Review: New American Fiction

Reviewed Work(s): The Rector of Justin. by Louis Auchincloss: Herzog. by Saul Bellow: The People One Knows. by Robert Boles: A Confederate General from Big Sur. by Richard Brantigan: Full Fathom Five. by John Stewart Carter: The Higher Animals. by H. E. F. Donohue: Leah. by Seymour Epstein: A Mother's Kisses. by Bruce Jay Friedman: The Nowhere City. by Alison Lurie: An American Dream. by Norman Mailer: To an Early Grave. by Wallace Markfield: Last Exit to Brooklyn. by Hubert Selby,: If Morning Ever Comes. by Anne Tyler

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LITERATURE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY
IN

New American Fiction

LEIGH BUCHANAN BIENEN

A man is not born in his native country for nothing . . .

William Dean Howells

AS HE WALKS AWAY, on bond, from the city police station, Saul Bellow's Herzog comments to himself that 'This . . . was not the sphere of *his* sins. He was merely passing through. Out in the streets, in American society, that was where he did his time." And in some sense every serious writer shares the same sense of his incarceration. For many writers the search for an identity within the culture, and particularly within a society as demanding and intolerant as America, is like "*The Heavy Bear Who Goes with Me*" in Delmore Schwartz's very American poem of that title, a poem which is subtitled with a quote from Whitehead apostrophizing 'the withness of the body.'

. . .
That inescapable animal walks with me
Has followed me since the black womb held
Moves where I move, distorting my gesture
. . .
Opaque, too near, my private yet unknown,
Stretches to embrace my very dear
With whom I would walk without him near
. . .

The individual's identity within the culture is never defined, for the culture stays the same no longer than the growing and changing individual. Hence all solutions and statements are ultimately false and frustrating. And yet some sort of attempt must be made before other subjects can be begun.

Most writers respond by limiting their fiction in locale. They slice off a part of the confusing whole and immediately inform the reader that this particular segment is all they are taking on. This kind of parochial solution, which is never wholly satisfactory for the larger issues, can be applied to region or to class, by drawing the boundaries around a certain ethnic subculture, by, in some ways, limiting America to one small group. Thus, an ex-sailor may write modern horror stories of rape and mindless murder and deal exclusively with a small segment of lower class gangdom, with a particular group within a group, this time petty crimnials who happen also to be homosexuals. Or a middle-aged classicist describes the rigidity of New Englanders, and the strength their institutions derive from the determination, vision and stubbornness of their old fashioned founders. And then there is always some variation on that most famous brand of American regionalism: The American South, with its trunk full of literary cliches and metaphors.

And yet despite the vast differences between the subject and style of individual American writers, there is an essence, at once eerie and unmistakable, which permeates most American fiction and makes it immediately distinguishable from the art of other countries. It is perhaps partly that so many American institutions are nation-wide, that the sectional differences always seem slightly exaggerated. But even granting the culture's lack of homogeneity, most good American fiction still leaves you with that sense of the presence of a dominating and unique culture which pervades every American institution, whether it be a Supermarket in Chicago or an aid project in Africa. And it is the expression of this "Americanism", as it both defines and projects the culture, that I would like to consider here.

It is in highly particularized and individual renderings of the American scene that we find the most dramatic expressions of national distinction. The generalized, official versions of the society have been so sullied, so watered down and so often betrayed, as are most national aims, that it seems no longer possible for serious artists to consider them except in terms of irony or satire. Not that the grand and ridiculous national illusions do not exist or do not have importance. They do both. But the story of the slogans and the dreams, and of their transformations, can only be told by a rare historian-novelist, a Robert Penn Warren. And Penn Warren seems tired of the task and has never produced the promised allegory. In the work of a writer like Norman Mailer the public tasks are assumed but they seem to drown out the simpler, basic demands of fiction. And the result is pretentiousness or reportage, or a muddied combination of both[1]. Fortunately, the explicit attempt to portray the national character is such an obviously impossible task that only once in a generation will a freak like Henry James or Mailer attempt it. Instead, most writers give us peeks and glimpses behind the curtain of the nation's windows, from which we piece together a patchwork of the fragmented and diversified culture. Rarely, as has happened this year, will a book appear which, through its generalized human concerns, seems to express the mood of a nation in the ambitious frustrations of its principal characters.

National identity then, at least in a conglomerate culture, is itself an aspect of style; and the possibilities for its variation and development are unlimited. It is one of the things which an author, consciously or unconsciously, makes a decision about; and he is then limited by this decision. For the past decade, partly out of a fashionable contempt for the old fashioned novels with "social concerns", and partly from cynicism, private life has been the respectable and common subject for serious fictions. Drama is set in the kitchen, on the road, in a small cloistered section of the city, or in the bedroom. And this has meant that the generalities about the culture have emerged from highly particularized renditions of family life, of love, and of individuality. Dreiser's hero the business tycoon, man in his civic role, is as out of date as the crank car he was so proud of. We no longer find portraits of the Common Man, instead we are introduced to a series of highly particularized individuals, characters who deny their affinity to the main stream.

If one were to classify fiction arbitrarily as to how it deals with questions of national identity, almost all novels could be divided into two groups: novels in which the author asks who the characters are, and novels in which the author tells you who the characters are. *If Morning Ever Comes* by Anne Tyler and *The Nowhere City* by Alison Lurie both fall into the first category. In the Tyler book a young Southerner stalled and frozen in his first New York winter comes home in the hope of finding himself in the feminine sprawl of his family (five sisters, a mother and a grandmother). And if we never find out very much about Ben Joe Hawkes, we learn something about his likeable sisters and other random characters who wander in and out of the family living room. Ben Joe's frustration, and his resigned acceptance at the end of the novel of the impossibility of understanding either the past or the present, is the most believable quality about him.

Alison Lurie also hinges the quest on regionalism. But instead of simply defining her characters in terms of the speech and manners of one section of the country, she takes a conservative New England couple and deposits them into the anarchy of Los Angeles. This is then the occasion for the development of several themes concerned with the nature of identity, as she plays with changing the style of speech, dress and the habits of love-making of the two central characters. Until, indeed, the wife, Katherine, is transformed, or loses her original identity:

> He therefore admitted now that it was just this shy, rural even sylvan aspect which had first attracted him [about Katherine]. He had been moved to passion not only by her pale beauty, her white arms and long brown hair, but by something in her manner which recalled the unsophisticated, almost mute spirit of a tree or stream.

And at the end of the novel . . .

> Mona pointed across the living room to where a girl sat in tight yellow pants, with a smooth California tan and ash blond hair piled up on her head like a mound of whipped cream; an obvious Los Angeles type . . . "Oh, that's not her," Paul started to say . . .

Miss Lurie has a fine eye for details of landscape and life styles. Her object is to demonstrate that regional styles of life can be donned and shed, along with the personalities associated with them, like old skins or habits. *The Nowhere City*, as a result, tends to show us only the skins and outer trappings of its characters, and hence is somewhat superficial. People are more than their clothes, their houses or even their manners in love. Still *The Nowhere City* carried its particular theme to its fullest development. In fact, it can be said in general that novels like *The Nowhere City* and *If Morning Ever Comes* are so busy asking who the characters are that the reader never finds out in the end.

SAUL BELLOW

Although they fall into the same general division as the Lurie and Tyler novels, *The People One Knows* and *A Confederate General From Big Sur* resemble discursive essays on the search for the self. The narrator in *The People One Knows* feels obliged to avoid both America and love until he can come to bear the image of his face in the glass. And this ambivalence towards himself is based upon his half Negro parentage, which he was brought up to accept with equanimity, only to find that the rest of the world did not share his calm or tranquillity on the subject. At least author Boles avoids the obvious cliches of the Negro search for identity, and that is in itself no mean feat, while the vague and aimless observer who describes the events in *A Confederate General From Big Sur* seems to bounce unfeelingly back from a series of odd and sometimes amusing encounters with fellow eccentrics on the Pacific Coast, without finding either himself or much else of any interest.

Other examples of the variety of American individuality have been published recently. A new and exciting novel by an unknown writer named John Stewart Carter began to appear last year in excerpts in *Encounter* and *The Kenyon Review*[2]. Carter writes about the very rich, a subculture which we tend to forget is disappearing as rapidly as other minorities. The

1. This obsessive concern with aspects of national identity seems to be what is destroying Mailer's work, for he is compelled to write The Great American Novel, this time titled *An American Dream*. It begins . . . "when Jack Kennedy and I . . . " *An American Dream* was published in *Esquire* magazine and is now out in book form.
2. Carter's novel, titled *Full Fathom Five*, has won the 1965 Houghton Mifflin prize for the best novel of the year and will be published as a book sometime in 1965 by Houghton Mifflin Publishing Co., Boston, Mass.

setting is the midwest, thirty or forty years ago. Suicidal cousins, authoritarian grandmothers (with diamonds "growing" from their fingers), playboy uncles—all are seen through the naive and curious eyes of a young boy who watches the spectacle of wealth and splendour, and mourns the disappearance of an age and a style of life. Carter's fiction is nostalgic, openly so, with few concessions to the work-a-day present. His characters die, but they never grow up. Time is held still, as though by the narrator holding his breath, or jerks forward and backward. Occasionally the storyteller shrinks to present-day size and sighs. But for the most part the stories are like a manuscript which has been collecting dust in the attic underneath the ballgowns and valences from the same extravagant period. But this queer and often sentimental stance has more relevance to the present than many other works with more obvious claims to contemporaneousness.

Louis Auchincloss's *The Rector of Justin* was on the top of the best seller list for much of 1964, and it is interesting to consider why a novel like this, and there seems to be one every year, appeals to so many readers. Auchincloss is an established writer with several well regarded books to his name. His style is clear and spare, if not very original, and his material serious and complex. The story tells of a man who builds a New England boarding school, a school whose standards are carved in the image of its founder's pride and pretensions. The School succeeds and leaves its mark upon the pupils, who remember both the institution and its keeper; but at the end of his life the founder must watch its founding ideals crumble in the face of a society which seems no longer able or willing to support institutionalized morality and ambition. Auchincloss deals relatively directly with the broad divisions of American society and talks explicitly about the passing of the old New England aristocracy and the contrasting values of the generations. Sometimes he is close to being superficial and slick on the subject; but the novel itself, principally because of its clean, classical design, skirts that pitfall. And *The Rector of Justin* is finally a pleasant and not very profound nineteenth century novel in the present, a novel which presents little threat to either reader or author. And that is probably the source of its appeal.

Too much American fiction is like Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. Degradation, long screeches of pain, injustice and a pervasive nauseating atmosphere of idiocy and purposelessness, these are the substance of Selby's fiction. The only proper name for the genre is sensationalism. Fiction of this type is similar to the Yellow Journalism of an earlier period which sold thousands of newspapers on daily installments of rape murder and brutality. Only now horror has become commonplace in the newspapers, and the fiction writer must find new sources of shock. Selby's method is to remove all vestiges of humanity from the sordid acts he describes. So we are left without even the inadvertent demonstration of life and feeling which so often relieves the newspaper reports. The fiction, as a result, is considerably less interesting than the newspapers' chronicle of the same murder, rape and brutality.

Novels like H.E.F. Donohue's *The Higher Animals* defy this and most other oversimplified classifications. Like Thomas Pynchon's *V*, *The Higher Animals* is in large part esoteric and private fantasy. And when it relates to the world the rest of us live in, it seems as if it were almost by accident. In *The Higher Animals*, as in *V*, there are enough points of tangency to the recognizable world to keep the reader going, but not enough relevance to make the overall fantasy as meaningful as the author implies it should be. With such original writers it is simply a question of waiting to see if they can produce a piece of dream-fiction which, like Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, seems through the logic of its own madness to make sane the injustice and irrationality we all witness.

Leah, by Seymour Epstein, boldly sets out to tell about the central character and her surroundings. A thirty-seven-year-old Jewish girl, working in New York, wants to fall in love and get married. And if this situation were not in itself definitive, we are quickly surrounded by people and scenes which immediately evoke the highly particularized setting:

> "I'll tell you frankly what I felt when I finished that book: I felt—*so what?* By that I mean you take an author, I don't care how beautifully he writes, when he states a problem, I look for the solution . . . "

The inflection, the expression, the habits of thought themselves are audible, and they bear a one-to-one correlation with a specific group of real people, New York Jews of a certain class. The recognized stereotypes march on and off stage, but the novel is not mechanical, and, accepting its tunnel-like ambitions, *Leah* is successful and well written.

Bruce Jay Friedman's *A Mother's Kisses* also depends upon the reader's familiarity with the customs and language of middle class Jewish society in New York. But Friedman's treatment of this society is different. Friedman abandons verisimilitude to exaggerate patterns of speech and behaviour for the purpose of satire. The result is true, unreal and cruel. Where Epstein recreates and observes, Friedman distorts and heightens, often with an almost fiendish cackle. Like most satire,

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Books under review:

Louis Auchincloss, THE RECTOR OF JUSTIN, Houghton, Mifflin Co., Boston, Mass., U.S.A. 1964.
Saul Bellow, HERZOG, in U.K., Weidenfeld and Nicolson in U.S.A., Viking Press, N.Y., N.Y., 1964.
Robert Boles, THE PEOPLE ONE KNOWS, Houghton, Mifflin Co.,Boston, Mass., U.S.A. 1964.
Richard Brantigan, A CONFEDERATE GENERAL FROM BIG SUR, Grove Press Inc., N.Y., N.Y. U.S.A. 1964.
John Stewart Carter, FULL FATHOM FIVE, Houghton, Mifflin Co., Boston, Mass., U.S.A. 1965.
H. E. F. Donohue, THE HIGHER ANIMALS, "*A Romance*", Viking Press, N.Y., N.Y. U.S.A. 1965.
Seymour Epstein, LEAH. Little Brown & Co., Boston, Mass., U.S.A. 1964.
Bruce Jay Friedman, A MOTHER'S KISSES, Simon & Schuster, N.Y., N.Y. U.S.A. 1964.
Alison Lurie, THE NOWHERE CITY, in U.K., William Heinemann, London.
Norman Mailer, AN AMERICAN DREAM, in U.K., Andre Deutsch Ltd., 1965.
Wallace Markfield, TO AN EARLY GRAVE, Simon & Schuster, N.Y., N.Y. U.S.A., 1964.
Hubert Selby Jr., LAST EXIT TO BROOKLYN, Grove Press, N.Y., N.Y. 1964.
Anne Tyler, IF MORNING EVER COMES, Alfred A. Knopf, N.Y., N.Y. 1964.

A Mother's Kisses has little character development or drama; but at its best it is both very funny and very vicious.

New York, as the literary capital of America, is every year the subject and setting for numerous novels. The novels are as varied as the city itself; for within New York exists in miniature the variety in life found through the entire country. Wallace Markfield's *To an Early Grave* is, even more than *Leah* and *A Mother's Kisses*, the product of the literary primacy of New York City. Marfield's novel is also satire, this time set in the milieu of New York Jewish Literary Intellectuals. Many jokes are made at the expense of the pretensions and hypocrisy of this group. And an ingenious plot follows the weaving progress of four jealous and squabbling mourners to the funeral of their former friend and colleague, a famous writer. Most comic effects depend upon the reader's familiarity with patterns of speech and thought of the four characters, who continually refer to factional political movements of the thirties, as well as to current literary fashions. And their talk itself is peppered with Yiddish and nonsense words, much of which would be incomprehensible to many readers. This is a pity. For a talent to satirize like Markfield's should be accessible to the general reader, as well as those few who happen to be up on past and present fashions among New York Jewish Intellectuals. In this case, the evocation of a regional setting excludes a substantial body of readers, for Markfield does not simply rely upon commonplace stereotypes. He demands specific knowledge.

The treatment of national identity in American fiction is then both various and individual. Most commonly, the obvious difficulties of describing a complex culture are put aside by calling upon the reader's preconceptions and general literary familiarity with a particular place. Thus, one of the reasons why Anne Tyler's novel has a believable background, and hence creates characters who seem real, is that the author quite consciously utilizes already existing images and stereotypes of the American South and Southern writers. This is not to say that she simply brings forward the old cliches, but she takes the standard ideas about the South, varies them, modifies them and capitalizes upon them. Auchincloss and Epstein do the same thing. They give the reader what he expects; and this is satisfying for fiction to do. It is also too easy a rendition of the relation between the individual and his culture, a relation which is likely to be both more ambivalent and complex than implied by these authors. The same kind of evasion has the lovers live happily for ever after. More interesting is *how* they lived for ever after, taking for granted their beginning love. Maybe they did really live happily for ever after; just as there must be some Americans as typical as Auchincloss's patriach and Epstein's Leah. But in all fairness, the fairy tale lovers and the cultural stereotypes are less interesting than their unpredictable and more individual fellows.

Saul Bellow's *Herzog* is distinguished from these other novels by its generalized ambition and by its excellence. And, as a consequence, it offers more and better examples of the oblique way in which national identity is expressed, and created, in fiction.

Bellow is an American Jew born in Canada who lives in Chicago. Americans of Jewish descent are usually the central characters in his fiction, but Jewishness is not, except in an early novel, *The Victim*, the dominant feature of the identity of Bellow's characters. Bellow's characters are first Americans—immigrant parents whose adjustment has been more or less incomplete, who dream in the images of a European ghetto, and second generation children who grow up straddling the old world and the new. The central figures are usually middle aged and middle class; and they live in a place immediately recognizable as a heightened version of the present day United States.

Bellow is a mature writer with several well known novels to his credit; and it has been argued that he represents the fullest development of a genuinely American style. Each one of his books treats differently his favourite themes of alienation, love and continuous adjustment to a vaguely suspicious society. *Seize The Day* and *The Victim* are classical, restrained and climatic. *The Dangling Man* is written as a diary, and imitates both the form and the introspection of much nineteenth century fiction. *The Adventures of Augie March* is rambling and discursive, a true picaresque novel. *Henderson The Rain King* is a morality, *Rasselas* in modern diction. *Herzog* is like no one of these earlier works and yet it harvests what Bellow learned in writing each of them.

In *Herzog* his subject is again man's perception of reality under the foreshortened and intensified conditions of crisis. Bellow aims for depth and range of feelings, rather than for the breadth of the narrative of a lifetime. One of the distinguishing features about Bellow's characters is that you see them in many moods, feeling and thinking about a variety of things. They are not merely husbands, or lovers, but also sons and brothers, and even nephews. They do not merely love, work, reflect or deceive themselves. They do all these things, and they do them all jumbled up—like the rest of us. This suggestion of confusing multiplicity of experience, whose expression Bellow has perfected in his loose narrative style, is most fully realized in *Herzog*. The novel is rich with landscape and portraits. Herzog's bitch of a wife, seen in full subjectivity:

> "To put on lipstick after dinner in a restaurant, she would look at her reflection in a knife blade."

And her lover, Valentine Gersbach, is with Clare Quilty one of the few villains in modern literature.

> Herzog's New York is Herzog's despair:
> In the mouth of the [subway] exit he stopped to catch his breath. Above him the flowering glass, wired and gray, and Broadway heavy and blue, in the dusk, almost topical; at the foot of the downhill eighties lay the Hudson, as dense as mercury. On the points of the radio towers in New Jersey red lights like small hearts beat or tingled. In midstreet, on the benches, old people: on faces, on heads, the strong marks of decay: the big legs of women and blotted eyes of men, sunken mouths and inky nostrils. It was the normal hour for bats swooping raggedly (Ludeyville), or pieces of paper (New York) to remind Herzog of bats. An escaped balloon was fleeing like a sperm, back and quick into the organe dust of the west. He crossed the street, making a detour to avoid a fog of grilled chicken and sausage.

And his ramshackle, deserted house in the country reflects the amble of his thoughts:

> The white paint was scaling from the brick walls, and Herzog sometimes wiped mouse droppings from

> the table with his sleeve, calmly wondering why field mice should have such a passion for wax and paraffin. They made holes in the paraffin-sealed preserves; they gnawed birthday candles down to the wick. A rat chewed into a package of bread, leaving the shape of its body in the layers of slices. He could share with the rats too.

For a unifying structural device Bellow uses letters, letters which Herzog writes to wives, presidents, fellow historians and to famous thinkers of the past. By shifting the tone of these letters, by juxtaposing an outraged postscript about his wife with a respectful, inflated missive to Adlai Stevenson, necessary variation in style and pace relieves what would otherwise be a too suffocating focus upon the single man and his teeming thoughts. The letters serve their double function well. They describe Herzog's thoughts on a number of unrelated people and subjects, (which could not otherwise be accomplished without long, awkward and ultimately false conversations), and they offer a second, more formalized expression of Herzog's consciousness. And Bellow, with the freedom of an imaginary correspondence addressed to anyone in the world, can wring the maximum expressive value out of the medium. Also, these attempts at communication with those dead or distant, in time, space or sympathy, are an original expression of the haphazard and emotional way in which man relates to his surroundings. The mind continually disregards boundaries of time or space. An author dead one hundred years may be a more congenial person to whom to address one's thoughts than the real and sweaty person sharing the subway seat.

As original as is the structure of the novel, as rich as are the minor portraits, it is in the direct description of Herzog himself that Bellow defines both the society and the individual. Herzog is painfully alive and real: wrestling with his wife, his friends and his conscience; loosening his shoes after dinner at his mistress's flat; sighing for his sins on the subway. The range and depth of his feeling and thought distinguish Herzog as a character and Bellow as a novelist. Thus, as with guilty circumspection, he spies through the bathroom window of his ex-wife's apartment:

> Then a hand reached forward and shut off the water —a man's hand. It was Gersbach. He was going to bathe Herzog's daughter! Gersbach . . . Herzog saw the hair-covered soft heavy flesh of Gersbach's breast. His chin was thick, and like a stone axe a brutal weapon. And then there was his sentimental eyes, the thick crest of hair, and that hearty voice with its peculiar fraudulence and grossness. The hated traits were all there. But see how he was with June, scooping the water on her playfully, kindly. He let her wear her mother's flowered shower cap, the rubber petals spreading on the child's head. Then Gersbach ordered her to stand, and she stooped slightly to allow him to wash her little cleft. Her father stared at this. A pang went through him, but it was quickly done . . .

The stock emotion is completely dramatized in physical detail. Bellow starts out with jealousy, or love, or some other standard and difficult enough emotion, and it becomes immediately transformed into a complex net of feelings and memories. His knack with the concrete is uncanny. Details are as physical and momentary as the touch of a hand. And it is through the relentless accumulation of these tiny expressive details that the larger ambitions of the novel are realised.

If this all important link of dramatic believability were missing, all of Herzog's more general yearnings would be as flat as the platitudes they can be reduced to. It is only through a flood of personal, physical and momentary detail that the general speculations upon the self and the society are buoyed up and made palpable. At times the novel threatens to sink under its ambitious cargo, but a subway ride, a meal, an encounter with a friend will reinject the necessary imaginative juice to keep going. And it is in this oblique way that Bellow has succeeded in portraying the more general ideals and frustrations which we identify as particularly American. It is because Bellow has refused to isolate Herzog's general and ambitious thoughts about the society that those thoughts are moving and significant. Herzog says little or thinks little that has not been expressed by American intellectuals in recent years; but because his thought and despair about the country are so clearly felt and acted, they become moving. Because it is surrounded by odd and logically irrelevant detail, smack in the middle of an imaginary letter, Bellow can get away with statements like the following: "Oh, Smithers, my whiskered brother! What a responsibility we bear, in this fat country of ours! Think what America could mean to the world. Then see what it is. What a breed it might have produced. But look at us —at you, and me. Read the paper, if you can bear to." The statement is partly rant and rave, and partly dead serious. And it is perfectly acceptable because of the particular tone and manner in which it is expressed. As double insurance, this admittedly melodramatic (but true, nonetheless) plea is followed by: "Dear Tennie, Perhaps we'll have a talk when I get back from the seashore. The message you sent through . . . " A canny jumble.

The novel is concerned with the place of the self in a modern society, and it escapes the traps of that subject by evoking a setting and characters which are full-blown imaginary creations. Thus, Bellow's statements about American society are completely believable because they are backed up by a physical creation of that society, its buildings, its habits, and its ways of talking to itself. Less successful, I think, are Bellow's attempts to have Herzog comment meaningfully upon man's more general condition in the Modern World, writ large. Here a contradiction appears.

Herzog affirms, with rhetorical flourish, scepticism for fashionable despair:

> Let us set aside the fact that such convictions [of pessimism] in the mouths of safe, comfortable people playing at crisis, alienation, apocalypse and desperation, make me sick. We must get it out of our heads that this is a doomed time, that we are waiting for the end, and the rest of it, mere junk from fashionable magazines. Things are grim enough without these shivery games. People frightening one another— a . . . poor sort of moral exercise.
>
> But of course he, Herzog, predictably bucking such trends, had characteristically, obstinately, defiantly, blindly but without sufficient courage or intelligence tried to be a *marvelous* Herzog, a Herzog who, perhaps clumsily, tried to live out marvelous qualities vaguely comprehended. Granted he had gone too

far, beyond his talents and powers, but this was the cruel difficulty of a man who had strong impulses, even faith, but lacked clear ideas . . .

But when this man turns his thoughts both inward and out, onto the world, what does he see? Gloom! Almost unmitigated gloom, grief and despair, within and without. Through Herzog's subjectivity the greed and cruelty are unrelieved. The landscape also resounds with funereal music.

> At the corner he paused to watch the work of the wrecking crew. The great metal ball swung at the walls, passed easily through brick and entered the room, the lazy weight browsing on kitchens and parlors . . . Paint and varnish smoked like incense. The old flooring burned gratefully—the funeral of exhausted objects. Scaffolds walled with pink, white, green doors quivered as the six-wheeled trucks carried off fallen brick. The sun, now leaving for New Jersey and the west, was surrounded by a dazzling broth of atmospheric gases. Herzog observed that the people were splattered with red stains, and that he himself was flecked on the arms and chest . . .

These visions are poetic and beautiful, but horrible at the same time. The novel is about love, and yet there is not one scene which shows that Herzog and his former wife ever gave one another happiness or pleasure. Even the memory of their courtship is frosted with the chill of mutual suspicion and competition. And Herzog's relations with his mistress are a grim exercise in sexual therapy. This would all be perfectly acceptable, except that Herzog keeps telling us he believes the opposite. *Herzog* is profoundly depressing, despite its rather shrill reassurances to the contrary. And the reader is forced, sadly, to choose which voice to listen to. This choice weakens the impact of the novel, for it sets Herzog against himself.

Herzog is, nonetheless, one of the few figures in modern fiction who does grapple with his society and his surroundings. And he is one of the most moving figures in recent American fiction because this struggle with his Americanism, the struggle to stand in his particular place in the society, is completely dramatized in physical, emotional and hence believable, terms. Instead of standing on a soapbox, he remembers and then forgets he is an American, while remaining always distinguishable by that identity. His Americanism is not a slogan or a political belief, or even a commitment to that country. It is as essential as his breathing, as much a part of him as his skin. Its presence is not a flash of patriotic colour, but a "withness" which is inextricable from all his feeling and thinking. And therein lies the magic and success of the book. For, in creating Herzog, Bellow has at one and the same time mirrored a complex culture and given that culture a new image of itself.