failure and guilt, because he is not the father he should have been. It is because of this projected guilt, as John J. Clayton has suggested,(11) that after he hears in the courtroom the most terrifying murder case, he goes to Chicago on impulse intending to kill Madeleine and Gersbach, his best friend who cuckolded him. He attempts to gain custody of his child June, for he hears that they are mistreating June. It is interesting to note here that he symbolically tries to associate himself with Papa Herzog. He dresses in an old seersucker suit, and takes Papa Herzog's antique pistol with which Papa Herzog had threatned to shoot him, "trying to act out the manhood you should have had"(250) the year before his death. He is going to judge and punish Madeleine and Gersbach according to the laws of Jewish family man, of "authority and protection,"(12) as well as "order"(11). Thus it might be said that Herzog's sense of family is significant not because it causes him a great deal of trouble but rather it gives him a cue to break through his predicaments in his personal life toward revelation, a change of perspective to reaffirm his Jewish heritage and to discard ideas.

What Herzog witnesses at Madeleine's home is Gersbach bathing June. "As soon as Herzog saw the actual person giving an actual bath, the reality of it, the tenderness of such a buffoon to a little child, his intended violence turned into *theater*, into something ludicrous"(258). Despite the grotesqueness of Gersbach's character, Herzog becomes aware of the holiness of the act and he steals away quietly. He sees that he has been childish and masochistic, for now he thinks "only self-hatred could lead him to ruin himself because his heart was 'broken' " (258).

It is one more incident that contributes to Herzog's change. After

he witnesses the bath scene, he visits Gersbach's wife Phoebe to offer to pay for a divorce suit against Gersbach if she will name Madeleine in her charge of adultery. Phoebe rejects his offer, however. Phoebe's desire to keep up appearances and to avoid emotional turmoil strikes Herzog as a representative posture of modern man resulting from the highly mechanized age. Mechanization of this modern society has freed man from dependence on human feeling. He realizes that "My emotional type is archaic. Belongs to the agricultural or pastoral stages"(265). Again this is another example of his Jewish heritage. And all of a sudden, like a streak of lightning, he experiences the new perspective:

> Blood had burst into his psyche, and for the time being he was either free or crazy. But then he realized that he did not need to perform elaborate abstract intellectual work--work he had always thrown himself into as if it were the struggle for survival. But not thinking is not necessarily fatal. Did I really believe that I would die when thinking stopped ? (265)

He now realizes that he has been led on a wild-goose chase in search of a synthesis he cannot achieve. Instead of accepting life as it is, he has felt he must look for reasons for an acceptance. But here he comes to accept that "a Life is something more than such a cloud of particles, mere facticity" as he puts his case, saying "Go through what is comprehensible and you conclude that only the incomprehensible gives any light"(266). Deeply influenced by the Jewish component of his childhood, he has this affirmation of human beings and life to fall back upon when his attempt to arrive at synthesis proves futile. The statement of Abraham Joshua Heschel to the effect that Jewish tradition turns to feeling which cures "rationalism" is evidently Herzog's case: "Reverence, love, prayer, faith go beyond the acts of shallow reasoning...For all the appreciation of reason and our thankfulness for it, man's intelligence was never regarded in Jewish tradition as being self-sufficient. 'Trust in the Lord with all thy heart, and do not rely on thine own understanding' (Proverbs 3:5)."(13) Though Herzog's rejection of certain ideas is not clear enough as Bellow himself professes,(14) Herzog's own sense of life reveals that he seems instinctly to understand the danger involved in dwelling on "reason" and "ideas." Here we see Herzog and Bellow overlapped when Bellow makes a comment that "We have to dismiss a great number of thoughts if we are to have any

creaturely or humane life at all.... How does one live if it is necessary to render ceaseless judgements?"[15]

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Concerning his own individuality, Herzog gradually comes to a realization, as Galloway has remarked: "only through self can man renew universal connection, but too much involvement in self may cancel out the universal."[16] Herzog has been involved in self too much. He has been living in words, not in the world, and the letters he continues to write make other people more distant and unreal, far from attaching him to them. Quoting approvingly the Whitman line-"Escaped from the life that exhibits 'itself'"(324), he becomes aware of the dangers of narcissism which makes an individual set himself up as a witness, an exemplar. He curses himself "Poor dizzy spook"(324), for he is realizing that he has not been living in the flesh but in mental construction. What he has to do now is to re-establish the contact with ordinary reality. Thus he is ready to discard self-contained individuality, finding himself fortunate in not having the the means "to get too far away from our common life"(322). "Against the looming abstractions of the philosophical spokesmen of alienation," Robert Alter has pointed out, "he(Herzog) counterpoises a very Jewish sense of the particularities of ordinal life."[17] Believing that "the strength of a man's virtue or spiritual capacity (is) measured by his ordinary life" (106), he decides to retire to a private life in the Berkshires. Anyway only now he is ready for the brotherhood he has been advocating in the conversation with Asphalter. Herzog asserts;

> I really believe that brotherhood is what makes a man human. If I owe God a human life, this is where I fall down. "Man liveth not by Self alone but in his brother's face...Each shall behold the Eternal Father and love and joy abound."... The real and essential question is one of our employment by other human beings and their employment by us. (272)

This is a kind of sermon of affirmation that unless he lives in brotherhood, a man is not human. It might not be irrelevant to conclude that there is at least an implication that Herzog will be trying to move away from selfhood toward brotherhood, to community.

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Herzog has suffered from the general critical tendency which tends to

find fault with its ability to resolve: that Herzog is either drowned in ideas, and therefore, there is no action or commitment, or that he ignores ideas, following instead those emotional impulses that lead him and the novel toward an easy, unconvincing resloution. Theodore Solotaroff, for instance, as the latter representative, complains that the conclusion is too affirmative: "The elegiac prose of the closing section is so naturally luminous and moving that one tends to overlook the fact that it is quietly burying most of the issues that earlier had been raised in connection with Herzog's relation to society."(18) The former group of critics find that "Herzog does not go anywhere...The book does not ultimately offer salvation,"(19) or that "The world goes on; characters act or fail to act; the incessant flow of ideas changes nothing, avert nothing, save no one...Herzog learns nothing, does nothing, slays no dragons, burns no bridges."(20) In a sense, these critics are all correct. Herzog does not arrive at his synthesis but, on the contrary, he discards a great number of thoughts. His invitation of Ramona at the ending section could be seen as another "feminine game" (188) and "anything resembling a hope"(208) upon which he could simply fall back. In these respects nothing much is achieved. However, as I have asserted, Herzog's outlook undergoes a change. He arrives at new conceptions. Much of what used to burden him is revealed in its irrelevancy, is disclosed to him as a great mass of nonsense, as "distraction" that has to be rejected if one wants to survive. He comes to accept life on very simple terms. As we have seen, Herzog's final affirmation of life and human beings, which comes from his Jewish background, is resounding as a keynote throughout the novel. Though his "Jewishness" might be unimportant when Herzog is taken as a symbolic alien whose struggle has significance for all of us, his Jewish heritage is very important in terms of his own particular development. It is this affirmation that makes him withstand the nihilism he encounters in American society and it is to the same affirmation that he returns when he finds that his task as a responsible scholar appears to be impossible. After all, as Irving Malin has asserted, Herzog's Jewishness is "a persistent guiding light."(21)

NOTES

(1) David Galloway, *The Absurd Hero in American Fiction*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), p. 142.

(2) Saul Bellow, *Herzog*, (New York: Viking Press, 1964), p. 322. Subsequent page numbers, when necessary, will be supplied in parentheses.

(3) Tony Tanner, *Saul Bellow*, (Edinburgh & London: Oliver and Boyd, 1965), p. 88.

(4) Irving Malin, *Jews and Americans*, (Carbondale:Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), p. 14.

(5) Galloway, p. 136.

(6) James Dean Young, "Bellow's View of the Heart." *Critiques: Studies in Modern Fiction* (Spring, 1965), p. 12.

(7) Malin, p. 80.

(8) Leslie A. Fiedler, "Saul Bellow," in Irving Malin, ed., *Saul Bellow and the Critics*, (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p. 9.

(9) Gordon Lloyd Harper, "Saul Bellow," in Earl Rovit, ed., *Saul Bellow: A Collection of Critical Essays*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall 1975) p. 16.

(10) M. Gilbert Porter *Whence the Power? The Artistry and Humanity of Saul Bellow*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974), p. 153.

(11) John Jacob Clayton, *Saul Bellow: In Defence of Man*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 218–219.

(12) Malin, p. 33.

(13) Abraham Joshua Heschel, quoted in Malin, *Jews and Americans*, p. 81.

(14) Harper, p. 17.

(15) Ibid., p. 17.

(16) Galloway, p. 134.

(17) Robert Alter, *After the Tradition: Essays on Modern Jewish Writing*, (New York: Dutton, 1969), p. 113.

(18) Theodore Solotaroff, "Napoleon Street and After," *Commentary*, XXXVIII (December, 1964), p. 66.

(19) Harold Fisch, "The Hero as Jew: Reflections on Herzog," *Judaism*, XVIII (Winter, 1968), p. 52.

(20) Earl Rovit, "Bellow in Occupancy," in Irving Malin, ed., *Saul Bellow and the Critics*, p. 178, 180.

(21) Irving Malin, *Saul Bellow's Fiction*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 147.

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