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The quotidian, childhood memory and the changing  
tone of comedy as the elements of Saul Bellow's  
humanistic vision in *Herzog*

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## Introduction

This thesis presents an in-depth analysis of three aspects of Saul Bellow's 1964 novel *Herzog*. These aspects, each discussed in a separate chapter, comprise: the role and value of ordinary life as opposed to nihilistic beliefs and attitudes (Chapter 1), the role of memory (Chapter 2), and the changing tone of comedy employed by the author (Chapter 3). The analysis of these issues involves discussion of the novel's plot, themes, narration, characterisation and style. Characterisation, however, is the major focus in the novel as well as in this thesis, because without it, Moses Herzog's, the central character, ideas and actions cannot have a careful analysis. In addition, the significance of Herzog's recollections is viewed in the light of the theory of *Bildungsroman* and "the reverse *Bildungsroman*" (Bellow as quoted in Gary et al. 213-4) in order to show the main protagonist's progress from chaos to maturity. The analysis of the change of the comic tone in Chapter 3 is supported with the theory of comedy, focalisation and comic devices. However, before acquainting the reader with the plot of the novel and the argument of this thesis, a succinct profile of Saul Bellow and a review of his literary achievements are given.

### *The author*

Saul Bellow was born on the 10<sup>th</sup> of June, 1915 in Lachine, Quebec, Canada, of Lescha and Abraham Bellows. Following the example of their relatives, Bellow's parents and their

three young children had immigrated to Montreal, in 1913, in hope of finding a better life. The family was one of the three hundred Jewish families who populated Montreal at that time; Lescha (later called Liza) and Abraham Bellows were of Russian Jewish origin. Because Saul Bellow was the only member of his immediate family to be born in Canada, he felt that he "was always the one apart" (Atlas 8). His life verified the truth of this statement. While his father and brothers pursued business opportunities and focused on turning a profit in Chicago, the youngest of the family stubbornly held on to his boyish dream of becoming a writer.

Despite the difficult living conditions endured by the family and the failure of every enterprise that Abraham took up in Canada, Saul Bellow remembered his birthplace as "a pastoral, idyllic village," and the outskirts of Montreal – the home to many other Eastern-European immigrants – was "the world as I first knew it" (Atlas 11). His happy childhood memories were partly marred by the fact that at the age of eight he fell ill with peritonitis and pneumonia. The six months that he spent alone at Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal engendered his mother's overprotective attitude and a sense of separation from his family that would accompany Bellow throughout his life. Yet he also remembered this experience as leading to his initiation into the stories of the New Testament and viewed his recovery as a symbol of triumph, joy and light (Atlas 16).

Raised by his Russian- and Yiddish-speaking parents, Bellow early encountered a cultural and linguistic diversity. At the age of four, he began to attend Hebrew classes at a neighbourhood rabbi's; in the streets he heard and spoke French, later he went to English-speaking schools and started speaking English with his siblings. It was only natural that after relocating to Chicago in 1924 English became his primary language. However, Bellow's knowledge of other languages did not wither. He was able to read Russian and Yiddish literature in the original and he translated into English the short story "Gimple the

Fool," by Isaac Bashevis Singer, 1978 Noble Laureate in Literature. He also translated into Yiddish T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. When a renowned professor of English dismissed Bellow's chances of becoming a quintessentially *American* novelist on the basis of Bellow's non-Anglo-Saxon origin, and, hence, his perceived lack of 'feeling' for the English language, the author-to-be took it as an offence and belittlement of his talent. If anything, the move to the United States gave young Bellow enormous faith in his creative potential. This conviction was shared by his parents, who eagerly nurtured their children's artistic talents in Montreal. Both Jane, Bellow's sister, and Saul played a musical instrument. Although Liza hoped that her son would become a rabbi like her father, Bellow never pursued this goal.

In Chicago, the father made sure that his children continued their education in the principles of Judaism, but he also preached "the gospel of improvement" to them (Bellow as quoted in *Bostonia* 256). At the same time, Bellow immersed himself in Russian, French and English literature; Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Wordsworth were his favourite poets, and the words of the latter he employed to describe his youth in Chicago: "*Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven!*" (Wordsworth as quoted in *Atlas* 22). In these formative years of Bellow's life, the convergence of two very different cultures, Jewish and American, played a significant role in the development of the sensibility of the writer-to-be. On the one hand, he was brought up in the old Jewish tradition, an "ancient world," as he used to call it; on the other hand, in Chicago he became a part of an undefined American civilisation (*Atlas* 26). He was fascinated by both. These two worlds would often collide in his later life. Bellow would grow to consider himself an American, a Chicagoan, and he would refuse to be labelled exclusively Jewish. In modern America, Bellow felt stifled by the traditional Jewish religious life, and thus he chose to break away from it. He comments on that decision as follows: "the religious vein was very strong and lasted until I was old enough to make a choice between Jewish life and street life. The

power of street life made itself felt" (Bellow as quoted in *Bostonia* 256). About his Jewish roots he had the following to say: "I simply deal with the facts of my life – a basic set of primitive facts. They're my given" (Bellow as quoted in Steers 33) and "(...) at a most susceptible time of my life I was wholly Jewish. That's a gift, a piece of good fortune with which one doesn't quarrel" (Bellow as quoted in Atlas 128). Even though Bellow successfully assimilated into American society and culture, "he found in his ethnic past an anchor, a story, a mental homeland" (Atlas 290). The themes of identity, memory and childhood also made their way into his writing.

His time at Tuley High School instilled in him an even stronger desire to read and write and provided inspiration and opportunities to compose poems and stories. In engrossing himself in literature and the observation of city life, Bellow, like his friends, escaped the pains of the Depression in the early 1930s: "Our only freedom was in thought," he explained (quoted in Atlas 30).

Liza died in 1933 when Bellow was seventeen, and the loss of the person who had loved him most had a devastating effect on him. He was not able to come to terms with his mother's death throughout his life: "My life was never the same after my mother died" (Bellow as quoted in Atlas 35). Atlas, the author of the most comprehensive biography of Bellow, finds in his subject's intense attachment to his mother the reasons for his excessive egotism, which led to the rupture of four of his five marriages (Atlas 36).<sup>1</sup> His marriages produced five children, four sons and one daughter. Those who knew him blamed Bellow's unsuccessful relationships on his "failure to properly mourn" his mother's death, the fact

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<sup>1</sup> Bellow himself did not agree with this assessment and with other angles from which Atlas approached the author. See Bellow's comments on this website (<http://www.theconnection.org/2001/01/15/saul-bellows-ravelstein/>) (Lydon 2001). Some critics, James Wood (2000) for example, criticise Atlas for demonstrating a biased (and negative) view of the writer and find in his biography of Bellow too much focus on his personal life and too little on his literary works. While Atlas's biography was seen by some to be the standard, many critics and the author himself expressed reservations, therefore I have used Atlas sparingly in this thesis.

that "his fidelity [was] to his past," and his inability "to form permanent attachments" (Atlas 363). Bellow's novels regularly present the theme of a mother (often on the threshold of death), a son's strong relationship with her and her function as the backbone of her family.

Despite a powerful vocation to become a writer, Bellow had a very difficult start to his career. After earning his bachelor degree in anthropology from the University of Wisconsin in 1937 and failing to complete his M.A. studies, Bellow lived on the unemployment benefit and spent his time composing *Dangling Man*, his first novel and what he later called his M.A. For many years, until he established himself as a novelist and won the recognition of literary critics, he was forced to take assorted jobs in order to provide for his wife and son. At one point he was a part-time teacher; later, he was employed by the Federal Writers' Project, in which he held various assignments (one being to write biographical sketches of contemporary American authors). Although he had the chance to get involved in his brothers' successful business enterprises, money-making at the expense of abandoning his talent, in which he strongly believed, was out of the question for the ambitious and stubborn Bellow. Instead, he conscientiously practised his craft, convinced "that [he] had something of importance to declare, express, transmit" (Bellow as quoted in Atlas 61). *The Adventures of Augie March*, his third novel, was published in 1953; this, finally, brought him acclaim and fame. Despite the fact that his successive literary accomplishments were rather profitable, Bellow took up lecturing at various universities in the United States for a significant part of his life. He was also a member of the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago for many years.

Bellow lived in various locations throughout his life, including a two-year sojourn in Paris, which was made possible by a Guggenheim Fellowship (1948). He also often travelled through Europe, Israel and Mexico. In the United States he lived in Chicago, New York City and Boston and had a country house in Tivoli, New York. He always regarded

Chicago as his true home, however, and it served as a setting in many of his novels and short stories. He felt that his knowledge of life was inseparable from that of Chicago. He was a recognisable figure in the city and Allan Bloom said of him: "Saul is to Chicago what Balzac was to Paris" (Bloom as quoted in Atlas 555).

As mentioned earlier, Bellow always considered writing to be his vocation. He was also convinced that the purpose of writing was "the raising of moral questions" (Kakutani 183). Bellow regretted that "America had failed to address the spiritual needs of its citizens" (Atlas 563), yet he himself "was gullible about spirituality," "had a weakness for it" (Atlas 580). Therefore, he would tirelessly address the nature of the soul in his novels, short stories and essays, and he viewed his writing to be an odd act of faithfulness "to things you learned as a boy" (Bellow as quoted in Atlas 229). *Herzog*, like many other Bellow's novels, apart from being a novel of intellectual ideas, is a story in which the author considers the question of moral values. Owing to Bellow's upbringing, many of these values belong to the Judeo-Christian tradition and, therefore, the writer is often referred to as an advocate of humanism. His art is an attempt to defend humanity and show that "there may be truths on the side of life," which indicates his defiance of the exclusively hostile vision of the world (Bellow as quoted in Harper 76).

### *The literary legacy*

Saul Bellow enriched American literature with a number of novels, novellas, short stories and essays. He was also famous for being willing to discuss his fiction and was an able interpreter of other works of literature, which is clearly visible in countless interviews he granted (*Conversations with Saul Bellow* 1984). His interest in European literature, especially French and Russian, is manifested in his novels through frequent intertexts and references to European traditions and intellectuals, especially in *Herzog* and *Mr. Sammler's*

*Planet* (1970), which are considered his most intellectually-loaded works of fiction.<sup>2</sup> Saul Bellow's characters are almost invariably male American Jews preoccupied with themselves and their inner lives.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, almost all are in pursuit of a meaningful existence. In consequence of his failure to provide vivid, convincing female protagonists, the author is often accused of misogyny (Fiedler as quoted in Pradhan 52). Those female characters that he does provide are also usually described from the point of view of central male characters, and what emerges from their accounts is often a negative, biased judgement of women. Finally, Bellow, "an amateur 'urbanologist'" (Bellow 1995: 145), uncovers in his fiction his deep interest in and careful observation of the city. Having lived in the city all his life, he became very sensitive to its character and problems. In his fiction and essays Saul Bellow frequently discusses the social and environmental issues of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century city. Often the setting of his novel, the city is presented as a source of chaos, noise, pollution, social problems and moral decay, and it is a scene of never-ending construction work, crime and the ongoing mass production of goods. However, in contrast to the more ominous descriptions of the cityscape, Bellow also characterises the city as stimulating, marvellous, lively and intimate (*Herzog* 27). The novelist tends to juxtapose the dehumanising force of the city with an individual who fears the threat of the erosion of his individuality in an overly mechanised, material world.<sup>4</sup> Both underdeveloped female characters and Bellow's fascination with the city find their way into *Herzog*.

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the influence of Dostoyevsky and his works on Bellow see Fuchs (28-49).

<sup>3</sup> Exceptions include *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), with Eugene Henderson, Bellow's only non-Jewish protagonist, and the novella *A Theft*, which possesses a female protagonist, Clara Velde.

<sup>4</sup> The role of the city and a dialogue between humanity and the city are examined in Tung-Jung Chen's thesis: "Man in the City: A Study of Saul Bellow's Urban Novels" (1987).

## Herzog

Moses Elkanah Herzog, the main protagonist of Bellow's 1964 novel, is a philosophy professor whose second wife, Madeleine, leaves him for his neighbour and best friend, Valentine Gersbach. Herzog, "a man of some intelligence and (...) learning" (Bellow as quoted in Steers 33), does not know how to respond to this event, so he suspends his ordinary activities. In his Ludeyville house he begins writing mental, never-to-be-sent letters. Weighed down by his knowledge of philosophy, history, politics and the problems of public life, Herzog deconstructs various ideologies in search of a higher synthesis. Among a tangle of thoughts, Herzog strives to find a historical perspective for himself and humankind and an answer to his broken-down condition. He soon realises the futility of his efforts and the tone of his complaint becomes purely comic.

The novel opens and closes at Herzog's house at Ludeyville "at the peak of summer" where "[h]idden in the country, he wrote endlessly, fanatically, to the newspapers, to people in public life, to friends and relatives and at last to the dead, his own obscure dead, and finally the famous dead" (1). It contains an account of his last five days, during which he takes a trip to Martha's Vineyard and comes back to New York. There, he meets with Ramona, his lover, visits the court house to see Simkin, his lawyer, and flies to Chicago, collects his late father's revolver and drives to Madeleine's house with the intention of killing her and Gersbach. The following day he takes his daughter Junie out, causes a car accident and is taken to the police station. He stays over at his friend Lucas Asphalter's. Finally, he returns to his cottage house in Ludeyville in the Berkshires where he meets with Willie his brother. Aside from this rather undeveloped plot, the novel includes Herzog's memories, the source of reader's knowledge about his past. Ever since Madeleine divorced him, Herzog has fallen into a depressed and disorderly state. Obsessed with "the need to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to clarify, to make amends" (2), he has sus-

pended his ordinary activities and cut himself off from public, common life. The only person with whom the main character has a lasting, though not very serious, relationship is Ramona Donsell, his lover and the owner of a florist shop. Herzog finds her company soothing and relaxing, yet his commitment does not match hers in strength.

Many of the characters in the novel are labelled "Reality Instructors." As early as page 30, the reader meets the pragmatic Simkin, one of Herzog's lawyers, the first one of the "Reality Instructors; he pities and ridicules Herzog at the same time (30). Himmelstein, another of the main protagonist's lawyers, is an angry and cruel spirit, a representative of nihilist beliefs, who provides Herzog with facts of his legal and life problems (86). Madeleine is also said to be a great educator in Herzog's life (125), and Valentine Gersbach lectures him as well (60). In general, these characters, when faced with Herzog and his tribulations, instruct him how to think, feel and make sense of reality. Bellow himself describes them as "people who think they know the score. You don't. They're going to teach you" (Bellow as quoted in Pinsker 96). The "Reality Instructors" play an important role in the structure of the novel. They appear frequently in the first half of the plot, when Herzog's confusion is at its most intense. Their hard-heartedness, pragmatism and phoniness contrast Herzog's instability, questioning nature and search for a way out of his despair.

As stated, Bellow's novels rarely focus on female characters. The women who are presented in *Herzog* are not given neither much attention nor their own voice. They are filtered solely through Herzog's perspective and his perception of them is stereotypical. Daisy is a good and diligent wife, Sono, his ex-Japanese mistress, is slavish; Madeleine is considered responsible for the disintegration of their marriage and family. Only Herzog's mother, the core of her family, is portrayed without scorn, irony or prejudice. Likewise, the figure of Ramona eventually receives a positive interpretation. Ram Pradhan argues that the female characters in *Herzog* "have got a life and blood of their own" (Pradhan 60). In the

first chapter of this thesis, I present Ramona's role in the novel as the individual that connects with Herzog and teaches him to appreciate his senses, which results in one of the discourses of 'the ordinary.'

Another of Herzog's significant characteristics is his nostalgia for the past. Due to the protagonist's confinement during the present time of the novel, a large part of *Herzog* naturally consists of not-too-distant recollections of the people and situations described in the story, many of which are painful to Herzog: his failed marriages, betrayal, disloyal friends, lawyers and doctors, limited contact with his children and academic infertility. However, there are also rather happy recollections of his childhood, to which the protagonist turns in the moment of his plight. In the Napoleon Street passages (129-49), which describe his childhood with his family, Herzog expresses a longing for the home of his youth and the love and warmth it was filled with. This is a moment when Herzog steps out of his egotism and focuses his attention on others. Nevertheless, the central character's obsession with his memories is at times described ironically and seems amusing to the reader. These passages and other fragments of familial recollections are suggestive of the protagonist's burning desire for a complete life with a family at its centre.

The epistolary style of the novel proves a successful way of conveying Herzog's privacy, "imprisonment" in the world of ideas and lack of other communication channels with other individuals and the world. Herzog isolates himself because he is not able to deal with Madeleine and Gersbach's betrayal. The letters and notes and the frequent shifts from third- to first-person narration are Bellow's ways of giving the reader insight into the character's mind, the purpose of the stream-of-consciousness style developed and popularised by modernist writers. It is a style which renders "an individual's subjective, ongoing, and often jumbled mental observation and commentary" and resembles the manner in which a human mind thinks, feels and senses the world: often illogically, fragmentarily and inco-

herently (Murfin 488). The nearly encyclopaedic language that Herzog uses serves a comic purpose. According to Bellow, those readers that have complained about this aspect of the novel misunderstood his intention. He meant to ridicule Herzog's education which proves futile in the moment of crisis (Bellow as quoted in Gray et al. 219). Another distinct stylistic device that Bellow employs in *Herzog* is an extensive use of Yiddish words. This accentuates Herzog's Eastern-European Jewish roots, and it reminds the reader of the importance of the character's past in Montreal.

*Herzog* is said to be the most autobiographical of Bellow's novels. This notion is connected to the fact that the novel may be considered a *Bildungsroman*. The *Bildungsroman* literary form, with its first-person narrative voice, makes it easy to recognise the link between fiction and autobiography and, as a result, to mistake the voice of the protagonist with that of the author. Certain critics have suggested that *Herzog* represents Bellow's fictionalised autobiography: the author and the protagonist possess similar cultural, historical and familiar backgrounds, and Bellow, like Herzog, was betrayed by his second wife (Susan Glassman), who left him for his good friend (Jack Ludwig). When asked about the potentially autobiographical nature of the novel, Bellow's answer is: "If you're asking me if I owned a house in the country and whether my wife kicked me out, etc., I don't know that that sort of personal thing is really relevant. I mean, it's curiosity about reality which is *impure*, let's put it that way. Let's both be bigger than that" (Bellow as quoted in Pinsker 99). I will occasionally return to the question of Herzog's resemblance to Bellow in my thesis, however, this issue is not central to my arguments.<sup>5</sup>

Bellow is the cover of the copy of *Herzog* published in 1965 by Penguin Books in Great Britain (cover design by Melissa Jacoby). The cover illustration of a male figure's

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<sup>5</sup> Some critics have investigated the question of Herzog as Bellow's alter ego. See Clayton (187-9), Wu (2005).

face (by Amy Hill) corresponds to that of the main protagonist's, Herzog. It reflects both his physical features (white face, full lips, straight nose, hazy eyes, receding hair, middle-age) and his inner state of disintegration (as represented by the left part of his face that is dissolving). In my view the image on the cover aptly illustrates the main problem of the novel:

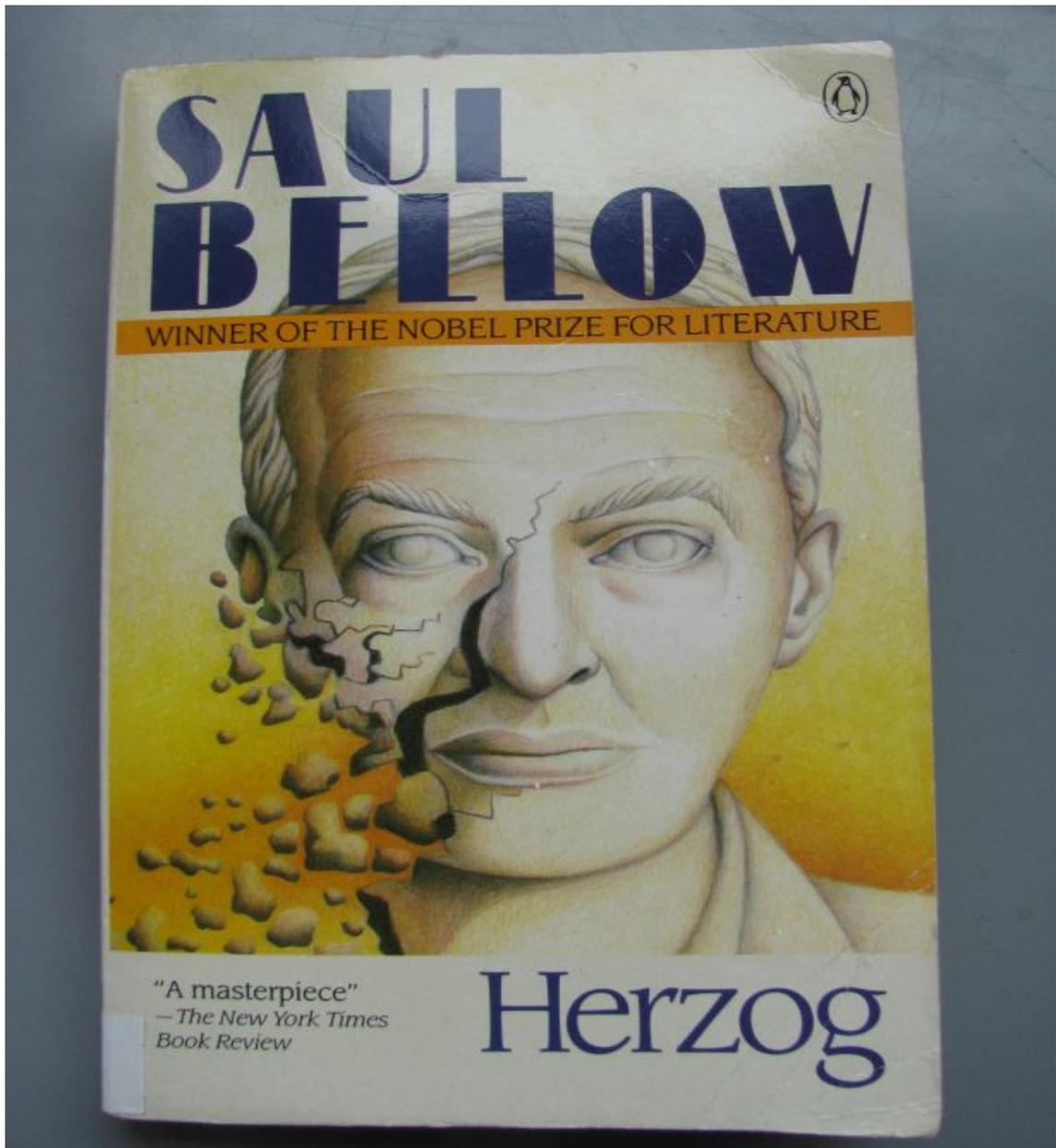


Illustration 1. The cover of *Herzog* (1965)

### *The argument of this thesis*

This thesis argues that the excessive university education that Herzog has obtained proves impractical and does not help him solve his marital crisis. Instead, his ambition to reach a synthesis of intellectual ideas leads him into a harmful privacy, which hinders his involvement in everyday life. Then, midway through the story, a discourse on the depth of ordinary life is represented in the form of Herzog's recollections of his family. This "reverse *Bildungsroman*" plot which consists of liberation from superfluous notions and grief over personal failures, requires Herzog to return to his childhood – the source of his implicit knowledge of the truth about people and life. Finally, the tension of the conflict between Herzog's self-absorption, which leads him to explore the depth of *his* self, and the outside world is resolved through humour. Having realised the inapplicability of his academic knowledge to his life's problems, Herzog makes comic use of his lethargic, self-conscious states, failures and intellectual ideas.

In the first chapter I analyse two sides of existentialism, the Heideggerian quotidian and nihilism, as they are most frequently voiced and vehemently discussed by the central character. Bellow wrote *Herzog* during a period when the idea of existential anguish was marked by a high degree of prestige (Gullette 137). The existentialist stances belong to the inventory of various ideologies that Herzog takes up in his letters and, sometimes, in conversations with other individuals. In the midst of his plight, Herzog, once a staunch academic, begins to consider the theories that he has dedicated himself to in his career as superfluous and insufficient to providing an understanding of both his specific condition and the human condition. In a number of letters, Herzog defends the value of ordinary human experience against the attack of European existentialists who dismiss its significance, yet he himself often struggles with the completion of everyday activities. The first chapter of this thesis demonstrates that in order for the Moses to find rest, it is necessary for him to first

disburden himself of the role of an intellectual. Whereas many critics have discussed Herzog's struggle with the philosophical and historical canon, which indeed lies at the centre of the novel, few have closely studied the effects of this struggle on his everyday life. This chapter shows that his intellectual battle usually takes place at the expense of his daily existence. My reading of this aspect of the novel approximates Rita D. Jacobs (1977) and Ellen Pifer's (1990) interpretations of Herzog's imbalance as that between "becoming" and "being." These critics refer to a passage in Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* (1959) in which Henderson, the main protagonist, states that "[o]thers were taken up with *becoming*. (...) Becoming people are very unlucky, always in a tizzy. The Becoming people are always having to make explanations or offer justifications to the Being people" (160). Herzog's comic ambition to explain everything is an example of the preoccupation with becoming. Henderson describes being, on the other hand, by quoting Walt Whitman's poem "The Mystic Trumpeter:" "Enough to merely be! Enough to breathe! Joy! Joy! All over joy!" (160). Being, then, is the source of transcendence, pleasure and joy. Becoming and being are opposed, just as Herzog's obsessive letter writing and his transcendence into an appreciation of the simple life. I argue that being, in Henderson's terms, is related to ordinary experience in *Herzog*. Therefore, this chapter concludes that Herzog's release from passive and impotent privacy into a common life in contact with other people and the external world anticipates the character's return to stability.

In the second chapter I will discuss the role of Herzog's memory of his past in helping him overcome his emotional and intellectual crisis. In my interpretation of the novel's recollections, I refer to the genre of the *Bildungsroman* and midlife progress narratives to show the central character's re-education. In an interview with Rockwell Gray (et al. 1984), Bellow also calls his novel a negative *Bildungsroman* that "goes in reverse" (Gray 21). He explains it as a narrative that demonstrates the necessity of "resuming your first self, with

its innate qualities" such as goodness, courage, duty, brotherhood (Bellow as quoted in Gray 213). In order to be able to take this first step towards the recovery of his true self, the objective of the anti-*Bildungsroman*, Herzog must divest himself of the role of an intellectual, a husband, a father and a lover, because they cause disquiet in his life and bring a crushing sense of failure. Thus the main character goes back to his pre-school past to retrieve the forces, which Bellow calls "the created soul" (Bellow as quoted in Gray 214), which have been first and shaped him. His childhood exposure to the principals of his Jewish heritage, which precede his formal schooling, becomes a source of those "innate qualities" once the works of Spinoza, Spengler, Nietzsche and other scholars have proved futile to offer Herzog any meaning. The image of his family provides a counterbalance to the artificial, unreliable and egotistical friends and acquaintances of the adult Herzog. By exploring his memory, Herzog seems to invite those original values into his life. Not only do those recollections point to the enduring imprint of Herzog's formative years left on him, but they also show immigrant American Jews' alienation in the New World, which the character, to a lesser degree, inherits from his parents. Equipped with a new remembered type of inner knowledge of life, Herzog restarts his life at the end of the novel. A great number of critics have recognised the importance of Herzog's recollections of his childhood in coming to terms with his pain (Vogel 1968, Clayton 1979, Wilson 1990, Furman 1995). However, there is little research into the anti-*Bildungsroman* aspect of the novel, as conceived by Bellow, and the ways in which the character uses his memory to regain stability.

In the third chapter I will address a well-researched element of Bellow's novel – comedy. Many critics have taken up this problem (Shulman 1968, Wisse 1971, Cohen 1974, Siegel 2002) and Bellow himself commented on it in numerous interviews. In one interview, conducted by Gordon Lloyd Harper, he acknowledges that he decided to employ a comedic tone, because it is "more energetic, wiser, and manlier," and because it has a

liberating power (Bellow as quoted in Harper 68). Bellow's inclination towards comedy is, to some extent, a result of his growing up in the Jewish environment. In the introduction to *Great Jewish Short Stories* (1963), Bellow openly attributes his appreciation of comedy to his Jewish heritage and presents humour as the strategy of Jewish people of alleviating the pains of their life in exile. In Bellow's view, the reason behind the use of laughter in literature as in life is "to restore the equilibrium of sanity" (Bellow 1963: 12). Sarah Blacher Cohen in *Saul Bellow's Enigmatic Laughter* (1974) argues that comedy functions as a "rescuing device in the face of despair" in Bellow's novel (Cohen as quoted in Bach 1991: 6). *Herzog* is richly ironic in both form and content, and the third chapter of this thesis is devoted to the analysis of the changing tone of comedy and its function in the novel. The use of comedy intensifies the futility of Herzog's education and the problem of his passivity in the same way that comedy itself allows Herzog to distance himself from his suffering, an act that mitigates his pain and restores a temporary equilibrium. While a comic tone dominates portrayals of Herzog's self-concern, self-pity and suspension of everyday life as well as his critiques of existentialist theory, it fades away when the protagonist steps out of his self-absorption and starts recognising and responding to the world and individuals around him. As his letter writing disappears at the conclusion of the novel so does the comic tone. Herzog's obsession at the beginning of the story with theoretical academic knowledge and his perceived failure in life is at the end of the story transformed into a silent reconciliation to the terms of his life, a symbol of his maturity.

# **Chapter 1: The existentialist "fall into quotidian" and Herzog's hard-won affirmation of life**

## **1.1. Introduction**

This chapter focuses on a constellation of intellectual ideas in Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, namely Heidegger's "fall into quotidian" and existentialism, and the central character's opposition to these. It also shows Moses Herzog's inconsistency in acting his defiance to and the gradual deconstruction of the criticised ideologies. Although *Herzog* discourses on many other topics of a philosophical and intellectual nature, only these two will be discussed in the present chapter due to the scope of this thesis. These ideas are important to Herzog and he frequently refers to them, and their deconstruction is essential to the protagonist's progression from personal chaos to stability.

Once a scholar and earnest explorer of various intellectual frameworks, Herzog doubts them and exposes their inadequacy to and insufficiency in ordinary life. Tony Tanner comments on this problem of the novel: "All of Herzog's thoughts and concerns are too various to summarise; indeed their profuse, unrelated multiplicity is an essential part of the meaning of the book" (1965: 96). It must be added that the very profusion of these thoughts and his inability to apprehend and relate them to real life prevent Herzog from completing his teaching or writing and participating in daily activities for the majority of the novel. First, I

will provide the definition of the ordinary. Then, Herzog's critique of Heidegger's philosophy of "the fall into quotidian," the acknowledgement of the importance of ordinary experience and the character's inconsistency in implementing it in his life are analysed. Further, the existentialist discourses focusing on nihilism, suffering and death will be presented in this chapter. Herzog comically disproves these existentialist ideas, which perpetuate feelings of anguish in his life and lead him to excessive self-pity and brooding over his personal misfortunes. However, in the second part of the novel, the portrayal and interpretation of death counters existential viewpoints with transcendental values and conviction in the meaning of human existence.

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that Herzog's opposition to Heidegger's idea of "the fall into quotidian," though vehement, is inconclusive and remains unsubstantiated in his life for a great portion of the novel. Yet his participation in the ordinary proves essential to his eventual return to stability and harmony. Then, I will show how everyday human experience is defended through Herzog's critique of existentialism. The analysis of the scenes depicting the negation of existential ideology points to the optimistic message of the novel affirming ordinary life and the virtues of brotherhood, goodness and responsibility. Tony Tanner in his article "A Mode of Motion" (Tanner 1971) argues that immobility in Bellow's novels (he refers to *The Adventures of Augie March* and *Herzog*) can be as much a source of power as a source of decay. The question of whether for Herzog imbalance is a source of power essential to a recovery of harmony is also addressed here. The character's defiance of the ideas is not supported by evidence other than his mental letters. This then becomes a source of comedy in the novel. I will develop more fully the issue of *Herzog's* comic tone and structure in the last chapter of this thesis.

## 1.2. Preliminaries: the definition of the ordinary

Two critics in particular have directly referred to the concept of ordinary life in their discussion of Bellow's fiction, including *Herzog*. John Jacob Clayton (1971) says that "he [Bellow] rejects the attitude that ordinary life is trivial and banal, conventional and mechanical; that men live secondhand, unauthentic lives (...); that ordinary life has fallen into the quotidian" (Clayton 22). Moreover, he interprets Bellow's work as an expression of the rejection of "the denigration of the ordinary life of the individual" and as an attempt "to show in his fiction the possibilities for finding meaning in such lives" (Clayton 24). Discussing the portrayal of Herzog's childhood on Napoleon Street, David Fuchs says that it "incarnates the depth of ordinary life" (Fuchs 135). While I argue this to be true and will detail why in the second chapter of this thesis, I think that Bellow also shows that a return to common life, to his "innate qualities (...) original sense of life," is a remedy for Herzog, who in his adulthood, in his moment of crisis, is locked shamefully in his privacy (Bellow as quoted in Gray et al. 213).

In an attempt to define the notion of the ordinary, "the innate qualities" of one's life, I would like to refer the reader to the following passages in the novel, as they shed some light on this rather obscure concept:

1. As long as Moses was married to Daisy, he had led the perfectly ordinary life of an assistant professor, respected and stable (5).
2. Mama's brother died of typhus in Moscow. I took the letter from the postman and brought it upstairs – the long latch-string ran through loops under the banister. It was washday. The copper boiler steamed the window. She was rinsing and wringing in a tub. When she read the news she gave a cry and fainted. Her lips turned white. Her arm lay in the water, sleeve and all. We two were alone in the house. I was terrified when she lay like that, legs spread, her long hair undone, lids brown, mouth bloodless, death-like. But then she got up and went to lie down. She wept all day. But in the morning she cooked the oatmeal nevertheless. We were up early (139).

3. Black and hot under the green, the soil gave off its dampness. Herzog felt it in his bare feet (73).

Each of these quotations found in different parts of the novel offers some insight in what is labelled in this thesis ordinary human experience or ordinary life. Some insight, because the phenomenon is so deep and broad that it eludes total definitions. In the first quote, Herzog, an assistant professor, leads with Daisy an ordinary life that is characterised as respected and stable. The second adjective – stable – aptly describes a fundamental quality of everyday life. Specifically, the ordinary implies stability, which refers to both the repetitiveness and predictability of actions and to inner balance: balance between body and soul, heart and reason, the private and public, work and family, desire and achievement, to name but a few examples. Further, balance is a prerequisite to peace, happiness and fulfilment, which are among those qualities of life that make existence worthwhile. The novel shows that to find these values outside the ordinary – in the state of imbalance – is impossible for the main protagonist. For in the course of the novel the reader learns that Herzog's instability leads to the dissolution of his marriages: "By my irregularity and turbulence of spirit I brought out the very worst in Daisy" (126). "Roast breast of veal every Sunday with bread stuffing like clay was due to *my* disorders, my huge involvement - huge but evidently formless - in the history of thought," Herzog admits (127). Consequently, due to the excessive commitment to his research, Herzog loses inner balance and his ordinary life transforms into a life of disquietude, obsession and detachment. These feelings and states reappear during and following his second marriage, that with Madeleine.

The second quote indicates two other distinct aspects of the ordinary life: presence of and concern for other human beings, and the performance of daily activities. The passage is Herzog's recollection of an unforgettable day in his childhood when his mother received word of her brother's death. Despite living far from the land of their birth, Herzog's parents remain in touch with their relatives in Russia. Letters from Russia arrive regularly

and are read aloud by Father Herzog (138). One day the news of Sarah's brother's death arrives (139). Herzog's mother collapses, to her young son's horror. She weeps all day; however, the following morning she rises to prepare breakfast for her children, refusing to let grief dominate her. Her ordinary life is marked by a tremendous love for other people, which is expressed here both through her mourning of her deceased sibling and her dedication to her children. This love for others was present in her late brother's life as well and it manifested itself through his generosity: "He shared with us," recalls Herzog's mother. "My brother had an open hand" (143). Time and again Bellow directs the reader's attention to the value of human relationships and their function in daily life. He does so convincingly through Herzog's recollections of his childhood. The adult Herzog knows that "the real and essential question is one of our employment by other human beings and their employment by us" (272). The root of this belief reaches back to his childhood. However, meaningful relationships are scarce in Herzog's adult life and their absence deepens his detachment from everyday life.

The other characteristic feature of the ordinary life presented in the second quote is the performance of mundane activities material to one's own life and the lives of others. As illustrated in the passage, the rhythm of Herzog's mother's life is defined by household duties and routines, such as doing laundry, rising early and preparing meals, which she performs in order to take care of her family. She resolves to resume ordinary housework the day after she receives the terrible news of her brother's death. This suggests that the performance of routine may even help overcome inner pain. Herzog certainly believes so, and when Madeleine announces a divorce, "[h]e continued with the windows because he couldn't allow himself to feel crippled" (10). Merely repairing windows prevents him from breaking down in the same way that preparing oatmeal holds back Herzog's mother's sorrow following the loss of her brother. Nevertheless, as Herzog descends into depression and

anxiety as a result of the divorce and his "need to explain" (2), he loses the ability to carry out the simplest activities and household chores. The "malodorous sofa" (3) in his apartment does not bother him and the history of intellectual thought seems more disturbing than the ruinous state of his country cottage in Ludeyville. In his discussion of the mundane, Martin Heidegger includes this feature as well: "It must be confirmed by characterizing the everyday being-in-the-world nearest to us – by entangled, circumspect taking care of things" (Heidegger 308). Unlike Bellow, he is convinced that his "very engagement in the world alienates me from my authentic possibility" (Crowell), which implies that ordinary experience is opposed to authenticity. Yet in *Herzog* these routine engagements and achievements in fact help the protagonist recover.

The third quote describes the ordinary life in terms of Herzog's response to and connection with the external world through his senses. His observation of the outside world in its diverse forms, be they cityscapes, the countryside or natural phenomena, and the perception of these through the senses of touch, smell and hearing seem to be Herzog's most effective ways of remaining in touch with reality, because he frequently reports the world as he senses it. The final quote above relates Herzog's experience of the dampness of the soil through his bare feet – the sense of touch. The character is generally very attentive to nature and enjoys contemplating it:

He loved to think about the power of the sun, about light, about the ocean. The purity of the air moved him. There was no stain in the water, where schools of minnows swam. (...) His heart was greatly stirred by the open horizon; the deep colors; the faint iodine pungency of the Atlantic rising from weeds and mollusks; the white, fine, heavy sand; but principally by the green transparency as he looked down to the stony bottom webbed with golden lines. Never still. If his soul could cast a reflection so brilliant, and so intensely sweet, he might beg God to make such use of him (91).

Herzog experiences the sea through his senses. He may make himself responsible for the history of ideas and development of the world (105), but "his imagination of the universe

was elementary" (47). However, his pleasant reflections on the sea are interrupted by the ironic reminder that "[t]he actual sphere is not clear like this, but turbulent and angry. A vast human action is going on. Death watches" (91). Ordinary experience is arrested at the cost of the existentialist admonition: "So if you have some happiness, conceal it. And when your heart is full, keep your mouth shut also" (91-2). The same technique is applied by the author in other passages that involve Herzog's observation and perception of the external world. This method serves as an ironic critique of existentialism with which Herzog grapples throughout the novel. Hence, he needs to withhold from innocent enjoyment of the landscape and allow existential ideology onto the stage, thereby ridiculing it.<sup>6</sup>

Summing up, ordinary life is characterised by, among other things, stability, interaction with and concern for other human beings, and the performance of routine activities and duties. The senses act as a link to the exterior world, where real life occurs; through them one is able to respond to and place oneself in the world, be it at the centre of his own life, the life of a city, garden or the sea. In view of these characteristics of the ordinary, Herzog's involvement in the quotidian is discussed in the following sections. As long as these abstract constructs hold his attention, ordinary experience remains his greatest affliction.

### **1.3. A mass of learning versus ordinary human experience**

A professor of the philosophy of history, the author of the Ph. D. thesis "The State of Nature in 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century English and French Political Philosophy," the book *Romanticism and Christianity* and a number of academic articles (4), Herzog concedes defeat as a scholar:

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<sup>6</sup> The comic representation of existential thought is analysed in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

But he couldn't deceive himself about his work. He was beginning seriously to distrust it. His ambitions received a sharp check. Hegel was giving him a great deal of trouble. Ten years earlier he had been certain he understood his ideas on consensus and civility, but something had gone wrong. He was distressed, impatient, angry (6).

The personal crisis that follows his second divorce extends to every sphere of his life, including his profession. What is more, the divorce itself partly results from Herzog's "sick[ness] with abstractions" (123) and the couple's intellectual rivalry: "*I understood that Madeleine's ambition was to take my place in the learned world. To overcome me*" (76).<sup>7</sup> As Herzog concedes that "he had mismanaged everything – everything" (3), he includes his academic career, which leaves him with nothing but facts and ideas. Because these are inapplicable and irrelevant to his personal predicaments and fail to provide immediate explanations, Herzog drops academic formalities (2). As early as the section immediately following the opening of the novel there is an anticipation of the protagonist's change from a devoted scholar, who intends to continue to design theoretical models of history, "look[ing] at the past with an intense need for contemporary relevance" (5), into a man who no longer settles for those interpretations of the world and human nature that history and ideology offer. A classroom scene on page 2 informs the reader of the novel's main concerns:

He was clear enough in April but by the end of May he began to ramble. It became apparent to his students that they would never learn much about The Roots of Romanticism but that they would see and hear odd things. One after the other, the academic formalities dropped away. Professor Herzog had the unconscious frankness of a man deeply preoccupied. And toward the end of the term there were long pauses in his lectures. He would stop, muttering "Excuse me," reaching inside his coat for his pen. The table creaking, he wrote on scraps of paper with a great pressure of eagerness in his hand; he was absorbed, his eyes darkly circled. His white face showed everything – everything. He was reasoning, arguing, he was suffering, he had thought of a brilliant alternative – he was wide-

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<sup>7</sup> All italicised quotes are Bellow's unless stated otherwise. The use of italics is predominantly the author's way of marking the difference between Herzog's letters and the rest of the text in the novel.

open, he was narrow; his eyes, his mouth made everything silently clear – longing, bigotry, bitter anger. One could see it all (2).

Herzog is lethargic and uneasy; he carries on rambling mental debates and obsessively writes notes and epistles to numerous figures in search of "a brilliant alternative." That this happens to him while lecturing points to the inseparable link between university education and his unbalanced state of mind. Eventually he loses control over his thoughts, body and conduct. There are long pauses in his lectures, muttering, pressure to record his confused thoughts, darkly circled eyes. It does not come as a surprise that Herzog's marital and intellectual crises are inscribed in his face and behaviour. However, the consistency with which he holds to this state of bitterness and intellectual struggle, removing himself from ordinary experience, is unusual and comic, taking into consideration the protagonist's strong sense for the good and true (166).

In a letter to Smithers that also comes in the beginning of the novel, Herzog proposes an idea for a new course and elaborates on his view of the curriculum:

*Dear Smithers, (...). The other day at lunch – (...) – we were asked to suggest topics for new lecture courses and I said what about a series on marriage. I might as well have said "Currants" or "Gooseberries". (...) Look, Smithers, I do have a good idea for a new course. You organization men have to depend on the likes of me. The people who come to evening classes are only ostensibly after culture. Their great need, their hunger, is for good sense, clarity, truth – even an atom of it. People are dying – it is no metaphor – for lack of something real to carry home when day is done. See how willing they are to accept the wildest nonsense (27-8).*

Interestingly enough, Herzog does not propose a course on Romanticism in which he specialises. Neither does he offer any suggestion that would correspond to Smithers and "his lot[s']" (28) academic preferences. His answer, i.e., a course on marriage, is rather a response to his own trials and tribulations within his last two marriages, to his own needs. Herzog's proposition is, therefore, ironic. Twice divorced, he cannot himself sustain a relationship, let alone instruct others how to do so. The protagonist's recognition of the evening

students' need for "good sense, clarity, truth," is, then, his realisation of the fact that he cannot provide it. There is a great deal of selfishness, admonishment, bitterness and comedy in this statement. It also exposes the face of an academia that is not able to offer students clear answers as to how to lead their lives. Herzog's change of opinion on what is taught at universities is apparent. During a visit at Simkin's, one of his lawyers, Herzog keeps a book on his knee, which sets Simkin off wondering: "What was it that day, Simmel on religion? Teilhard de Chardin? Whitehead?" (29). Indeed, throughout the novel Herzog reads, quotes and evaluates numerous intellectual works and ideas and writes letters to their authors. However, he does not do it to acknowledge and support his own or other peoples' intellectual achievements, but to reorganise his view of the canon and search for "something real" (10). Herzog debunks many intellectual notions as they have cut him off from the ordinary world to such an extent that he considers himself an outsider.

Herzog's status as an immigrant is accentuated in two ways: in his characterisation and in narration. Herzog is an American Jew of Russian Jewish parents. He was born in Montreal and moved to Chicago at the age of nine. His identity and character are thus inevitably marked by a sense of similarity to his Russian Jewish relatives, which leaves him partly detached from mainstream American society. After having bought some new clothes, he puts them on at home and comments on himself, triggering a flow of recollections of his relatives:

In it he looked like his father's cousin Elias Herzog, the flour salesman who had covered the northern Indiana territory for General Mills back in the twenties. Elias with his Americanized clean-shaven face ate hard-boiled eggs and drank prohibition beer – home-brewed Polish piva. He gave the eggs a neat rap on the rail of the porch and peeled scrupulously. He wore colourful sleeve garters and a skimmer like this one, set on this same head of hair shared also by *his* father, Rabbi Sandor-Alexander Herzog, who wore a beautiful beard as well, a radiant, broad-stung beard that hid the outline of his chin and also the velvet collar of his frock coat. Herzog's mother had had a weakness for Jews with handsome beards. In her family, too, all the elders had beards that were thick and rich, full

of religion. She wanted Moses to become a rabbi and he seemed to himself gruesomely unlike a rabbi now in the trunks and straw hat, his face charged with heavy sadness, foolish utter longing of which a religious life might have purged him (22).

In this passage the reader observes that Herzog's view of himself is influenced by a comparison to his Jewish relatives and their qualities. By recalling and comparing himself to them, Herzog positions himself outside American culture and the present time. When others doubt his American identity, he asks rhetorically: "What else was he?" (159). Herzog knows that he does not entirely belong to the Jewish world, as he hardly resembles Elias and Elias's father, except by way of wearing a colourful shirt and a straw hat. The character also stands outside Jewish tradition by, for instance, not growing a beard, as his mother's predecessors did, and by not fulfilling his mother's hopes of him becoming a rabbi. As a result, Herzog lives in two different worlds, the Jewish world belonging to the past and the American world that he is separated from. Thus, neither of these two worlds does he seem to embrace as his home. Moreover, in consequence of his second divorce, Herzog loses his closest friends: his wife, his daughter, his best friend and Madeleine's relatives, and, thereby, his secure existence and stable identity (Gordon 66). Finally, he is "a prisoner of perception, compulsory witness" (72), which means he is more of a passive spectator of himself and other individuals than a spontaneous and active participant. This seems to be the reason that Herzog's brother tells him at their father's funeral long after they have all moved to Chicago: "Don't carry on like a goddamn immigrant" (280).

The suggestion of Herzog's estrangement is intensified by the kind of narration that Bellow employs in the novel. Namely, he uses a particular type of focalisation in the text to emphasise the protagonist's otherness. Focalisation, as Abbott defines it, "refers specifically to the lens through which we see characters and events in the narrative" (66). Both a narrator and a character can be focalisers. In *Herzog* the first- and third-person focalisations intertwine, and Herzog, regardless of whose eyes the reader sees him through, is oftentimes

described from a distance, detached, almost to the point of non-involvement. Here are two examples of the use of such a technique, which serves to intensify the main character's detachment:

In his posture of collapse on the sofa, arms abandoned over his head and legs stretched away, lying with no more style than a chimpanzee, his eyes with greater than normal radiance watched his own work in the garden with detachment, as if he were looking through the front end of a telescope at a tiny clear image (10-1).

Do not deceive yourself, dear Moses Elkanah, with childish jingles and Mother Goose (77).

In the first quote it is the narrator who informs the reader of the detached manner in which Herzog looks at himself. Interestingly enough, the narrator's account includes a description of Herzog's watching his own work in the garden in a detached way. In the second example it is either the narrator or Herzog himself who warns the character against falling for Shapiro's multiple ideas, which his colleague included in his monograph and which Moses has reviewed. In both instances the type of focalisation that the author chooses to use contributes to the reader's perception of Herzog as an alienated character. The novel abounds in such shifting perspectives, which often coexist in single sentences. Masayuki Terenishi argues that the use of plural focalisers in *Herzog* is an example of postmodern polyphony.<sup>8</sup> In Terenishi's view, the purpose of the type of narration found in Bellow's novel is to express the character's "inner struggle" and "inner split between a subjective 'I' and an objective 'he'" (Terenishi 28).

Being consumed by intellectual ideas, Herzog is compelled to liberate himself from an obsessive brainwork in order to survive. One way he may interrupt this burdensome state is by living life on its most ordinary level. However, for the greater part of the novel

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<sup>8</sup> The critic contrasts postmodern polyphony with the monologic style of premodernist novels where the narrator possesses ultimate authorial power. Postmodern polyphony stems from the modernist tradition of presenting the reader with characters' subjective truths. In postmodernism this technique is reinforced and diversified (Terenishi 21).

Herzog continues to comically privilege free thinking and himself over involvement with other people. His absolute dedication to self-analysis leads to his detachment from the external world. As a result, he drifts out of touch with reality; only rarely is he able to appreciate an actual ordinary moment. The question of the quotidian is inseparably connected to Herzog's letter to Martin Heidegger.

#### **1.4. Heidegger and "the fall into quotidian"**

Herzog voices his appreciation of ordinary experience through his critique of Heidegger's "fall into quotidian," one of the philosophical concepts that grip the protagonist throughout the novel. Herzog ironically addresses the philosopher with nagging questions: "*Dear Doktor Professor Heidegger, I should like to know what you mean by the expression "the fall into quotidian." When did this fall occur? Where were we standing when it happened?"* (49), challenging Heidegger's assertion that humans tend to completely immerse themselves in the most prosaic aspects of life, which Heidegger calls *everydayness*. In this way, one avoids the discomfort of pondering one's own death, fear and authentic existence (Heidegger 307-38). To Herzog the question of life and death is central: "Not to burst, not to die – to stay alive, was all he could hope for" (44). Throughout the novel, until he finds peace, he is depicted as "a prisoner of perception" who cannot simply "fall into quotidian," a state he lauds and attempts to achieve and in which transcendence is the highest goal. Consequently, on the one hand, Herzog celebrates the concept of ordinary experience, but on the other hand, he cannot implement it in his life. When he attempts to carry out an ordinary activity or participate in a social event, he breaks down and fails. Thus, Herzog's approach to Heidegger's "fall into quotidian" is inconsistent: although the character advocates the value of the quotidian, he does little to actualise his conviction for the bulk of the novel.

Returning to the German philosopher in his ruminations on page 106, Herzog expands on and provides reasons for his critique of Heidegger's philosophy:

*No philosopher knows what the ordinary is, has not fallen into it deeply enough. The question of ordinary human experience is the principal question of these modern centuries, as Montaigne and Pascal, otherwise in disagreement, both clearly saw. – The strength of a man's virtue or spiritual capacity measured by his ordinary life (106).*

In opposition to Heidegger, Herzog defends the ordinary life, attributing value to it and making it a measure of humanity. However, even though he fervently objects to Heidegger's formulation, believing that "[t]he question of ordinary human experience is the principal question of these modern centuries" (106), he repeatedly neglects, mismanages or acts as if he were indifferent of such an experience. If the strength of his virtue or spiritual capacity were measured by his ordinary life, Herzog would rate poorly. Nevertheless, there are moments when Herzog discerns the ordinary and involves himself in it: when he rubs his hand to see the darkness, for example, or when he notes Gersbach's paternal nature. These moments, his greatest connection with the *here* and *now*, indicate that Herzog's sanity can be restored only through his growing appreciation of and participation in the ordinary.

One of such moments when Herzog fails to fulfil an ordinary activity occurs when he travels to Martha's Vineyard to visit his friend Libbie. Advised by a doctor to take a holiday and reluctant to accept an offer from Ramona, his lover, to stay at her house in Montauk, Herzog chooses Vineyard Haven. Once there, he judges the entire trip to be a mistake: immediately multifarious notions and concerns – grief, egotism, modern ideas, a sense of failure (93) – return to eat away at him. His mind swarming with these destructive thoughts, Herzog is unable to enjoy his time with Libbie and her husband Arnold. On the very same night, after a short evening with his hosts, Herzog deserts the place, leaving a note for his friends: "*Have to go. Not able to stand kindness at this time. Feelings, heart,*

*everything in strange condition. Unfinished business. Bless you both*" (98). The character is in no state to connect with the surrounding world, either through accepting Ramona's kind offer or through staying at Libbie's.

Another clear instance of Herzog's definite dissociation from the outside world takes place on a train to the Vineyard. The narrator explains Herzog's behaviour: "[h]e might have gone to the club car, of course, where there were tables, but there he'd have to buy drinks, talk to people. Besides, he had one of his most essential letters to write (...)" (53). Herzog consistently retreats from everyday life in favour of letter writing. Even though he recognises his need for human interaction and for "something real," as voiced in his letter to Smithers (27-8), Herzog fails to respond to these real events when they happen in his life.

Herzog's relationship with his children is also affected by his inability to fully, capably and responsibly participate in their world. During a day out with Marco, Herzog is only able to teach his son facts about the American history (General Beauregard, Island Number 10, Andersonville, Civil War) while distracted by thoughts of Sono, his Japanese lover at the time, the question whether he should leave her for Madeleine, his general confusion and the timetable of the train back to Philadelphia. Unconcerned with his failure as a father, Herzog asks rhetorically: "These children and I love one another. But what can I give them?" (104). Having neither further ideas as to how to occupy his son nor any willingness to do so, Herzog excuses himself: "'Well, okay, kid, I've got to go back to Philadelphia now' (...) 'It's just about train time, Marco'" (104). Again Herzog flees from ordinary activity, this time spending a day with his son. Then, while on a day out with Junie, his daughter, the protagonist ends up causing a car accident and bringing harm on his child (291). The girl is taken alongside Herzog to the police station, and she is a witness to the interrogation of her father in connection with the loaded revolver found in his possession.

Despite his laudable attempts to give Junie all the care she needs at the police station by fixing milk for her, telling her stories and holding her tight (295), the recklessness that leads to the accident and the compulsory visit to the police headquarters displays Herzog's lack of control over the simple experience of taking his daughter out for the day. To Madeleine, who arrives at the station to collect Junie, this accident is further evidence of Herzog's instability, which enables her to judge her ex-husband yet again: "He's jealous and a trouble-maker. He has a terrible temper" (301). It follows clearly that Herzog, despite his ideals, views life on his own terms and with himself at the centre.

A similar rejection of reality takes place in the courthouse, which Herzog visits in order to talk to Simkin. With time on his hands, Herzog enters a courtroom and listens as a number of cases are presented. However, he soon learns that he is unable to tolerate the gruesome details of the senseless crimes. Consequently, he leaves hastily after the first hearing, feeling "something terrible, inflammatory, bitter" stinging and burning "his veins, his face, his heart" (230). He concludes that the evil within him causes him to react in such an abrupt way. "Eager impulses, love, intensity, passionate dizziness that makes a man sick" (231) paralyse Herzog and remove him from the ordinary – he leaves the courtroom only to come back to it later on. Outside the hall of justice, he recalls his mother.

Herzog's mother suffered an untimely death when Herzog himself was sixteen. He did not want to be involved in the life of his family at that age, either, and he acted indifferent to his mother's fate. In a similar way, he refuses to partake in the court hearing: its focus on death repels him. In his self-pity, Herzog yet again revisits the memory of his dying mother and recalls her presenting him with dust on her palm when he was a young boy: "Look carefully, now, and you'll see what Adam was made of.' She rubbed the palm of her hand with a finger, rubbed until something dark appeared on the deep-lined skin, a particle of what certainly looked to him like earth. 'You see? It's true'" (232-3). What Herzog's

mother shows him is very concrete and tangible – ordinary. It reminds the reader of burial and echoes a fundamental message of the Bible: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." (Genesis 3:19). On the threshold of death, Herzog's mother carries the meaning of human life: fragility as well as power. She is a cornerstone in her son's life, teaching the youthful Herzog more about life and death than any ideology. Inspired by the simplicity of his mother's act and its message of the ordinary – i.e., the essence of existence – he repeats it and nowhere else in the novel does he seem closer to everyday human experience than here:

He rubbed, smiling; and it worked; a bit of the same darkness began to form in his palm. (...) Maybe she offered me this proof partly in a spirit of comedy. The wit you can have only when you consider death very plainly, when you consider what a human being really is (233).

Thus, Herzog's inability to accept the atrocious cruelty that is becoming more and more common in modern life, which the courtroom scene illustrates, is succeeded by a symbolic act of recognition of what a person is and what remains of them after death. This is perhaps the single most important scene in the novel, describing the true character of life in the most concrete terms and using the simplest imagery. It is in great contradistinction to the abstract constructs with which Herzog is usually preoccupied. Only now does he manage to acknowledge death, a part of the quotidian, many years after his mother's death. In his teenage years, when she was approaching her death, he received a dramatic image of her dying body and short hair. This image spoke to Moses: "*My son, this is death*" (234); however, he "chose not to read this text" (234). The character distanced himself from his mother to such a degree that he treated her in abstract terms. He removed her humanity so that her death would not have any effect on him. He would not dare to examine how "she had begun to change into earth" (234). He would rather immerse himself in Spengler's *The Decline of the West* than participate in the last days of his mother's life. This participation

could be embodied by offering her company, attending to her, or comforting her, but none of these compassionate gestures are included in the scenes of Herzog's mother's dying moments. It appears that academic texts and intellectual dilemmas have functioned as a refuge from the facts and problems of his life. The realisation of this breeds in Herzog a sense of guilt, one of the main factors of his crisis.

Another collision with reality occurs when Herzog drives to Madeleine and Gersbach's house in Harper Avenue in Chicago in order to kill her and Gersbach, as he fears they have been abusing Junie. First, he sees Madeleine in the kitchen doing the dishes. He notices the details of her movements, clothes and appearance. Fuelled by a fantasy of revenge, he walks until he spots Junie through a bathroom window: Gersbach is giving the child a bath. The tenderness and actuality of this moment move him, and instead of seeing in Gersbach a phony and despicable man, he discovers a father in him, a father to Junie, whom Herzog himself cannot successfully care for. In consequence of the realisation of the humanity and goodness within Gersbach, the protagonist does not fire the gun and asserts that it "was nothing but a thought" (257). Almost shocked by this discovery, Herzog deserts the scene of what would have been another senseless crime. It is important to note that Moses apprehends the tender, fatherly side of Gersbach through sight. Discarding the role of a self-absorbed mental synthesist, he assumes the role of an active spectator who becomes genuinely involved with other people's actions (in this case, with Gersbach giving Junie a bath).

If Herzog cannot partake in everydayness, he can at least realise what it is and what value it has. His mental capacity to recognise and analyse life and others' behaviour is stronger than his capacity to act. After all, he is another of Bellow's "dangling men" on a quest to recover the purpose of life and the willingness to exist (Levenson 39). One of Herzog's most definitive realisations of the ordinary in life enters his mind during Shapiro's

visit at his and Madeleine's house in Ludeyville. Herzog's fellow academic harbours an inauthentic interest in Madeleine's research field of Russian religious studies, and Herzog despises Shapiro's mask: that of a refined scholar resorting to academic topics to appear more appealing to his conversationalist.<sup>9</sup> Herzog silently charges Shapiro with insincerity and recalls that "[t]here was more of the truth of life in those spotted, spoiled apples, and in old Shapiro, who smelled of the horse and of produce, than in all of these learned references" (70). Shapiro's father's mundane work, peddling apples, leaving the natural odour of horse and produce on him, seems more authentic to Herzog than his colleague's pretentious claim of truth. Thus, the novel suggests a hierarchy of values, wherein the ordinary is superior to theory. Old Shapiro's humble work and the earthy smells are honest and pure, and, hence, they represent the truth of life. Meanwhile, ideas – a source of confusion and inauthenticity – tumble from their pedestal. As Herzog recollects his past in the form of vivid memories, be they of Shapiro's father or his own mother, his appreciation of the ordinary grows and he regains power to accomplish ordinary actions himself.

The affirmation of life through the senses is at the centre of the novel. Bellow regretted that "certain primitive kinds of knowledge" were "banished from ordinary discourse, like the knowledge brought by smells" (Bellow as quoted in Howard 81). In *Herzog* he invites this knowledge back by invoking not only the sense of smell but also the senses of sight, hearing and touch. The central character records the world through his senses as soon as he takes to the streets, whether in Chicago, New York, Warsaw or Istanbul. He never misses the details of his surroundings and invariably depicts them in terms of their colours, shapes, sound and odour – e.g., "The Avenue was filled with concrete-mixing

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<sup>9</sup> Herzog's critique of Shapiro's allegedly dishonest interest in Madeleine's research is born of the fact that he himself does not harbour much interest in his wife's academic career. Herzog's engagement in solely his own academic pursuits and achievements breeds ignorance of Madeleine's career and does not leave much room for an exchange of ideas between the spouses (Pradhan 2006: 66-7).

trucks, smells of wet sand and powdery gray cement. Crashing, stamping pile-driving below, and higher, structural steel, interminably and hungrily going into the cooler, more delicate blue" (32). While waiting for a subway train, he perceives "the strong suffocating fragrance of New York underground" (33), whereas at another time fresh air brings him joy: "He was glad to reach the open air, to breathe" (175).

An extremely pronounced appreciation of the senses is found in Ramona. Through her the author reinforces the message of the significance of the senses in human life. Namely, Ramona runs a florist shop in Chicago. She tenderly looks after a depressed and distressed Herzog. She is portrayed in this fashion:

That was Ramona – no mere sensualist, but a theoretician, almost a priestess, in her Spanish costumes adapted to American needs, and her flowers, her really beautiful teeth, her red cheeks, and her thick, kinky, exciting black hair (150).

Ramona is a sensualist and flowers are an important part of her life: she exhibits them to Herzog and her apartment, which he visits often, is full of them. At first, they do not seem to affect him at all: "With his eye to the viewer, he said, 'It's very pretty. All those flowers.' But he felt heavy-hearted – dreadful" (15). With time, however, Herzog starts to recognise their beauty and be positively influenced by them. While approaching Ramona's shop, he notices "daisies, lilacs, small roses, flats with tomato and pepper seedlings for transplanting, all freshly watered" and he can "smell the fresh odor of soil." The sight and smell of flowers and soil coexist with the influx of positive feelings caused by spending time in Ramona's company; her "perfumed kiss" and "fragrant face" intensify Herzog's pleasure and joy. The character observes "the buses pouring poison but the flowers surviving" and he is possessed by wistful musing: "Here, on the street, as far as character and disposition permitted, he had a taste of the life he might have led if he had been simply a loving creature..." (206). The flowers symbolise, among other things, strength and a natural urge to survive – values essential to Herzog's return to balance and values that Ramona consistently

introduces into his life. In addition to flowers and fragrances, she offers him meals, touch and sexual fulfilment. These three aspects of life: nutrition, human touch and sexual intercourse – belong to human beings' natural needs and, hence, may be said to be a part of the quotidian, even when these experiences are regarded as extraordinary. Ramona strongly believes that there is not "any sin but the sin against the body, for her the true and only temple of the spirit" (151). Gloria Cronin (2001: 61) and Jonathan Wilson (1990: 26) interpret Ramona as a narrowly provocative and erotic goddess, limiting her role in Herzog's life to a provider of sexual pleasures. In fact, her immense corporeal power is in conflict with Herzog's spiritual and mental power, which leads him to pose disquieting questions to himself: "But is that the secret goal of my vague pilgrimage? Do I see myself to be after long blundering an unrecognized son of Sodom and Dionysus – an Orphic type? (Ramona enjoyed speaking of Orphic types.) A petit-bourgeois Dionysian?" (17). However, although Herzog does not subscribe to Ramona's extreme practice of contemplating the flesh (to him, it is yet another ideology) and evades her and her propositions a couple of times (fearing that she hides a desire to marry him), he seems to realise the benefits of their relationship in the second part of the novel:

She wanted to add riches to his life and give him what he pursued in the wrong places. This she could do by the art of love, she said, the art of love which was one of the sublime achievements of the spirit (184).

As the critics Pradhan and Cohen argue, Ramona succeeds in helping Herzog heal his broken heart and confused mind with "fleshly love" (Pradhan 75), and, hence, they propose a view altogether different from Cronin and Wilson's. I support Pradhan and Cohen's interpretations, which acknowledge Ramona's contribution to Herzog's recovery. Namely, Ramona's self acceptance, as Cohen argues, is the embodiment of Herzog's desire of coming to terms with himself (Cohen 2004: 8). In addition, she is characterised by sincerity, as

she offers Herzog no lies – her words are confirmed by her actions.<sup>10</sup> Further still, she helps Herzog by turning his attention to life's basics: sensual pleasures (touch and body), natural phenomena (flowers and smells) and everyday activities (meals, caretaking, conversation). Partly owing to Ramona, Herzog appears to regain stability through centring his attention on the simplest aspects of life. Moreover, he imagines what kind of mother Ramona would make (161) and he generally admires the value that she attaches to family feeling: "Still, Herzog observed that Ramona had genuine family feeling, and of this he approved" (153). Family, another feature of ordinary life, is absent from his own life and he silently yearns for it. As the character liberates himself from neurotic analyses of ideas, including the critique of the many bodily pleasures promoted by Ramona, he abandons his judgemental attitudes about Ramona herself and begins to recognise her worth as a partner: "Indeed, Ramona did look like those figures of sex and swagger," notices Herzog, "but there was something intensely touching about her, too. She struggled, she fought. She needed extraordinary courage to hold this poise. In this world, to be a woman who took matters into her own hands!" (337). Besides her perfect body and unusual sexual skills, Herzog perceives important values in her: courage and independence, which he himself is in great need of. In summary, Ramona's role should not be reduced to that of a "sexual professional (or priestess)" (17), because, as the novel progresses, aside from finding pleasure in her body, fragrance and touch, Herzog confides in Ramona, seeks comfort in her company, conducts ordinary activities with her, appreciates her familial instinct and ultimately learns to accept his mismanaged life. At the conclusion of the story, Herzog invites Ramona to his house in Ludeyville for dinner and, following her example, picks flowers, because he knows she is fond of them. The performance of simple activities, some of which Ramona has taught him, proves vital to achieving peace of mind.

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<sup>10</sup> Ramona's truthful character contrasts with other protagonists' false characters.

As mentioned previously, Herzog undergoes a change during the course of the novel. This is signalled by his abandonment of letter writing and his adoption of enthusiasm for the most prosaic aspects of life. Herzog is finally able to fully connect with the external world and complete everyday actions: having an honest conversation with his brother, making plans to spend more time with Marco (334), describing Ramona as "a woman, a florist, a friend from New York" (335) without an unnecessary analysis of her sexual ideology; telephoning Ramona instead of writing her a mental letter, and eventually preparing dinner for her (337) rather than being invited to one. He also re-establishes connection with the Ludeyville community by asking Mr. Tuttle to fix electricity in his house and Mrs. Tuttle to help him clean up in the cottage (335). Heidegger's "fall into quotidian" is conclusively refuted through Herzog's final actions. The end reveals the origin of his recovery: the sanity and balance inherent to ordinary experience.

The suggestion that Tony Tanner offers, namely that biding one's time can be a source of both decay and power, is answered by Herzog himself:

Why must I be such a throb-hearted character... But I am. I am, and you can't teach the old dogs. Myself is thus and so, and will continue thus and so. And why fight it? *My balance comes from instability*. Not organization, or courage, as with other people. It's tough, but it's how it is. On these terms I, too – even I! – apprehend certain things. Perhaps the only way I'm able to do it. Must play the instrument I've got (330) [emphasis mine].

Though it might seem to the reader that Herzog is in the process of disintegration, which he himself admits at the beginning of the novel (3, 37), this disintegration proves not to be an incurable condition. As critics have argued, *Herzog* is a novel about deliverance from suffering and liberation from intellectual versions of reality, thanks to which the protagonist eventually manages to regain stability and peace. That Bellow decides to turn to the self in *Herzog* and structure the story around it implies "the vision of self as inviolable, powerful, and nervy, self as the only real thing in an unreal environment" (Roth as quoted in Tanner

297). The in-depth examination of the essence of self and the struggle with everything the self is shaped by: education, memory, family, relationships, surroundings, and the confusion which self-analysis creates – indicate the insufficient character of the self to live and develop on its own. Herzog recognises the value of community, "I really believe that brotherhood is what makes a man human" (272), yet, being preoccupied with his personal crisis, he finds it difficult to establish meaningful relationships. Herzog's balance comes from instability – the time and energy he has spent on making amends are vital to his eventual recovery of harmony. The ideas that have plagued his mind and the suffering that crushed his heart no longer dominate his thinking. At the end, back in Ludeyville, Herzog writes in a letter to the Russian philosopher of the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, Vasily Rozanov: "*A curious result of the increase of historical consciousness is that people think explanation is a necessity of survival. They have to explain their condition. And if the unexplained life is not worth living, the explained life is unbearable, too*" (322). Once Herzog drops his habit of compulsive rationalisations, the everydayness that he once avoided regains its due place in his life. Admittedly, Herzog's participation in ordinary experience in the majority of the novel is portrayed as impossible in order to expose and ridicule the protagonist's mental preoccupation with himself and various ideas – a preoccupation which in fact proves indispensable to the restoration of his well-being. At the conclusion of the novel the ordinary becomes an instrument of preserving that well-being.

### **1.5. Existentialism and Herzog's response to suffering, death and evil**

Existentialism is a philosophical position formalised in the 1940s and 1950s; its roots and affiliations, however, reach back to the philosophies of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger. In short, the theory of existentialism proposes a new set of categories in which hu-

man existence can be grasped, as the natural sciences do not fully account for the human condition. A number of terms have been developed to describe the tenets of existentialism and these terms include boredom, dread, the absurd, alienation, freedom, nothingness, and validity of values. Many of them originate in a belief in the absence of objective morality. In other words, existentialism proposes that no values exist before existence itself and one's freedom is the only origin of value. The lack of intrinsic values in life is encapsulated in a famous axiom from Sartre: "Existence precedes essence." The French philosopher and leading proponent of existentialism claims that because there is no inherent meaning to life, no essence, any meaning must be created through life. Existence, then, consists in establishing identity and becoming what one desires to become. In the existentialist view human life is marked by inescapable experiences of alienation, feelings of angst, the fear of death, the absurd, nothingness and inauthenticity (Crowell). This echoes modernism, popularised by, among others, Oswald Spengler (*The Decline of the West* 1918), T.S. Eliot (*The Waste Land* 1922), Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Rainer Maria Rilke, Thomas Mann, Joseph Conrad and Albert Camus, who proclaim the decline of the world, ubiquitous evil, and that values no longer hold (Walden 275).

From the very beginning of his literary career, Bellow stated his dislike of existentialism and modernist philosophy. He did so both through the characters in his novels and in numerous interviews. In an interview with David G. Galloway he says: "I agree with Walt Whitman that there has never been any more good or evil than now. I think the world has been as absurd before or not as absurd. I don't like these fashions" (Bellow as quoted in Galloway 21). In *Herzog* the central character consistently voices his dissatisfaction with existential philosophy:

"Then it's the old *memento mori*, the monk's skull on the table, brought up to date. And what good is that? It all goes back to those German existentialists who tell you how good dread is for you, how it

saves you from distraction and gives you freedom and makes you authentic. God is no more. But Death is. That's their story" (271).

Herzog condemns such grim views of humanity, which to him are "mere junk from fashionable magazines" and "we must get it out of our heads that this is a doomed time, that we are waiting for the end (...)" (316-7). Herzog repeatedly refers to existential notions as fashion items, products, canned goods or junk; he warns against their inauthenticity and rejects them: "I can't accept this . . . We are talking about the whole life of mankind. The subject is too great, too deep for such weakness, cowardice" (75). Towards the end of the novel Herzog argues that "human life is far subtler than any of its models" (271). As Wilson points out, for the mass of the story, the character perpetuates morbidity and the feelings of anguish and pain – a symptoms of his disorder and a source of comedy in the novel, an ironic critique of nihilism (Wilson 43). However, when the question of death becomes real, existential theory does not account for it and it is ultimately dropped in representations of death in the novel. What Bellow offers instead is attention centred on everyday human nature, transcendence, the mystery of death and the meaning of life based on certain permanent virtues. In the scene with Himmelstein, the lawyer's abdication to evil is loathed by Herzog, and Bellow seems to shape the main character's critical reaction in order to express his own belief that "existence, quite apart from any of our judgements, has value, that existence is worth-ful" (Bellow as quoted in Harper 72).

Before his ultimate rejection of existentialism in the latter part of the novel, Herzog first tests these ideas against his experience. His suffering is voiced time and again. Namely, he suffers from betrayal, humiliation, anger and pain. Only the comic perspective of the narrator rescues him from complete despair – Bellow often downplays the overdramatizing language and actions of Herzog with humour. Even though on an abstract level Herzog opposes attaching value to anguish and suffering, which is clearly manifested in his mental debates with philosophers (e.g., 37, 107, 166), it requires nearly the whole novel for

him to implement in his life his intention to break away from pain. It points towards Herzog's enormous egotism and self-pity, which are dominant discourses in the novel due to the focalisation being centred on the main protagonist.

Early in the novel Herzog directs the following thoughts and questions to Shapiro:

Are all the traditions used up, the beliefs done for, the consciousness of the masses not yet ready for the next development? Is this the full crisis of dissolution? Has the filthy moment come when moral feeling dies, conscience disintegrates, and respect for liberty, law, public decency, all the rest, collapses in cowardice, decadence, blood? Old Proudhon's visions of darkness and evil can't be passed over (75).

This is an explicit articulation of Bellow's aversion to the bleak view of existence offered by the 20<sup>th</sup>-century existentialists. Herzog voices his contempt of this view again in the scene with Himmelstein, whom the narrator characterises as an ardent representative of existential nihilism. Just like Ramona stands for concept of the significance of the senses in ordinary human life, Sandor Himmelstein, one of Herzog's lawyers, represents the modernist notion of the ubiquity of evil. After Madeleine has left him, Herzog finds shelter at Himmelstein's place. While there, he debates with his lawyer the possibility of obtaining custody of Junie. Himmelstein's opinions become a point of contention and the conversation provides an opportunity for Herzog to condemn the pessimistic outlook of modernism. Himmelstein discourages Herzog from applying for custody of his daughter, endeavouring to convince him of his meagre chances. The lawyer argues against it, saying: "Facts *are* nasty" (86). Herzog retorts: "You think they're true because they're nasty" (86), interpreting his friend's position as nurturing "the brutal facts of predatory existence" (Pifer 117) and of the void. Herzog angrily concludes: "The very Himmelsteins, who had never even read a book of metaphysics, were touting the Void as if it were so much salable real estate" (93). The protagonist rejects the assertions of Himmelstein, yet another of the "Reality Instructors" who intend to teach him a lesson, "blast[ing] him with their truth" (86). However, he

never does apply for custody of Junie, thereby consenting to the brutal terms of society. To Himmelstein Herzog is a "dreamy boy" (86) who has not come to terms with an unforgiving reality and become willing to accept that "we're all whores in this world" (85). In addition, the way Himmelstein is characterised reveals the truth about his beliefs. Bellow depicts the lawyer as a "fierce dwarf with protruding teeth and deep lines in his face" whose heart's savagery "may have pushed those ribs out of shape" and "the force of that hellish tongue made his teeth protrude" (86).<sup>11</sup> Himmelstein's appearance corresponds with his words, which reverberate with the nihilistic affirmation of the void, the lack of intrinsic values in life and brutality. At the centre of this seems to be Nietzsche's declaration that "God is dead" and the stronger invariably prevail (the concept of the *Übermensch*). The imagery that the author uses to describe Himmelstein and his ideology evokes Hell and Himmelstein himself can be interpreted as the embodiment of Satan. Towards the end of the novel, Herzog arrives at a conclusion:

But what is the philosophy of this generation? Not God is dead, that point was passed long ago. Perhaps it should be stated Death is God. This generation thinks – and this is its thought of thoughts – that nothing faithful, vulnerable, fragile can be durable or have any true power (289-90).

What Bellow seems to be saying here is that the world has adopted Nietzschean philosophy eagerly and blindly and popularised it as a fashionable idea. In an interview with Matthew C. Roudané, paraphrasing Nietzsche, Bellow gives a broader definition of nihilism; it embodies an event, "a long chains of events" in the history of humankind, a result of "the dislocation of the reigning values" following the triumph and decline of Christianity (Bellow as quoted in Roudané 268). The author constructs the novel so as to deny nihilism and affirm the essentials of life for to him, in the words of Herzog, "a perpetual thought of death was a sin" (33).

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<sup>11</sup> See Cohen (2004) for a detailed analysis of the symbolism of body language in *Herzog*.

Bellow builds towards the main protagonist's implicit denial of the existential viewpoint by interweaving scenes of aging, death and murder in the seventh chapter of the novel (245, 248, 257). First, Herzog visits Taube, his stepmother, because he wants to collect his late father's revolver from what was once his home. As he approaches the house and notices the flowers, he recalls his father's devotion to his garden. All at once a memory of his father's death springs into his mind: "And this was the house in which Father Herzog had died a few years ago, on a summer night, sitting up in bed suddenly, saying, '*Ich shtarb!*'" (242). Taube is an aging, slow-moving woman who suffers from a number of illnesses but not from an unclear mind (244). "The living dead," as she describes herself to Herzog. The light in the house reminds him of "the *ner tamid*, the vigil light in the synagogue" (245) – an association which displays Herzog's familiarity with Jewish mourning practices. The house shelters objects from long ago. Herzog pays attention to the unforgettable luster, the Oriental rug, the photographs. Then, the character recalls the approach of his father's death. He reflects upon Father Herzog's divulgement of the suspense that his impending death excited within him: "I don't know when I'll be delivered'. (...) The horror of this second birth, into the hands of death, made his eyes shine, and his lips silently pressed together" (249). This acceptance of the inevitability of death, the perception of the end as the beginning (the departure as the arrival), and the man's shining eyes and silent lips when he ponders it elevate death to a concept more composite, if equally inexplicable and indefinable, than mere existential anxiety. The following scene of Father Herzog actually grabbing a pistol and threatening to kill Herzog for all his vanity, idleness and "long-suffering" (250) emphasises the danger and foolishness of Herzog's self-concern. Father Herzog disdains his son for "the look of conceit or proud trouble, (...) stupid schemes, *liberating* [my] spirit" (248). In other words, to be as inert, indolent and unstable as Herzog is tantamount to death

in Father Herzog's eyes. To pursue a rational and fulfilling life is, then, humanity's purpose – a truth that Herzog slowly puts into effect by recognising the importance of everyday life.

From these scenes emerges a view of life and death that carries no trace of existential angst. The reader notices in Taube enduring mental powers: she displays vitality despite her aging body. The image of Father Herzog looking after flowers in the garden affirms the fertility of the earth against the modernist vision of its barrenness. The existential dread of death is then countered with Herzog's father's belief in the afterlife and his revelation that he awaited his fate not only with fear but also with curiosity. Furthermore, Father Herzog's violent reaction to his son's miserable conduct paradoxically suggests an interest in and concern for Herzog's life and thus denies Sartre's existential maxim: "Hell is other people." The assumption that involvement with other individuals is a distraction and withholds one from an authentic experience is disproved here. Father Herzog purposefully engages in and responds to his son and his son's problems, expecting him to "act out the manhood" (250) instead of making selfish demands, alienating himself and aggrandising suffering. Finally, Taube's aging body and Father Herzog's care for his flowers, his reflections on death and his "*Ich shtarb*," alongside his concern for Herzog through his vehement criticism of his son's permanent confusion, belong to what in the previous sections is described as ordinary human experience. They appear to further accentuate the fact that existence is not contingent on dread and alienation but rather finds meaning in everyday life, which is marked by the values of brotherhood, responsibility, duty and non-verbal sensual experiences.

## **1.6. Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter was to present the two recurring intellectual ideas of "the fall into quotidian" and existentialism in *Herzog* and show their meaning to and role in the construc-

tion of the novel and main character's transformation. The first notion, Heidegger's everydayness, which the German philosopher and, later, the founders of existentialism consider an obstacle to authentic experience, turns out to be a component essential to Herzog's return to his stable self. The discussion of Herzog's treatment of ordinary life showed that as long as the character is possessed by the need to clarify, justify and synthesise multiple ideas, which finds its expression in his mental letters and notes, he is unable to complete everyday actions and routines. He fails to visit his friends, take care of his children, bear the fact of social injustice in the courtroom cases, and as a teenager already devouring intellectual works, he disregards his mother's death. However, Herzog consistently voices his rejection of Heidegger's philosophy and affirms the value of ordinary life. Whenever he slips into self-valuation and mental debates with intellectuals, ordinary actions are withheld. This is done in order to fulfil the other goal of the novel: to show the comedy inherent to Herzog's unattainable ambition of reaching a higher synthesis. Near the end of the novel, as his drive towards total definitions withers away, Herzog begins to take up simple actions anew and the ordinary achieves its rightful place in his life. The perception of the outside world through the senses acts as the termination of Herzog's isolation from reality.

Similarly, the ideology of existentialism is attacked early in the novel and its pessimism is frequently condemned throughout its pages. Nevertheless, it is not until the second part of the novel that Herzog's opposition finds its reflection in the actual anti-existentialist scenes of death, evil and suffering. In these passages genuinely meaningful relationships, the sense of community and belonging, and responsibility for others speak against the gloomy view of the existential void and moral decay professed by modernist and existential thinkers. Herzog's opposition to nihilism cannot be discussed without considering his childhood, a prominent source of his conviction in morality and brotherhood.

## Chapter 2: The issue and role of memory in *Herzog*

### 2.1. Introduction

In this chapter I investigate the aspect of Moses Herzog's childhood memories, which recur in the novel. I analyse their content and function in the character's development, especially in his reorganisation of ideas and values and in the recovery from his crisis. In other words, I address the question of why certain memories in the novel are included and how they imbue Herzog's story with meaning. I also demonstrate that *Herzog* is a progress narrative and an anti-*Bildungsroman*, as Bellow describes it. In light of theories pertaining to the *Bildungsroman* genre I attempt to show the significance of childhood in an adult's life. A number of topics are analysed here: Herzog's immersion in the Jewish religious tradition; the simple and genuine character of his parents' life as reflected in their physical descriptions; and their shared fate as immigrants, with the suffering that it entails. I also analyse how Herzog constructs his parents' strategies for endurance. I argue that these memories, appearing midway through the novel, function as a source of power and integrity, which the reader observes in Herzog at the end of the novel. Through these recollections of his family members, the main protagonist realises the value of the ordinariness of existence and begins to take the life-affirming attitude, which stands in opposition to the nihilistic tendencies promoted by the other characters in the novel.

## 2.2. Herzog as an anti-Bildungsroman within a Bildungsroman

The *Bildungsroman* genre, a literary tradition that flourished during the Victorian Age, centres on the development of characters from childhood to early adulthood. *Bildungsromans* are also referred to as novels of education, youth or formation. In the prototypical *Bildungsroman*, a protagonist comes from the countryside and in his adolescent years leaves home and moves to the city, usually as the result of conflict with one of his parents and an inner need to break away from the familiar atmosphere of home. In the city, the character acquires education and forms social relationships, which act as sources of knowledge about the world (Buckley 17). Also, according to Golban, "[t]he Victorian *Bildungsroman* involves the principle of crisis, revelation and change leading to the formation of personality" (2). Such a crisis is worked through and self-knowledge is gained. The story is usually told in a first-person narrative voice, which results in a dramatization of the consciousness of the narrator and provides a confessional tone. The protagonist often looks back on his past, comparing the past and the present, in order to understand the development of his identity (Buckley 61). Classic examples of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century English *Bildungsroman* include Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Great Expectations* (1860-1861), and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the tradition of the *Bildungsroman* has continued, and on its basis new kinds of *Bildungsromans* have emerged – decline and progress novels, for instance, both of which focus on characters in their midlife. In contrast to decline plots, which are based on protagonist's unyielding sense of sorrow and chaos, progress plots are based on renewals which "move the evolving and sometimes consciously questing protagonist from randomness to meaningfulness, or from conflict to resolution, from pain to serenity, from stasis to activity, from defect to fulfilment, from drive to freedom, from loss to recovery"

(Gullette xiv – xv). Saul Bellow's *Herzog* is an example of a midlife progress narrative, in which a period of disappointment and anguish is followed by the growth of the adult protagonist (Gullette 121, Braham 30). While the progress novel resembles a traditional *Bildungsroman* in that it shows the formation of personality and advancement, the protagonist and themes in these two types of fiction are different, i.e., a midlife narrative features an adult instead of a child/youth, self-reflection and isolation instead of formal education and social factors (work, relationships, etc.) as the main forces behind a change and an open ending instead of a conclusion with a marriage. Considering these traits, we can speak not about the formation but, in fact, about reformation or re-education of the protagonist.

### **2.2.1. Umbildungsroman**

Besides being a progress narrative, *Herzog* is also described as a negative *Bildungsroman*. Shortly after its publication, Saul Bellow characterised the novel as a *Bildungsroman* (Harper 74); however when Gary Rockwell (et al. 1983) revisited this point over a decade later in an interview with him, the author says the following about the protagonist of the story:

He [Herzog] has received an utterly useless education and breaks down as soon as he faces a real crisis. Simply doesn't know what to do. He starts to drag books from the shelves to see what Aristotle advises, or what Spinoza has to say. It's a joke. To his credit, he quickly understands this. His blindness ends when he begins to write letters. By means of these letters the futility of his education is exposed. On Job's dunghill, and scraping himself with a potsherd, he recognizes (with joy!) how bad an education he has had. And this is what I was after in my book... *Herzog* is thus a negative *Bildungsroman*. It goes in reverse (Bellow as quoted in Rockwell 213-4).

Soon after this interview, in a reply to critic Mark Cohen's fan letter, Bellow adds:

Someone asked, 'Is it a bildungsroman.' I said, 'The very opposite. *Herzog* comically divests himself of an appallingly bad education. That's the purpose of the letters. A Jewish PhD deeply grieving sees

in the light of his grief that he has been taught nothing at all about love, about marriage, children, friendship, conduct, justice, and to save his humanity he must diseducate himself (Bellow as quoted in Cohen 2008).

How to reconcile Gullette's vision of *Herzog* as a progress novel and Bellow's as a negative *Bildungsroman*? I see the truth on both sides. With due respect to Bellow et al., however, my colleague and I propose the term *Umbildungsroman*: a novel of re-education, because, to our mind, the words: "anti," "reverse" and "negative" imply a lack of growth, in fact, a regress.<sup>12</sup> Gullette perceives progress midlife narratives as novels of a revisionist genre, to which *Herzog* certainly belongs. I would like to suggest that Bellow's novel is an *Umbildungsroman*, as it portrays the protagonist's re-growth, which cannot take place unless he discards certain superfluous ideas. Franco Moretti in *The Way of the World: the Bildungsroman in European Culture* (1987) says that "Bildungsroman attempts to *build* the Ego, and make it the indisputable centre of its own structure" (11). While in a traditional *Bildungsroman* the ego is built through formal education and socialisation, in *Herzog*, a midlife progress novel, the protagonist's ego needs to be reinvented and, therefore, the divestment of formal schooling and social roles must take place. This is the aspect of the book which Bellow calls a reverse *Bildungsroman*. The ultimate goal of the progress novel, to which *Herzog*'s re-education leads, is thus for the protagonist to learn to "direct 'the plot of life'" (Moretti 19). The achievement of a certain objective – e.g., learning a trade or establishing a family – that is expected at the end of a traditional novel of formation, is not of

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<sup>12</sup> The prefix *um-* applied in the term *Umbildungsroman* has many meanings and grammatical functions in German, one of which (central to the meaning of *um-* in *Umbildungsroman*) indicates a revision or a change. In this context *um-* translates into English as 'anew,' 're-' or 'again' (Babylon). The origins of this prefix can be traced back to the Latin preposition, *circum*, which means 'around, round, about' (Oxford English Dictionary). Its slightly modified form also occurs in other Germanic languages, e.g., *om-* in Norwegian means 'nok en gang; på ny' ('once again') and in the words such as, e.g., 'omgjøre' ('alter') and 'ombestemme seg,' ('change one's mind'), the prefix *om-* suggests a revision, alteration. *Um-* in *Umbildungsroman* conveys the concept of re-education, the theme inherent to *Herzog*.

crucial importance for a character in a midlife progress plot. What the traditional and modern midlife *Bildungsromans* share, however, is the interest in childhood experiences.

### **2.2.2. *Bildungsroman* and the importance of childhood**

The critic Petru Golban explains the importance of childhood experiences to any traditional novel of formation:

What I mean is that every Victorian *Bildungsroman* focuses on the individual that can be defined by his experience of the past and growing self. The essential experience is that of childhood, and the essential mode of operation of the hero's psyche is memory. The hero in the final stage of his mature formation of consciousness and the physical entering upon maturity attempts (...) to return to the past, to establish a mythic circle between the present moment and the moment which has sparked off the moments of a temporal and spatial reality that constitutes actually the very developmental process undertaken by the protagonist (Golban 3).

This demonstrates that in a *Bildungsroman* the purpose of the protagonist's recollections is to help him construct his identity and establish a connection between the present and the past. Furthermore, critics relate the genre's interest in childhood to the Romantic tradition that emphasises the significance of childhood to a mature individual. Prominent Romantic poet William Wordsworth begins his "The Prelude" (1850) with "recollections of early childhood on the assumption, psychologically acute, that the child was father of the man, or to shift the metaphor, that the defined attributes of the child's character would somehow build a bridge over the troubled currents of adolescence to a more stable maturity" (Buckley 4). The significance of childhood experience, consolidated in Romanticism and embraced by the *Bildungsroman* novel, is ignored in Mark Sandy's discussion of Saul Bellow's Romantic vision (2008). In this article *Herzog* is analysed in terms of Wordsworthian imagination and "emotion recollected in tranquillity" as well as Shelley and Emerson's no-

tions of "the web of being" and transcendence (Sandy 61), which all aptly describe Herzog's character and the changes that he undergoes in the text. However, I believe that it can be argued that the recognition of the significance of childhood times is further evidence of Bellow's inclination towards Romanticism. He seems to feel, as did Wordsworth and other representatives of the Romantic trend in English literature, that "the child is the only character who keeps his mind always inquisitive, open to external phenomena, which in the long run turns to become trite and conventional for a mature person" (Golban 3).

In placing emphasis on the past by means of intensive retrospection, *Herzog* resembles a *Bildungsroman*. Concerning the *Umbildungsroman* dimension of the novel, childhood memories initiate the process of Herzog's re-education, by filling the void that he so acutely feels in consequence of his individual existence and loss of balance. This void is to be filled with the basic values that his parents held but which were repressed in him during his education and socialisation. It is then not a surprise that in the middle of this *Umbildungsroman* (the plot driven by the realisation of the futility of education and the character's desire to rid himself of it and re-educate) the author places the Napoleon Street passage. Herzog revisits his home and some early periods of formation (one would like to say "formative years;" however, in the novel the reader is presented with only a handful of scenes from Herzog's childhood). Recalling his childhood provides a moment of relief from his philosophical struggle. It also provides a counterbalance to his unrealistic ambition to reach a synthesis of intellectualism and expresses his need for values that arise from the heart, which learning has not given him.

The Napoleon Street passages can also be read as belonging to a traditional *Bildungsroman* in the sense that they depict the beginning of life, to which Herzog in his adulthood returns. His childhood home was an ideal place of harmony and happiness and, I argue, it becomes a peculiar kind of well which Herzog, through his recollections, opens

and draws from, unaware, as he did when he was a child. The purpose of his return to childhood through memory is not only to recover love and a sense of belonging, but also, more importantly, to draw from the well of his parents' understanding of life, to imitate certain behaviours, actions, gestures and beliefs that were a part of that childhood, to revive them in his own life, and, finally, re-shape his mindset. At one point in the text Herzog says that he is "the specialist in . . . in spiritual self-awareness; or emotionalism; or ideas; or nonsense. Perhaps of no real use or relevance except to keep alive primordial feelings of a certain sort" (307). Andrew Furman, who endorses a similar view of the importance of Herzog's childhood, interprets these "primordial feelings" as the spiritual core of Herzog's life, "rich in thought and feeling" (Furman 44-5). At another point in the novel, Herzog admits to being "half-made Moses yet" and, therefore, his father cannot die, cannot leave him (250). It shows that he himself believes in the richness of non-academic knowledge and the life experiences of his mother and father, from which he begins to draw inspiration instead of continuing to look for answers in the philosophical works. Bellow, when asked about the themes of his novels, answers: "In almost everything I write there appears a primordial person. He is not made by his education, nor by cultural or historical circumstances" (Bellow as quoted in Roudané 276). Herzog recalls such primordial impulses present in his earliest years and embodied in his family members.

### **2.3. Memory in *Herzog***

Along with his frenzied unsent letters and notes, Herzog's numerous recollections of his family and childhood constitute a considerable part of the novel, providing the reader with an insight into the forces that shape his sensibilities. The Napoleon Street passages, which Bellow had written a decade earlier under the title "Memoirs of a Bootlegger's Son" (Atlas

218) and which were published in *Commentary Magazine* a few months before the publication of the novel in 1964, comprise the longest series of these recollections. As many critics have agreed, these and other sections of Herzog's ruminations on his past in Montreal play an important role in his survival "as a mensch in the midst of personal chaos and against assimilatonist tendencies" (Rosenthal 81).

Herzog's nearly obsessive passion for his childhood and family, apart from being a source of comedy in the novel, expresses his deep attachment to and longing for his family, meaningful relationship with them and certain "old-time values." The world of Herzog's childhood appears as an unchanged garden on the other side of time: full of love, courage and sacrifice. Herzog's relentless meandering along the bank of Heraclitus's river (e.g. 3, 5, 11, 75, 134) seems to be necessitated by his present concerns about his private and academic life, consisting of the loss of his closest family and friends and his inability to account for existence on the basis of historical and ideological perspectives. This difficulty is then relieved partly by his recollections of everyday life on Napoleon Street.

The treatment of time in *Herzog* is not linear. The present of the novel consists of only a five-day period; however, a large part of the main protagonist's life is recalled and retold. The rules of chronology are not followed and the reader may occasionally need to reread passages to return to an understanding of the story. One critic aptly compares the structure of the novel to that of a Matryoshka doll, a Russian nested doll, implying that narrative represents memories within memories, flashbacks within flashbacks (Yassin-Kassab). Moreover, the present is often interrupted and gives way to the past. Here is an example:

Moses stood behind Helen, staring at the swirling pages of Haydn and Mozart, wanting to whine like a dog. Oh, the music! thought Herzog. He fought the insidious blight of nostalgia in New York – softening, heart-rotting emotions, black spots, sweet for one moment but leaving a dangerous acid residue. Helen played (141).

This extract comes from the Napoleon Street fragment and presents Herzog reminiscing about his sister playing piano while he stands behind her, watching and listening. Without any warning, the narrator has shifted Herzog's location from the present to the past, depicting the character as he recalls this childhood moment in New York. It seems that recollections, much like the mental letters, arrest the protagonist's attention and awaken within him a multitude of emotions, the most powerful of which is nostalgia. Dan Vogel describes this dislocation of narrative time as a reflection of geographical and psychological dislocation in an individual's life (Vogel 68). Herzog's characterisation as an outsider is discussed in Chapter 1. His partial detachment from American culture is due to his Jewish heritage and immigrant history. This history inevitably includes the past of his parents.

### **2.3.1. Napoleon Street**

A few years before Herzog's birth, Sarah and Jonah Herzog, his parents, moved from St. Petersburg, Russia to Montreal, Canada. Herzog was born and spent his early childhood on the outskirts of the capital of Quebec. When he was nine years old the family traversed another border, into the United States, and settled down in Chicago. The protagonist, then, is a border crosser; however, because he receives from his parents memories of their life in Russia, he can be considered a double immigrant. Memories of a pre-emigrant life are transmitted to Herzog through stories and obscure images of the period that his parents and their relatives (whom Herzog never met) spent in St. Petersburg. This phenomenon, known as projected memory, is what the critic Marianne Hirsch describes in the context of the Holocaust as "postmemory:" "the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they 'remember' only as the stories and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to

constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsch 8). Even though in *Herzog* the main character does not inherit memories of the Holocaust from his parents (the family arrive in Canada in 1913), he is well aware of the tragic events of the Second World War in Europe, given the post war setting of the plot. References to the Holocaust in the novel are few, yet they play an important role in the change of Herzog's perception of suffering:

What happened during the War abolished Father Herzog's claim to exceptional suffering. We are on a more brutal standard now, a new terminal standard, indifferent to persons (...). So many millions – multitudes – go down in terrible pain. And, at that, moral suffering is denied, these days. Personalities are good only for comic relief (148-9).

With reference to his father's suffering resulting from his failure as a bootlegger, Herzog negates the exceptionality of his pain in the face of the enormity of the massacre that was the Holocaust. He seems to address these words to himself, too. Having so often straddled the border between the recognition and glorification of his own anguish, the primary source of comedy in the novel, he realises that his suffering, which is just like his father's, is insignificant in light of the fate of the Holocaust victims. By now the reader knows that Herzog's self-pity is "good only for comic relief." It is clear that his reconstruction of the projected, collective memory of the Holocaust in this extract is one of the steps that lead to the construction of a new self for Herzog, the ultimate goal of the *Umbildungsroman*.

### **2.3.2. The role of projected memory and Herzog's own childhood memories**

One of Herzog's projections of the most remote recollections of his parents' past concerns his grandfather, whom he never met and knows only through letters. As a young boy just starting to learn Hebrew, he could not understand his grandfather's letters, which were written in this language. Possibly through his parents' translations or the similarity of Hebrew to Yiddish, the language spoken in his home in Canada, Herzog learned from his grandfa-

ther's "accounts of cold, lice, famine, epidemics, the dead" (138) of the country and people his parents had left behind. With the letters came "packets of worthless rubles" (138) which served not only as an object of play for Herzog and his siblings but also as a symbol of his parents' homeland. Thanks to these letters from his grandfather, which Herzog's father read aloud, the protagonist learned about such details of his grandfather's character as "the instinct of a Herzog for the grand thing" (138) his elegant handwriting and his ordinary life: his walks around Winter Palace in search of "a *minyán*" (a quorum of ten Jewish men necessary for certain religious services), loss of "precious books" (the reader is never told what books) and attempts to acquire Czarist currency in the hope that he would become rich if the Revolution failed (138).

Another projected memory is of his mother's brother from Russia, about whom Herzog learns from one of the family's conversations. He has just died of typhus and Herzog's mother mourns him, remembering him as someone who "shared with us" and "had an open hand." Uncle Yaffa recalls him as "a fine man" and commemorates him: "May he have a *lichtigen Gan-Eden*" (143) ("luminous Paradise"). From these two projections of his parents' and uncle's memories, both of his grandfather and his uncle Mikhail, Herzog, as a small boy, discovers the existence of such values as the love of one's family, generosity, filial memory and religious practices, values which he lacks in adulthood. Recalling them with nostalgia, Herzog does subscribe to these values, yet, only passively.

Herzog's memory indirectly reaches the beginnings of Jewish religion and tradition. Owing to his Jewish roots, Herzog acquires an understanding of both Yiddish and Hebrew and he reads Holy Scripts. As a five-year-old boy, he attends Hebrew lessons and is immersed in Judaism through frequent prayers at home. This is where Bellow seems to recall his own childhood immersion in the Old Testament. Herzog's memories of his religious

childhood correspond to the author's memories. Bellow implies this in an interview with Nina Steers:

My childhood was in ancient times which was true of all orthodox Jews. Every child was immersed in the Old Testament as soon as he could understand anything, so that you began life by knowing Genesis in Hebrew by heart at the age of four. You never got to distinguish between that and the outer world (Bellow as quoted in Steers 29).

Herzog learns Hebrew together with his friend Nachman from Nachman's father, Reb Shika: "The Bible lay open on the coarse table cover. Moses clearly saw the Hebrew characters – DMAI OCHICHO – the blood of thy brother. Yes, that was it. God speaking to Cain. Thy brother's blood cries out to me from the earth" (131). It is not the only instance of Biblical intertext being an integral, natural part of the narrative. According to Jeffrey Meyers's (2009) list of literary allusions in *Herzog*, Bellow frequently makes Herzog quote from the Old and New Testaments. One of the functions of these Biblical intertexts is to remind the reader of Herzog's Jewish outlook, which originates in his early childhood. Herzog himself recognises the primeval character of Judaism: "But all these are antiquities – yes, Jewish antiquities originating in the Bible, in a Biblical sense of personal experience and destiny" (148). His frequent quoting from the Bible has a twofold nature. First, it is projected and collective – all who have received a Jewish religious schooling share it. Second, it is personal: a consequence of the times when "Moses and Nachman shared a bench in the cellar of the synagogue" (131) and were introduced by Reb Shika to the stories of the Bible.

As an eight-year-old, Herzog, again like Bellow, was confined to hospital in Montreal to better allow him fight a serious lung illness. There he was introduced to the New Testament by a Christian woman who had him read from it once a week (22). His memory of this woman is so vivid that the narrator comes back to it in the second part of the novel:

And later when he was in the hospital and the good Christian lady came, the one with the button shoes and the hatpin like a trolley-rod, the soft voice and grim looks, she asked him to read for her from the New Testament, and he opened and read, "Suffer the little children to come unto me." Then she turned to another place and it said, "Give and it shall be given unto you. Good measure . . . shall men give into your bosom" (289).

Both quotations originate in the New Testament (Mark 10: 14, Matthew 7: 7) and appear in the novel twice. Herzog's recollection of these two quotes is surprisingly strong. It is clear that despite the abandonment of religious practice in adulthood, Herzog remembers and repeats the Biblical quotes which he most probably first heard as a child. For instance, in his conversation with Luke Asphalter, who tells him about a form of therapy in which he had to imagine himself lying dead in a coffin, Herzog criticises the principles behind the treatment, regarding them as cultivating the existential "dread of death" (272), an attitude that he feels distances one from the world and other individuals. After the turbulent period of his own struggle against existential pain and detachment, he has grown certain of the value of human interaction. Hence, he replies to Asphalter: "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'" (272). This and other New Testament references point to the most basic measure of morality in human life, namely the difference between good and evil, upon which Jesus based his teachings. Recalling this fundamental moral question through Biblical quotes, Herzog strengthens his conviction in the necessity of maintaining a clear line between good and evil. For example, in the courtroom scene, Herzog cannot stand the pain of hearing about a couple's murder of the woman's baby (235-6). Herzog's overwhelming sense of social injustice has its origins in his implicit understanding of good and evil. Yet he cannot help this child just as he cannot help himself. Even though he utters Biblical quotes, the potential for his redemption is absent for the majority of the novel:

*"Lord, I ran to fight in Thy holy cause, but kept tripping, never reached the scene of the struggle"* (128). Despite its comedic tone, which I will discuss in Chapter 3, this quote conveys Herzog's feelings of futility, failure and powerlessness.

When discussing the significance of the Bible in Bellow's novel, one cannot ignore the resemblance of Moses Herzog to the prophet Moses, the author of the Torah and leader of the Israelites.<sup>13</sup> Just as the prophet Moses was saved from death at the hands of the Pharaoh, who ordered all male Israelite babies slain – his mother hid him in the bulrush of the Nile – Bellow's Moses, who developed a respiratory illness in childhood, miraculously avoided death. Moreover, Herzog attributes to himself responsibility for "[t]he progress of civilization – indeed, the survival of civilization" (125), and he believes that "a sense of responsibility was the underlying motive" for his unfinished research (119). In this way he also resembles the Biblical Moses, who is equally determined to assist his people and is called upon and appointed by God to lead them out of Egypt into Canaan, the Promised Land, thereby securing their survival and freedom. In addition, the prophet Moses receives the Ten Commandments from God on Mt. Sinai and the promise that if the Israelites abide by them, they will be rewarded with eternal life in heaven. Neither the Biblical Moses, who is not allowed by God to enter Canaan, as a consequence of his failure to properly sanctify God at the waters of Meribah, nor Herzog, whose knowledge is limited to theoretical constructs and proves ineffective in his personal crisis, can at first fulfil their task. The actions and thoughts of both are steered by an immense yearning for stability and liberty. The Israelites, led by the prophet Moses, who have lived in exile and Egyptian slavery for years, long for freedom and their own independent territory promised them by God. Similarly, Herzog hankers after stability of his uneasy mind, liberation from his pains and obsessions

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<sup>13</sup> Biblical experts are at variance regarding Moses's authorship of the whole Torah. In the Torah itself only the Book of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy mention Moses' keeping written records of the history of Israelites (Encyclopedia Britannica).

and a place he can call home. Yet while the prophet Moses can in the end only watch from afar as the Israelites enter Canaan from afar, Bellow reverses Moses Herzog's fate and redeems him by making his transformation possible. Towards the conclusion of *Herzog*, the protagonist arrives at his house in Ludeyville and exclaims "*Hineni!*" (310), paralleling the response of the prophets (e.g., Abraham, Jacob, Moses) to Yahweh's call: "Here I am." This term of readiness expresses Herzog's reconciliation to his fate and failures and it embodies the notion of progress. He is ready to accept the course of his life from now on.

Additionally, the trope of a journey is very common in the Bible. It is represented in the story of Adam and Eva, for instance, who in the Book of Genesis are expelled from the Garden of Eden and forced to spend the rest of their lives wandering; it is represented in the story of the prophet Moses, who guides the Israelites to the Promised Land; in the New Testament, it is represented in the story of Jesus and His apostles, who are on a spiritual and literal journey preaching the gospel. The trope of a journey is also present in *Herzog*. From the start, Herzog's family's life story includes a great deal of movement: from St. Petersburg in Russia to Lachine and Montreal in Canada and finally to Chicago in the United States. In the course of the story Herzog himself moves between New York, Martha's Vineyard, Chicago and Ludeyville. He also recalls his university trips to Europe. His house in Ludeyville in the Berkshires is abandoned and his kitchenette apartment in New York is cold, dirty and neglected; neither can he truly call home. In the fledgling state of his relationship with Ramona, Herzog questions it: "But is it the secret goal of my vague pilgrimage? Do I see myself to be after long blundering an unrecognised son of Sodom and Dionysus – an Orphic type?" (17). Herzog's "pilgrimage" is an outcome of his geographical and cultural dislocation, a result of his departure from his family's in Canada and Chicago and the recent ruptures of his two marriages. Lost without a family and balance in his life, a cause of his further psychological displacement, Herzog undertakes this quest for meaning

and calmness of mind. In a conversation with Willie, his brother, Herzog calls himself "a lousy lost sheep" (306), bringing to mind the Parable of the Lost Sheep as delivered by Jesus in the New Testament. Jesus tells His disciples about a shepherd who leaves his herd of a hundred sheep to seek one lost sheep; the joy which he feels when he finds this sheep is greater than the joy over the other ninety-nine sheep in his herd which remain. In the same way, God rejoices more over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous people. The themes of loss, search and joy are found in *Herzog*. The protagonist loses not only his family but also his mental clarity and the ability to judge and act reasonably. Herzog's frantic letters are a consequence of his restless rationalisations of the human condition – a search for an answer to his broken state and the state of the world. The search ends when the character arrives at his cottage house in Ludeyville at the conclusion of the novel. His deliverance from obsessive thinking and introspection and his recognition of the house in Ludeyville as his home imbue him with a feeling of joy and a peaceful and balanced state of mind.

Another reading of the novel relies on imagery associated with the Garden of Eden which is used to portray pastoral childhood in *Bildungsromans*. In Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, the garden where Pip encounters Estella becomes the site of his fall. Driven to win Estella's heart by earning a higher social status, Pip leaves the forge in his home village and goes to London. This is interpreted by Joe, his brother-in-law, as a fall from virtue. The novel focuses on the story of Pip's path to rebirth and redemption; it then concludes with the anticipation of his return to Eden: years later he again meets Estella in the same garden and it is suggested they finally come together (Finney 31). Herzog's memories of happy childhood call to mind an image of the Garden of Eden despite the fact that Lachine is a slum on the outskirts of Montreal. Herzog recalls his home as a place of simple joy, an Arcadia (140). Then, the loss of the family (the death of his mother, the weakening of his

relationship with his father and siblings) and a subsequent fall from virtue (the onset of his egotism, which leads to the rupture of his marriages, negligence of his children, absolute immersion in his studies at the expense of his connection with reality) exemplify an exile from symbolic Eden. Moreover, Herzog lives in a world in which influential philosophers, primarily Nietzsche and Heidegger, have condemned mankind to "a fall from classical greatness" (54) – specifically, "the Fall of Man into the quotidian or ordinary" (106). This imagery of fall from greatness and grace serves to comically criticise such a bleak vision of humanity. It is an irony of the novel that the central character should represent the idea of a fall, the perpetuation of which he himself objects to. Bellow suggests the possibility of Herzog's redemption at the conclusion of the novel, however, when his utterly comic divestment of the self through his mental letters and intensive introspection come to an end. The author sets Herzog's return to stability in a pastoral landscape, a garden by his cottage in Ludeyville. This house changes from a symbol of the waste of "Papa's savings, representing forty years of misery in America" (120) into a place of rest. Upon arriving at the house, Herzog reflects on his past and the present moment: "What a struggle I waged! – left-handed but fierce. But enough of that – here I am. *Hineni!*" and rejoices over the natural surroundings: "How marvelously beautiful it is today. He stopped in the overgrown yard, shut his eyes in the sun, against flashes of crimson, and drew in the odors of catalpa-bells, soil, honeysuckle, wild onions and herbs" (309-10). Just as in *Great Expectations*, the overgrown garden brings to mind an image of an Eden enclave, and it emanates peace and functions as a symbol of Herzog's "riper age" (310). His maturity finds its reflection in his forgiveness of Madeleine's betrayal (318), acceptance of and gratitude for his life, which he expresses in a letter to God (326), and the first actual letter in the novel, to Marco, his son, in which Herzog fixes a date for their meeting: "*Expect me on the 16<sup>th</sup>, bright and early*"

(315). The garden in Ludeyville, like the Garden of Eden, is a symbol of harmony with God, other people and oneself.

Through the portrayal of Herzog's childhood practice of reading the Bible, Bellow also seems to accentuate the values of attention, permanence and truth, which are temporarily absent in Herzog's adult life. The reading of the Bible requires concentration and silence, and even though young Herzog and Nachman did not begin with a long attention span, these values were instilled in them. Herzog seems to yearn for the ability to focus his attention on a text, an idea, even a memory, which he has lost in favour of a continuous and uncontrollable influx of thoughts. "It's been years since I was really able to concentrate," he confesses (29). Herzog's letters clearly demonstrate a lack of concentration and the ability to steer his life. The change arrives at the end of the novel, where Herzog's mind no longer grapples with the creators of the ideological concepts and his wrongdoers, the primary addressees of his letters.

### **2.3.3. "A wider range of human feelings" on Napoleon Street**

In the words of Fuchs, Herzog received a "Victorian upbringing" with "its acculturated moralism" (Fuchs 148). Bellow explains why his character reminisces about his childhood as follows: "Herzog looks for repose in what he was before he had accumulated this mass of 'learning.' He returns to Square One. There he asks himself the essential question, What was it that I ought to have been doing? Or, What was my created my soul? And, Where is it now?" (Bellow as quoted in Roudané 269). His childhood, the time when he was taught such values as the love of one's family, attention, permanence and truth, is what Bellow means by Square One: "a wider range of human feelings than he had ever again been able to find" (140). This variety of feeling is found in Herzog's family members, whom he ob-

sessively recalls, because "[t]o this Moses' heart was attached with great power" (140). He seems to discern in them the virtue of authenticity – the quality with which he is most concerned and which he does not see in contemporary American culture, populated with "Scalp Experts" (3) and salesmen who "couldn't have cared less" (20). Both groups are preoccupied with money and material success. Furthermore, the characters surrounding Herzog, especially Madeleine, Gersbach, Himmelstein, Shapiro, Dr. Edvig, are judgemental, malicious and false. As Cohen argues in his article, these characters' bodily features reflect their mischievous inner nature (Cohen 2004: 4). Dissatisfied with the prevalent falseness of those who surround him, Herzog recalls his mother and father, who represented a "variety of feeling." Through their descriptions, the author counters the nihilism advocated by the people around him and delineated in their bodily features with the higher values embodied in Herzog's family members. By recalling them in such a favourable light, Herzog shows his appreciation of the good they represented. His attitude to his dead is nearly despotic, as he admits: "But I, with *my* memory – all the dead and the mad are in my custody, and I am the nemesis of the would-be forgotten. I bind others to my feelings, and oppress them" (134). Apart from having a smack of comic, boundless nostalgia and indicating Moses's instability, this statement conveys a sense of responsibility for the past and commitment to resurrect values it incarnated. It also reveals the permanence and precision with which these recollections are etched on Herzog's memory.

Herzog frequently reminisces about his mother. In the Jewish tradition the mother is the centre of the family. Sarah, his mother, did not work, but she offered her constant support and loving care to her four children and ill-fated husband. In the Napoleon Street passages, Herzog first remembers her urging Father Herzog to help the drunk Ravitch, a boarder in their apartment, lest he awaken the neighbours. In addition to possessing that natural sincerity and concern for others, she is a character of ultimate kind-heartedness and

sacrifice bordering on self-denial, which is rendered in the accounts of her dedication to and protection of her children and husband. Herzog marvels at her amazing strength and her spoiling of her children, including him. On one wintry January evening, while pulling the young Moses on a sled, breathless and cold, she meets an old woman who gently reprimands her: "Daughter, don't sacrifice your strength to children" (139). Later, when Aunt Zipporah criticises her for sending her children to the conservatory, Sarah's reply is simple and honest: "Why shouldn't the children study if they have intelligence, talent?" (146). Herzog, who once received love and guardianship from his mother, is permanently "in need of protection" (307). This particularly important role of the mother, who died prematurely, is eventually taken over by Ramona. The good-hearted florist offers Herzog her time, attention, care and a much-needed boost to his self-confidence. Bellow's portrait of Herzog at this point in the novel is largely comical and Herzog mocks his selfish behaviour. He realises that courting Ramona for the sake of sexual pleasure does not resolve his predicament. He expresses this self-criticism through such ironic comments as this one: "I get laid, I take a short holiday, but very soon after I fall upon those same thorns with gratification in pain, or suffering in joy – who knows what the mixture is!" (207) while the narrator plainly states: "When he jeered in private at the Dionysiac revival it was himself he made fun of. Herzog! A prince of the erotic Renaissance, in his *macho* garments" (186). Herzog's need for release from the role of an egotistical lover is realised at the end of the novel, when he for the first time invites Ramona for dinner and implies to his brother that sexual intercourse is not his top priority: "I've asked her for dinner. Only that. She goes back to the party at Misseli's – I'm not going with her" (338). Herzog understands that salvation does not come through sex from the beginning of his relationship with Ramona, yet only now is he able to put this knowledge into effect. This change also suggests his new-found need for honesty. Such genuineness, represented by the memory of his mother, makes its way into

his conduct in life, starting with a change in the way that he handles his relationship with Ramona.

In another scene from Herzog's childhood, Sarah, concerned for the safety of her husband Jonah, nods in agreement at Zipporah's disapproval of Jonah's dealings with bootleggers (146). When he arrives home from one of his "business trips" with cuts on his face and torn clothes, Sarah scolds him for putting himself in such danger, urges him to give up his illegal and dangerous undertaking and eventually takes care of him by putting a compress on his eye and watching over him. The memory of her family and life in Russia – "Old World" – as well as her archaic mind "filled with old legends, with angels and demons" (147) prevent her from believing that "Jews could do this to a Jew," because she is sure that "[t]hey couldn't have the heart. Never!" (148). It seems that this passion for remembering, predisposition to melancholy and faith in the human heart are qualities that Herzog inherits from her. This sentimentalism grossly detaches Herzog from the present, just as it did Sarah. The protagonist remembers, as his mother did: "These personal histories, old tales from old times that may not be worth remembering. I remember. I must" (149). Aware of the irrelevancy of these memory acts, Herzog accounts for his "passion for reminiscence" (306): "Perhaps of no real use or relevance except to keep alive primordial feelings of a certain sort" (307). The soul, which is the source of these primordial feelings and which his mother taught him to trust, matters to Herzog more than it does to Willy, his brother, "a balanced, reasonable person" who "had no time for such stuff" (306-7). This heritage of sentimentalism and emotionalism that his mother bequeaths him might even be embodied in his surname, whose first part, *herz*, means *heart* in German. However, as long as he remains engrossed in his memories of his childhood on Napoleon Street, he cannot put the beliefs that he holds in his heart into effect. Only when he releases the past can he benefit from what the past has taught him. As long as Herzog puts himself in the centre of

his relationship with Ramona, for example, he treats her as a substitute for his mother, a source of attention and care. Only when he ceases to look back nostalgically on his past is he able to become genuinely involved in their relation and be the one to offer kindness and tenderness.

A wider range of human feelings is also found in Herzog's projected memories and recollections of his father. Herzog is familiar with his father's Russian past through stories that were often retold: "I suppose, he was thinking, we heard this tale of the Herzogs ten times a year" (148). Besides the many stories of poverty, the tale of his success as an importer of Egyptian onions, a delicacy in St. Petersburg at the time, is particularly remembered. In contrast to the pains of his childhood and his further difficulties in Montreal, this job earned Jonah a comfortable living: "In Petersburg there were servants. In Russia, Father Herzog had been a gentleman. With forged papers of the First Guild" (136). However, the discovery of his illegal residence permit by the police put a stop to his "princely" lifestyle (39) and was followed by a short prison sentence and, after he and his family immigrated to Canada, a series of work failures. While in Montreal, Father Herzog took up a number of occupations, but none of them turned out well. Quite the opposite, he failed in each and one of them:

(...) failed as a farmer. Then he came into town and failed as a baker; failed in the dry-goods business; failed as a jobber; failed as a sack manufacturer in the War, when no one else failed. He failed as a junk dealer. Then he became a marriage broker and failed – too short-tempered and blunt. And now he was failing as a bootlegger (...) (137).

Jonah's failure as a bootlegger, which Herzog witnessed as a young boy (147-8), left a particular stain on the protagonist's memory. Consequently, he is in his adulthood obsessed with the fear of repeating his father's mistake: "I do seem to be a broken-down monarch of some kind, he was thinking, like my old man, the princely immigrant and ineffectual bootlegger" (39). Herzog seems to admire his father's will power, determination, luck, "his dig-

nified *I*" (149), however: "His father was desperate and frightened, but obstinately fighting" (140). Jonah might have been a failure, but his great resolve and the sacrifices to support his family render him a king to his son: "(...) a father, a sacred being, a king" (147). Moses Herzog has no right to adopt the same title, though, and he seems to be well aware of this. Unlike his father, whose failures and imperfections did not hinder him in his efforts to live and provide for his family, Herzog breaks down and laments over his losses and defeats. In his nostalgia he professes a slavery to his "Papa's pain" (149); however, he is in fact a slave to his own pain. He admires his father's dignified *I* because he himself does not possess it yet. Father Herzog's dignified *I* refuses to give up on bootlegging, for instance, for fear of having to take up work at the burial society: "What should I do, then! Work for the burial society? Like a man of seventy? Only fit to sit at deathbeds? *I*? Wash corpses? *I*? Or should I go to the cemetery and wheedle mourners for a nickel? To say *El mai rachamim. I*?" (149). On the one hand, this dignity "could make one laugh" (149), as Herzog notes, which shows the comedy of Father Herzog's economic ineptitude. On the other hand, his wide range of feeling and "the instinct of a Herzog for the grand thing" (138) strengthen him in his obstinate attempts to make a living. Herzog's aspiration to such grandeur in his own adulthood, however, becomes nothing but a source of comedy. For example, he harbours a somewhat ironic hope that he can win Madeleine "on the ground of being, after all, Moses – Moses Elkanah Herzog – a good man, and Madeleine's particular benefactor" (10), whereas he is exactly the opposite. The positive story of his father teaches him the lesson of endurance, which Herzog at the end of the novel seems to embody.

#### **2.3.4. It is in their faces: the recollections of physical features**

Many critics agree that Bellow's excellence as a writer lies in his vivid depictions of his characters (Cohen 2004: 1, Furman 63, Howe 526). Physical descriptions, which sometimes even precede the disclosure of character, always reflect, complement and dramatise characters' personalities. Cohen's article (2004) on body language in *Herzog* provides a great many examples of this manner of characterisation. As Irving Howe observes, in many characters one or two traits are exaggerated so as to render them grotesque (526), another of Bellow's comic techniques in the novel. For instance, Madeleine's parents, whom Madeleine hates and whom Herzog has no respect for, are portrayed accordingly. Before Herzog finds out that Tennie, Madeleine's mother, was an accomplice to her daughter's affair with Gersbach, she is depicted ambivalently: once as a Jewish woman of "a good, culture-respecting background (...), sisterly gentleness and appeal," at another time with "elaborate glasses (...), a crooked appeal, (...) a measure of hypocrisy and calculation" (109). These depictions of Tennie stem from Herzog's sympathy towards the woman, who failed as a wife and mother. However, the narrator ceases to present her in any favourable light once Herzog learns about her participation in hiding Madeleine's affair. Her body then immediately betrays her dishonest character: "But the legs went bad, and her dyed hair turned stiff and quill-like." "Her teeth were like the awkward second teeth of a seven-year-old child," her glasses are no longer elaborate but "butter-fly shaped," and her jewellery is "abstract." She is "diabetic" and has "gaunt" legs; she is wicked, hypocritical, cunning, "abused by her daughter," and generally in a worse condition than Herzog (30-1). Pontritter, Madeleine's father, is uniformly described in a negative light: "Pontritter, this immense figure of a man with single white fibers growing from his tanned scalp (he used a sun lamp all winter)" (107). "A famous impresario" hated by his daughter, he has "wide hips" and a pair of severe blue eyes (107). Even the dancer that accompanies Pontritter when Herzog first meets him

is criticised: "a middle-aged Filipino woman who had once belonged to a well-known tango team (...) had put on weight in the middle (...), her makeup didn't much lighten her dark face" (107). The physical characteristics of these individuals and many other deceitful characters in the novel are "the most reliable barometer for truth" about them (Cohen 2004: 1). The same holds true for the genuine individuals. A case in point: Herzog's parents, whose physical selves are omitted in Cohen's analysis. Yet they speak volumes of their inner kindness, affectionate nature and wisdom.

The wider range of human feelings, the phrase with which Herzog describes Napoleon Street, seems to be inscribed in Sarah and Jonah's physical characteristics. Moses' attitude towards his parents is completely opposite Madeleine's, who despises her parents; Herzog confesses: "Whom did I ever love as I loved them?" (147). This love reverberates in the representation of their bodily features. Herzog remembers his mother's face as "slender" (139), splendid and beautiful, yet sad. He finds an explanation for this sadness: "it reflected the deep experience of a race, its attitude towards happiness and towards mortality" (232). It is clear that he makes her a representative of the Jews' many painful experiences, experiences that he as a teenager considers himself part of and to which he responds with anger:

I learned that I, a Jew, was born Magian and that we Magians had already had our great age, forever past. (...) A Jew, a relic as lizards are relics of the great age of reptiles, I might prosper in a false way by swindling the *goy*, the laboring cattle of a civilization dwindled and done for. Anyway, it was an age of spiritual exhaustion – all the old dreams were dreamed out. I was angry; I burned like that furnace; reading more, sick with rage (234).

While Herzog rages against the injustice of Spengler's theories, his mother's pain finds its expression in "these indurated lines of submission to the fate of being human" and coexists with her "finest nerves" (232). Sarah is then described in her entirety, both in terms of beauty and misery. She owns a pair of "eye-lights" (232), symbolising an illuminating power, in which her role of a nurturer is accentuated. Moreover, she wears simple, often

torn clothes in common colours: a brown and grey dress (232), "the torn seal coat and a red pointed wool cap and thin button boots" (139). Her lips turn white when she reads the letter about her brother's death, and she collapses helplessly and lies with "legs spread, hair undone, lids brown, mouth bloodless, death-like" (139). When Aunt Zipporah takes up the issue of her brother to find out what happened to him, Sarah covers her eyes with her hand, "as though she were shading them," and says nothing (143). She protects her eldest son Shura by touching his hand after Aunt Zipporah provocatively asks why he does not contribute to the family's budget. According to Cohen, in the novel "the most powerful communications involving love, desire, reprimand, and death are delivered silently" (Cohen 2004: 3), and Herzog's mother's gestures are evidence for this; she does not need to express her love in sophisticated declarative sentences. "Moses saw" his mother's reassuring touch on his brother's shoulder (146), informs the narrator, pointing to his heightened perception of the world and people around him – a quality that he retains in adulthood and that becomes a source of his affliction (72). In the same way, Herzog cannot forget his mother's smells: the odour of her saliva, with which she wipes his face during a train journey (33). He transforms this memory almost into an adage: "All children have cheeks and all mothers spittle to wipe them tenderly" (33). His mother's act becomes the highest measure of tenderness to him. Whereas Herzog lavishes attention on Tennie's (Madeleine's mother) body and its fading attractiveness as she gets older, he only mentions that *his mother's* "hair turned gray, and she lost her teeth, her very fingernails wrinkled" (139) – the reader is not offered any more details of the decay of her body. This is probably done in order to keep her positive features into focus and accentuate her worth that Herzog finds within her. When she is on the threshold of death, her hair is cut short, and of her fingers "under the nails they seemed to him to be turning already into the blue loam of graves" (234). The fact that "she had begun to change into earth!" scares the teenage Herzog so that "[h]e did not

dare look" (234). The little that he does notice of her dying body he perceives in plain, natural terms, as if he was associating her impending death with the message of the story of Adam's origin, which she once told him: we come from dust, we return to dust (233). Sarah's facial expressions, gestures and clothes reveal her rich personality: good-naturedness, purity, simplicity, poverty and pain – the range of feelings Herzog ascribes to life on Napoleon Street.

The physical description of Father Herzog also matches his inner nature. Neither his depictions nor Sarah's portraits contain any element of exaggeration or distortion, in contrast to the portrayals of Madeleine, Gersbach, Shapiro, Dr. Edvig, Himmelstein. However, just as with them, the physical selves of Herzog's father and mother are true reflection of their characters. Father Herzog's endearing spirit is given expression in his "finely made (...), keen (...) handsome" figure and in his movements: "He did everything quickly, *neatly*, with *skillful* Eastern European flourishes: (...) jotting *like an artist* in his account book. There each cancelled page was covered with a *carefully* drawn X" (137, emphasis mine). The act of bending his knees is read by Herzog as the anticipation of "something of great subtlety" that "was about to be revealed" (249). His neat and skilful movements are complemented with his cheerful tone of voice: "He would say cheerfully, 'Well, children, what shall it be – White Horse? Johnnie Walker?' Then we'd all call out our favourites" (146). In another scene, "he laughed with his bare breath" (136). He cries when he reads his father's letters, he nods, muses, shouts, is silent and wry (135-8, 249). As a way of dissuading him from smuggling alcohol, his sister reminds him: "'You're a gentle creature,'" and contrasts him to the hooligans who usually engage in bootlegging: "'They don't have skins, teeth, fingers like you but hides, fangs, claws'" (145). Then, when he has been beaten, the unpleasant sight of "his tatters, and the white of his body under them" (147) diminishes in prominence, and "his handsome forehead, his level nose, the brown mustache" (149) re-

ceive attention. Through such positive descriptions of Father Herzog the author substantiates Herzog's assertion: "Yes, he was a king to us" (147). In addition to being a figure of power, Father Herzog is short-tempered, obstinate, hasty and rebellious, traits which are contained in his "clear tense face" (tense, yet clear). These characteristics lead him to "frequent bursts of temper" in which "he slapped his sons swiftly with both hands" (137), and they make "his face fill[ed] with stern anger" at times (233). At these times his pace becomes hasty, his teeth grind, his neck strains and his colour becomes frightening. Herzog transforms these negative characteristics into the symbols of strength and pride, while in fact they communicate Jonah's weakness. Herzog has to forgive his father this, however, in order to forgive himself his own imperfections. Thus, "Father Herzog was not made to be pitiful" (250). Regarding his garments, in St. Petersburg he "got used to putting on style" and was even "all dressed up (...) in ostrich feathers, taffeta skirts" on the day that he arrived in Canada (142). After a few years, Father Herzog's prosperous Russian past is present only in "a Russian sleeping suit of linen with a pleated front," which he wears indoors (135). Outside, "his coat, once lined with fox, turned dry and bald, the red hide cracking" (137) and "overalls, reeking of linseed oil" (233) speak loudly of his failure and ongoing financial predicament (137). Yet his obstinacy in fighting for a better life is revealed in his manner of walking, which is compared to a "one-man Jewish march," later, to a swing, as "he covered Montreal in his swing" (137). When Jonah grows old, Herzog notices disintegration and "injured male pain" written in his aged face (249). However, "the remaining elements, incredibly vivid, had all their old power over Moses – the straight nose, the furrow between the eyes, the brown and green colors in those eyes" (248), just as they did when he returned home beaten when Moses was a small boy (149). In another description, Herzog perceives him as "the old man in his near-demented way" who "was trying to act out the manhood you [Herzog] should have had" (250). The technique of juxtaposing an

unfavourable feature (near-demented) with an honourable one (manhood) seems to be one of Bellow's favourites, which he uses to affirm life in characters who have lived so as to assert its value themselves.

Herzog's parents not only receive rich and favourable representations, but they also are among the few characters who change over the course of the novel. The reader watches Herzog's parents age, whereas crooked protagonists are brought to life only briefly – i.e., they appear before and/or during Herzog's crisis. In other words, they are more developed than most of the other protagonists. That they so persistently return speaks of their role and importance in the story and the protagonist's life. Taking into consideration the fact that the mass of the novel is built upon Herzog's thoughts and musings and, thus, that dramatic actions in the present are scarce, the manner in which Sarah and Jonah's characters are developed is unusual. Although already deceased in the present of the story, they are important figures in Herzog's life and occupy his mind with great power. Besides the similarities between them and Herzog mentioned in the analysis of their characters above, they also have in common their experiences as emigrants and a sense that they have lost their true homes. The way that Sarah and Jonah deal with these issues is in my view crucial to Herzog's recovery of balance.

#### **2.4. Herzog's present in the light of the past**

Herzog's strong attachment to the past is the overriding element of his personality. Though it has been almost forty years since his family left Napoleon Street in Montreal for Chicago, Herzog remembers the details of his home and family members with incredible precision. As mentioned earlier, his nostalgia is the product of love but a sign of weakness. It is also said to be purposeless and even "childish of him" (78). In addition, this inclination to

reminisce is possibly a reflection of "a dreaming look" possessed by his mother, who seemed "to be seeing the Old World – her father, the famous *misnagid*, her tragic mother, her brothers living and dead, her sister, and her linens and servants in Petersburg, the dacha in Finland" (139). Herzog duplicates her deep preoccupation with the past: "He sometimes tried to think, in his own vocabulary, whether this might be his archaic aspect, prehistoric. Tribal, you know. Associated with ancestor worship and totemism" (78). He is moulded from the same clay, so to speak. It is notable that both his mother's and his own bond with the past are described in mythological terms. Totemism, according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, is "a system of belief in which humans are said to have kinship or a mystical relationship with a spirit-being." Sarah *sees* the Old World (139) and Herzog *listens* to the dead: "Engrossed, unmoving in his chair, Herzog listened to the dead at their dead quarrels" (144). Both are devoted to maintaining a connection with the past. That specific weakness of Herzog's character infuriates Madeleine, who deems his dreaminess impractical and silly:

You'll never get the surroundings *you* want. Those are in the twelfth century somewhere. Always crying for the old home and the kitchen table with the oilcloth on it and your Latin book. Okay – let's hear your sad old story. Tell me about your poor mother. And your father. And your boarder, the drunkard. And the old synagogue, and the bootlegging, and your Aunt Zipporah . . . Oh, what balls! (124).

Madeleine also refuses to recognize any worth whatsoever in Herzog's drive to keep his memories, ignoring the importance that they have for him.

The common source of Herzog and Sarah's attachment to the past is a powerful feeling of loss, the outcome of emigration. Sarah, Jonah and Herzog are all immigrants: Herzog's parents in Canada, he in America. In adulthood all miss their parents, familial love and a sense of belonging and familiarity. I discussed Herzog's detachment from mainstream American culture and society earlier in this chapter and in the previous one (30-3).

Herzog's parents experience a similar state, which is aggravated by their loss of social status (they fall from middle- to working-class), lack of knowledge of French and English and, in Father Herzog's case, enormous difficulties in earning a living. However, one never hears them complain to excess, barring Jonah's occasional fits of rage concerning their financial predicament. Nor does the reader find them philosophising on the condition of people and the world. The difference between them and Herzog is evidently one of education. Their son is a professor at university, until recently an active researcher. They, on the other hand, never received higher education and never became acquainted with the theories of Spengler, Spinoza and Nietzsche. Therefore, Herzog's predicament is essentially different from theirs. He is disillusioned with an academia and philosophical ideas that do not explain his current situation. His attempts to arrive at "a five-cent synthesis" (207) fall short and his ambition proves absurd. Herzog understands that "[r]eadiness to answer all questions is the infallible sign of stupidity" and his letters to various people are largely comic (155). Moreover, he is betrayed and left by his second wife and he loses custody of his two children. In terms of his social contacts, he is deceived by his friends, relatives, lawyers and a doctor. He receives little or no mental support from them, only pieces of practical advice and grim visions of reality – "the lessons of the Real" (125). The critic Andrea Mannis states that Bellow's intention with *Herzog* is "to show us how little that Moses, the super-intellectual, really knows" (Mannis 43). Bellow himself comments on this aspect of the novel: "Even the qualified intellectual doesn't know what he's doing. People keep telling him, 'You don't know what you're doing. You eggheads don't know reality. Even a little kid in the street knows more about the actual conditions of life than you do'" (Bellow as quoted in Cromie 42). These seem to be the words that Bellow puts in the mouth of Himmelstein, who blames Herzog's intellectualism for his crisis: "Because you're a highbrow and married a highbrow broad. Somewhere in every intellectual is a dumb prick. You guys can't answer

your own questions – still, I see hope for you, Mose" (81). To Himmelstein, Herzog is "a *mensch*" (81) and Nachman, Herzog's old friend, sees in him "a good man, Moses. Rooted in yourself. But a good heart. Like your mother. A gentle spirit. You got it from her" (134). In the course of the novel Herzog seems to realise that the hope Himmelstein is talking about can be found in the example set by Jonah and Sarah. His parents taught him the values of perseverance and dignity; finally he has learned to use these to create his new self and progress towards maturity.

The wide range of human feelings that Herzog's parents represent is what the main protagonist absorbs as a child and by means of memory recovers in the middle of his adult crisis. Under the layer of nostalgia there seems to exist a purpose for Herzog's passionate recollections. Namely, his childhood, his love for his parents and Sarah and Jonah's strength of character must be re-enacted in the present in order to build a bridge to a stable maturity over his current crisis. His progress depends on it. Its outcome is visible, for instance, when he arrives at his house in Ludeyville at the end of the novel. Looking at the cottage, Herzog no longer despairs over the foolishness of having wasted his father's money on the ruin, which he does earlier in the novel (6, 120); instead, he accepts it as a "[m]onument to his sincere and loving idiocy, to the unrecognized evils of his character, symbol of his Jewish struggle for a solid footing in White Anglo-Saxon Protestant America" (309). Then, with no more regret, he proceeds to explore his home: he opens the windows, looks for canned food, moves things around, rests on the mattress (without recalling his difficult sexual life with Madeleine (61)), smiles "affectionately" at the thought of Ramona (314) and finally goes outside to "sit under his trees," "his hearth," "*his* birches, catalpas, horse chestnuts" (322-3). He is at peace and nature is a symbol of his inner harmony.

Herzog's memory of his parents' cordiality and sympathy also affects the way that he views Ramona:

She was thirty-seven or thirty-eight years of age, he shrewdly reckoned, and this meant she was looking for a husband. This, in itself, was not wicked, or even funny. Simple and general human conditions prevailed among the most seemingly sophisticated. Ramona had not learned those erotic monkey-shines in a manual, but in adventure, in confusion, and at times probably with a sinking heart, in brutal and often alien embraces. So now she must yearn for stability (17).

Herzog's perception of Ramona is permeated with recognition of her tough past, filled with disappointments, rejection and unfulfilment. He feels compassion towards her because he has been in similar situations himself (e.g., in numerous affairs that led to confusion, disquiet and ultimately failure). Another instance of Herzog's newly discovered consideration of individuals in pain concerns George Hoberly, Ramona's ex-lover. Largely critical of Hoberly's holding on to Ramona and submitting his life to her after their parting, Herzog nevertheless understands that "he was crushed by failure" and "bursting with unrecognized needs, imperatives, desires for activity, for brotherhood, desperate with longing for reality, for God (...), anything resembling hope" (208). This sympathy again stems from Herzog's similar experience with Madeleine. Compassion interweaved with criticism and comedy was also characteristic of his mother, who acted kind-heartedly towards her beaten husband (149) and to her son Shura, accused by Aunt Zipporah of being a good-for-nothing (146). The healing inherent to such an approach lies in the fact that while expressing sympathy towards others, Herzog is no longer so full of himself. Yet he cannot respond in the same analytical way about himself. He is still far too focused on his own pain; egotism and sentimentalism provide an obstacle to his release from debilitating self-criticism.

Ordinary human experience, an aspect of life that Herzog finds difficult to implement, is highlighted in the Napoleon Street passages and other sections pertaining to Herzog's recollections. For example, Herzog recalls his father helping the drunk Ravitch

into the house, smoking, looking for work, riding trams, reading letters, telling stories about life in Russia, drinking tea, sleeping, waking up. Similarly, his mother's everyday life is recollected: her occupations as cook, washerwoman, seamstress, the smell of her hands. Herzog also recalls her pulling him on a sled, rinsing and wringing clothes in the bath, crying. Shura, his eldest brother, delivers bottles and pastes labels onto them. Helen plays the piano. Aunt Zipporah visits the Herzogs and brings fresh eggs from the country. An argument between her and Father Herzog breaks out. It is in these instances that Herzog's thoughts on the importance of ordinary life, discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, are echoed: "The question of ordinary human experience is the principle question of these modern centuries (...). The strength of a man's virtue or spiritual capacity measured by his ordinary life" (106). As Chapter 1 demonstrates, Herzog suspends many of his ordinary actions for the majority of the novel. He becomes passive and shuns interaction with other people. During those moments when he manages to carry out simple, common activities, however, he approximates the pattern of life on Napoleon Street. Consider, for example, those occasions on which Herzog tells Junie stories on their days out. On one such outing, as Herzog is about to tell her another story, Junie asks whether he can make faces as well as Uncle Val (Gersbach). Herzog answers: "'Some' (...). 'I have too much dignity to make good faces,'" to which she replies: "You tell better stories;" she proceeds on to enumerate the stories that she remembers him telling her (275). Father Herzog also told his children stories, and Herzog remembers them as a part of their everyday life. He seems to imitate his father's habit of storytelling in the belief that it is a rich, genuine and dignified pursuit. These memories of his father result in the emulation of his behaviour, storytelling in this case, which shows Herzog's need to reach beyond his individual existence.

Another example of the protagonist's unconscious repetition of one of the ordinary activities that Father Herzog took up at the end of his life is his picking flowers. When

Herzog visits Taube to collect his father's revolver, he walks through a garden and recalls "how he [his father] squirted his flowers at evening with the hose and how rapt he looked, his lips quietly pleased and his straight nose relishing the odor of the soil." Shortly before this recollection, Herzog himself pays attention to the flowers round him (the sight of which triggers the memory of his father): "there were also certain flowers, peculiar to Chicago, crude, waxy things like red and purple crayon bits (...). These foolish plants touched Herzog because they were so graceless, so corny" (242). The importance of flowers in Herzog's life is broadly discussed in the first chapter of this thesis; I would like to once more note, however, that the character's communion with flowers is indicative of his recovery of balance.

Although it is not suggested that Sarah and Jonah hope to form Herzog into a certain type of person, Herzog does worry about what type of person Junie will become. Because she is in the custody of Madeleine and Gersbach, "those two grotesque lovers" (258), Herzog feels that his role is "to relinquish this daughter." He is afraid that otherwise she will "become another lustful she-ass" or "a melancholy beauty like Sarah Herzog, destined to bear children ignorant of her soul and her soul's God" (274). In another scene, Herzog fears not being able to transfer "the Herzog standards of 'heart,' and all the rest of it" to Junie. If he fails to do that, "she will fail to become a human being" (258). The protagonist is aware of "the sheer irrationality" of this thought, yet he confesses that "some part of my mind takes it as self-evident" (258). "The Herzog standards of heart" include his parents' values, which he revives through his memories. That he wishes to live his life according to these values and to pass them on to his daughter is a demonstration of his maturity. In being concerned with others' progress and growth, he himself progresses and grows. He has entered a stage of re-education in his life which depends more on consideration of his past and participation in ordinary human experience than on abstract constructs.

## 2.5. Conclusion

Moretti argues that the eventual aim of the protagonist of the prototypical *Bildungsroman* is to institute "the reassuring atmosphere of 'familiarity'" (24) within both the familial sphere and the public sphere, to "build a 'homeland'" (26). Bellow has Herzog produce a simulacrum of it through the process of recollection. This recollection has inspired him to retain and imitate the qualities of his parents' lives and forward them to his children. Although he still struggles to consistently adhere to such values as love, brotherhood, compassion and dignity (his self-importance continues to be his dominant feature), the lasting impressions of childhood revived in his memory are the points of reference which may help "direct the plot of his life" (Moretti 19). By recalling life on Napoleon Street, Herzog discovers what he, as a result of his marital crisis and scholarly isolation, lacks: family bonds, truth, ordinary human experience, dignity and endurance. It is through remembering that Herzog grows certain of the fact that "habit, custom, tendency, temperament, inheritance and the power to recognize real and human facts have equal weight with ideas" (Bellow as quoted in Harper 75). While it is clear that his obsessive attachment to the past deepens Herzog's instability and lethargy, re-enactment of these virtues helps him come out of his depression and makes progress possible. Nostalgia, in itself futile, becomes a useful foundation, upon which Herzog builds his new self. His progress is therefore embodied in the transformation of his egotism into a mature awareness of the world around him, which, in turn, is signalled by a change in the comic tone of the novel.

## Chapter 3: The changing tone of comedy in *Herzog*

### 3.1. Introduction

Saul Bellow frequently acknowledged that at some point in his development as a writer he became drawn to comedy (Bellow as quoted in Harper 68). This accounts for his choice of extensively employing a comic style in his novels rather than continuing in the vein of solemn complaint found in his earliest works, *Dangling Man* (1944) and *The Victim* (1947). With *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), Bellow discovered a new voice; from then on his fiction was to be characterised predominantly by irony, lyricism, "expansive metaphors," rich idiom and intellectual probing (Shulman 110). Since Bellow's novels often contain elements of "victim literature" in that they present troubled, suffering and needy protagonists (e.g., Eugene Henderson in *Henderson the Rain King*, Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day*, Moses Herzog), comedy is employed to provide balance to otherwise pessimistic discourses of pain and powerlessness. This seems to be in accordance with a common definition of comedy: "the overturning of the tragic" (Bennett et al. 98). Moreover, critics (Cohen 15, Shulman 109) agree that Bellow particularly excelled in writing the comedies in which he made ideological systems the object of irony, e.g., in *Henderson the Rain King* (1958), *Herzog* (1964) and *Mr Sammler's Planet* (1971). In this chapter I investigate the forms and functions of humour in *Herzog*, particularly those concerning the main protagonist and existentialist theories. I also attempt to demonstrate the change in the tone

of the novel as Herzog discards his egotism and obsessive introspection and adopts a balanced, proportionate point of view, including a regard for other individuals: once he steps out of self-absorption, the irony directed at him and others fades away. Comedy withdraws at the end of the story, which seems to be a consequence of Herzog's new-found placid nature.

The question as to the source of Bellow's inclination towards and flair for comic novel writing cannot be detached from his cultural and linguistic Yiddish heritage. In his review (1953) of Sholom Aleichem's *The Adventures of Mottel: the Cantor's Son* (1953, originally written in Yiddish) Bellow describes Yiddish, which he knew well, as "the secular language and the language of comedy" and a repository of "an ironic genius" (15). Although sources of the Jewish sense of humour are many, some dating from the earliest recorded interpretations of the Torah and the Talmud, its origins are most frequently traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century history of Eastern European Jews.<sup>14</sup> Living an isolated shtetl life, subject to pogroms and persecutions, the Yiddish-speaking Jews developed humour to counter the difficulties and humiliation that they were forced to bear. C. Israel Lutsky, a radio host at the Yiddish Radio Project from the 1930s-'60s, expounds on the Jewish comic perspective of life as follows:

One of the strongest defence weapons in our possession. Without our brand of humour, heaven only knows where we would all be by now. The secret of the special brand of Jewish humour lies in the fact that we are able to jest at our own very selves, at our own shortcomings and grim and bear it. Even in the most tragic circumstances we can find what to laugh at or at least what to smile at (Lutsky).

Although humour is universal and people around the world and throughout history have embraced it in moments of despair, Jewish culture is said to have developed a strategy of

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<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the traditional roots of Jewish humor see Knox (1963).

humour to deal with the adversities of life. As a Jew, Bellow absorbed that strategy and the use of comedy came to characterise his fiction.

Another interpretation of comedy is offered by the so-called superiority theory, one of the theories of laughter, which explains that "[w]e laugh (...) out of a sense of superiority – the 'sudden glory' or 'conception of eminency' in relation to the stupidity or weakness of others, or of ourselves at some point in the past" (Bennett 98). Since the bulk of the novel is retrospection, on which *Bildungsroman* heavily relies, Herzog's laughter shows his superiority to his past self, implying his realisation of and coming to terms with his failures. Hence, it is possible to speak about his changed condition in terms of "glory" and "eminency." Laughter not only distances the protagonist from his pain, but it also indicates a sense of triumph over the hardships that he has been through.

The functions of comedy in Jewish novels and in *Herzog* in particular are various. James D. Bloom in his article on American Jewish humor distinguishes two main objectives of comedy: anesthetic of the heart and assault (Bloom 93). The first objective, anesthetic of the heart, refers to the purpose of comedy, mentioned above, to "overturn the tragic" – in other words, to fight off those distressful and upsetting circumstances of life. Sarah Cohen phrases it in the following way: "to interrupt, resist, reinterpret, and transcend adversity" (Cohen 1974: 4). The second objective in adopting a comic tone is to oppose and attack a certain outlook, behaviour or characteristic. Comedy is consistently employed with this purpose in the Old Testament, for instance. According to Israel Knox's research into the use of irony in the books of the Torah, the prophets' irony fulfils the function of "the mocking of idolatry of wealth and lasciviousness and self-indulgence" and the protest "against the injustice of coarse power, of man's degradation of man" (Knox 331). *Herzog* is pregnant with a comic style that deftly fulfils these functions: it rescues the central character from absolute despair; it exposes and mocks his and other characters' flaws; it protests

against various ideologies. The author's descriptions of Herzog are absolutely comic and so too are the descriptions of other protagonists. The objects and effects of humour are numerous and it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss all of them. I will focus instead on the main protagonist and his flaws, which prevent him from actively participating in everyday life: his self-indulgence, his exaggerated sense of victimhood, his "consciousness composed of words" (Clayton 191) – he is obsessed with verbalisation, "putting into words what he had often thought" (327), and is imprisoned in his own perception.

In what follows, I will also pinpoint the comic representation of existentialist theories, which, consistently ironised, are rejected by the central character until the conclusion of the novel. Herzog's portrayal and his portrayal of others lose their comic tone once the character abandons his nearly solipsistic state of mind and begins to see others in proportion; the scene of Herzog's listening to cases in court and the scene of Herzog's arrival at Madeleine's house with the intention of killing his ex-wife and Gersbach are crucial here. The aim of this analysis is to demonstrate the change in comic representation that occurs as a result of the shift in Herzog's outlook. By focusing on the ironic approach used in dealing with Herzog and existential ideology, I wish to enhance the understanding of the issues discussed in the first chapter – ordinary human experience and existentialism – with a broader perspective of the comic attitude and sense of life with which the novel is saturated.

### **3.1.1. Comic devices**

The humorous effects in *Herzog* that I analyse in the present chapter are achieved by means of specific linguistic tools that include hyperbole, understatement, verbal irony, juxtaposition, word play, exaggeration and the protagonist's peculiar idiom and nomenclature. All

these serve to fulfil the function of comedy: to counter depression and/or ridicule the absurdity of a certain ideology or a character's viewpoint. In the novel the most evident vehicle of comedy is Herzog's letter writing. These letters contain a wealth of intellectual jargon and embody his humorous ambition to reach fixed conclusions concerning human nature. Shulman connects such an epistolary style, packed with sophisticated vocabulary, with "encyclopaedic comedies of knowledge," to which *Herzog* belongs (Shulman 109). Herzog's letters offer a great deal of irony, which strengthens the comic effects of the novel. Irony suggests "a discrepancy (...) between what someone says and what he or she actually means, between what someone expects to happen and what really happens, or between what appears to be true and what actually is true" and it not only applies to verbal statements but also to "events, situations and structural elements of a work" (Murfin 251). Through ironic comments directed at the characters the narrator exposes their flaws, while Herzog's own amusing commentaries show his awareness of his own and others' flaws and, ultimately, serve to critique them. Another comic device that Bellow often employs is hyperbole, "a deliberate, emphatic exaggeration" (Murfin 231). Minor protagonists in *Herzog* tend to possess one or two qualities, usually physical, that have been exaggerated for comic effect – Gersbach's wooden leg, red hair and stoutness, for example, are his best-defined features (19). Understatement and word play are also common; understatement, the exact opposite of hyperbole, is mostly used in reference to intellectualism with the intention of downplaying its significance and displaying its limitations.

### **3.2. Herzog's comic self-absorption and existentialism**

In the first chapter of this thesis, Herzog's detachment from a common life is shown to be a result of his personal, marital and professional crisis. I would now like to demonstrate that

this passivity, with all its causes (self-pity, hypersensitivity) and consequences (self-indulgence, egotism, letter writing), is a source of comedy. Bellow mocks the protagonist's flaws by means of highly humorous descriptions (manifested through irony, exaggeration or understatement). Simultaneously, the comedy is meant to act as an anaesthetic for Herzog's pain and difficulty in comprehending, accepting and transcending his problems: his broken marriage, academic unproductiveness, intellectual confusion and betrayal by friends and relatives. Shulman aptly observes that "Bellow has an acute sense of trouble, pain, and difficulty that he does not want to give in to, that he does not want to become dominant" (Shulman 112) and, thus, the comic tone interrupts the doleful vein and undermines its domination in the novel.

Comic descriptions of Herzog abound in the text. The opening sentence anticipates the ironic tone of the novel: "If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me, thought Moses Herzog" (1). Such juxtapositions, revealing the comedy of Herzog's unstable self, are plentiful in the story. Even his physical appearance is meant to be amusing: "In his posture of collapse on the sofa, arms abandoned over his head and legs stretched away, lying with no more style than a chimpanzee, his eyes with greater than normal radiance watched his own work (...)" (10-11). A caricature like this is in accordance with the fact that Yiddish humour relies heavily on people's physical aspects and bodily functions (Rovit 517).<sup>15</sup> Because the narrator invokes a comic tone so early in the novel, the reader understands from the beginning that Herzog's instability is not to be taken seriously. The realisation of the absurdity of his condition is made clear on page 11, where Herzog jots down a verbless one-sentence note to and about himself: "*That suffering joker.*" The reader laughs at Herzog because he takes himself and his suffering too seriously, a trait that he conceals beneath the mask of comic self-criticism. The humour of his addled state is also visible in the following

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<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the comedy deriving from Herzog's corporeal side see Cohen (1974: 145-6).

juxtaposition: "(...) as if by staggering, he could recover his balance, or by admitting a bit of madness come to his senses" (23). Such contrasts between reason and madness recur in the novel, embodying Herzog's comic struggle out of his crisis. The humour that emerges from them is Bellow's favourite tool for resolving tension between Herzog's intolerable imbalance and unreachable recovery. "And he enjoyed a joke on himself" (23) indicates that the protagonist's best defence against the crushing effect of his misfortunes is laughter. He holds a comic opinion of himself and laughs about his looks, emotional reactions, intellectual tribulations and behaviour. Herzog's approach to his letters, in which he argues with philosophers, historical figures, many of them already dead, and people from his life, is made to be comic. In the scene on the train to Martha's Vineyard, for example, "[a] dining-car steward rang the chimes for lunch, but Herzog had no time to eat. He was about to begin another letter" (46). This exaggeration of the importance of his letter in comparison with food is employed for humorous effect. In a reply to Dr. Bhave's article on the Bhave charity movement in India, Herzog says: "(...) *I would like to join your movement. I've always wanted very much to lead a moral, useful and active life. I never knew where to begin*" (48). The irony stems from the contrast between Herzog's words and wishes and his deeds, which are far from "*moral, useful and active.*" He has failed twice as a husband and as a father and he has indulged in many affairs; furthermore, in his isolation and passivity, he does not prove helpful to anyone for the mass of the novel. His comic opinion of himself, however, releases him from his own accusations and a feeling of blame. As Bellow remarks in an interview with Robert Boyers (et al.), "comedy brings forgiveness and mercy," allows for a momentary equilibrium, transcendence of pain (Bellow as quoted in Boyers 15). While still on the train to Martha's Vineyard, for example, where the amusing comments mentioned above are made, Herzog writes in a letter to a major department store with reference to Madeleine's overuse of his credit card: "*So don't send me anymore bills –*

*I was knocked over by the last – more than four hundred dollars. For purchases made after the separation. Of course I should have written sooner – to what is called the credit never-center (...)" (47).* Such ironic remarks act to combat Herzog's depression and help him stay in touch with the outside world. After all, he does undertake the trip to the Vineyard Haven (although he aborts it shortly after the arrival), which is a symbol of his continuing effort to maintain contact with other individuals (in this case, Libbie and Sissler). Ironically, humour provides him with the earnestness that he needs to generate the strength to connect with the outside world.

Similarly, Herzog's letters, whose comedy yields a form of attack on various philosophical, political and social theories, demonstrate the irony of the form of the novel. These letters, which are integral to the structure of the text, create a discrepancy between the protagonist's seclusion and his longing for an ordinary life. Herzog, a suffering divorcé and intellectual, longing for brotherhood and applauding its value (272), remains enclosed in his inner world of words. Encounters with other people in real life and serious, calm conversations are few. This contrast is the prime source of comedy in the book. On the one hand, Herzog wants to shake off the yoke of this written, thought-based mode of being, but on other hand, he remains aloof from everyday life and involvement with others. Janet Altman proposes that "Herzog's letters are not to be confused with diary entries or even stream-of-consciousness narration. The existence of a real addressee, whom Herzog perceives as 'other' than himself, is a distinction that is crucial to interpretation of the novel" (Altman 46). The existence of these addressees and Herzog's preoccupation with questions about the humanities, politics and society show that under the guise of irony, with which his letters are infused, there seems to be the protagonist's recognition of others and his drive to include them in his perspective. The language of his letters is ultimately dysfunctional, however: the epistles never reach their addressees. As long as Herzog continues writing the

letters, he is in "a second realm of confusion, another more complicated dream, the dream of intellect, the delusion of total *explanations*" (166).

David Fuchs claims that in Bellow's novel "a sense of humor is the better part of salvation" (Fuchs 149) and Sarah Cohen states that Herzog is able to "cure himself of his infectious conceit with the most styptic humor" (Cohen 1974: 144). Yet I am hesitant to accept such a reading of the role of comedy in the novel, because Herzog's salvation, which I understand to be his transformation towards the end of the story, is not portrayed in comic terms. On the contrary, the protagonist's transcendence is recorder with a serious tone. The author does not sustain the comic mode at the conclusion of the novel. I will come back to this issue in section 3.4., where I will discuss a number of scenes which portray a reversal in Herzog's perception and in which irony towards that protagonist and other characters is dropped.

Although I do agree with Fuchs's view that comedy facilitates Herzog's struggle towards salvation, I assert that it only renders his condition bearable, which is in harmony with the theory of laughter as an anesthetic; I do not believe that comedy in itself proves a cure for his agitation, nostalgia and loneliness. The bulk of the novel presents the central character as self-absorbed to an extreme degree. The comedy emerging from scenes of Herzog's self-indulgence seems to invite a critical interpretation of such egotistical attitudes. His self-pity, which drives him into alienation, is a stark contrast to his frequently voiced need for and belief in brotherhood (272). Blaming Madeleine for having made him a spectator of life (as opposed to a participant in life) by betraying and rejecting him, "[b]y his dismissal from Madeleine's life, sent back into the darkness, he became again a spectator" (38), Herzog accepts the role that he believes he has been unjustly cast into, namely that of a passive observer. Due to the ironic undertone of this statement, the attribution of Herzog's misery to the forces of predestination is a sign of foolishness. As Earl Rovit points

out: "humor has to be against something – a concrete injustice, a specific affectation or hypocrisy" (Rovit 514); in this case, Herzog's egotism and affectations are its target. There is irony in the fact that the protagonist's unfinished academic project was to show "how life could be lived by renewing universal connections; overturning the last of the Romantic errors about the uniqueness of the Self" (39). Indeed, he often humorously underscores his perceived value by, for instance, claiming credit for "the instinct of a Herzog for the grand thing" (138) and the assumption that "[t]he progress of civilization – indeed, the survival of civilization – depended on the successes of Moses E. Herzog" (125). His comic presumptuousness makes it impossible for him to tolerate Ramona's lecture: "*But why is it that I, a lecturer, can't bear to be lectured?*" (15). Herzog often mocks this ridiculously excessive focus on himself:

And next came his specific self, an apparition in the square mirror. How did he look? Oh, terrific – you look exquisite, Moses! Smashing! The primitive self-attachment of the human creature, that sweet instinct for the self, so deep, so old it maybe have a cellular origin. As he breathed, he was aware of it, quiet but far-reaching, all through his system, a pleasing hunger in his remotest nerves (159).

Instead of "overturning the last of the Romantic errors about the uniqueness of the Self," which was to be the centre of the sequel volume to his *Romanticism and Christianity* (4), Herzog comically recreates the Romantic notion of originality, which finds its expression in his self-centred behaviour. Critics agree that Bellow uses these exaggerated descriptions of narcissistic and melodramatic postures to combat the Romantic trend of the glorification of the self, of which he was a great opponent himself. In an interview with Sanford Pinsker, the author dismisses the assumption that "every individual had to re-invent himself and everything that surrounded him in an original way. As if to *live* were an act of genius, as though we had no resemblance whatever to people who preceded us. All of this stuff is obviously wrong" and objects to the erroneous conviction that "we, in the tradition of the

nineteenth century, think we are our own authors, from the ground up" (Bellow as quoted in Pinsker 99-100). Clayton quotes from another of Bellow's novels, *Henderson the Rain King*, to give an interpretation of Herzog's Romantic inclination: he engages in the act of "dramatizing life with you as the central character; (...) fulfilling yourself at the expense of those around you" (Bellow 1965: 76 as quoted in Clayton 189). Owing to such an attitude, Herzog loses touch with reality and prioritises himself over other individuals. During Shapiro's visit at his house in Ludeyville, for example, Herzog, unwilling to confront his wife Madeleine and Shapiro, does not join their conversation and remains aloof. Yet his perception is thriving: he is observing Madeleine and Shapiro, making cutting remarks about the two interlocutors, "trying to take stock of my position" (76), conceding: "But I am a prisoner of perception, a compulsory witness" (72). Although Herzog has understandable reasons for not participating in this conversation (he detests Shapiro's phony nature and "his learned references" (70), and he has marital issues with Madeleine),<sup>16</sup> his "imprisonment" in his perception is a source of comedy. By indulging in the observation of his wife and his guest, Herzog misses a balanced view of them, which produces overblown caricatures. Shapiro becomes "the dignified visitor," "a greedy eater," "almost shrieking" with a "snarling, wild laugh" and "the white froth forming on his lips as he attacked everyone" (70-3). Madeleine's exhilaration reminds Herzog of her dissatisfaction with his disinterest in her research in Russian religious history and her accusations of him acting superior to her. Therefore, he interprets her glance at him keeping aloof during Shapiro's visit as "offended" (72). His perception is limited to his and other people's faults.

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<sup>16</sup> I discuss Herzog's aloofness in this scene in detail in Chapter 1: 39-40.

### 3.3. Modernists under comic attack

Interestingly enough, while Bellow constructs Herzog as a comic representative of the Romantic tendency to place the self at the centre, he at the same time makes him a humorously serious spokesman against the validity of such a position. On the one hand, Herzog is a failed intellectual who through his obsessive introspection has refuted his own assertion that the Romantic conviction in the originality of the self is flawed. On the other hand, the author ascribes to him the function of "the intellectual conscience" (Cohen 1974: 15), whose task is to expose, ridicule and defy numerous philosophical conceptions of human nature. Existentialism is one ideology that Bellow makes Herzog object to. His attacks on both Romantic self-glorification and existentialist thought require that the character be ironised, but in the latter case the protagonist is made to communicate a denial of existentialism. Although he often uses comedy in his arguments, he stands against modernists, who have condemned humanity to the void. In a letter to Shapiro, Herzog tempers his seriousness with humour:

*Is this the full crisis of dissolution? Has the filthy moment come when moral feeling dies, conscience disintegrates, and respect for liberty, law, public decency, all the rest, collapses in cowardice, decadence, blood? Old Proudhon's visions of darkness and evil can't be passed over. (...) The canned sauerkraut of Spengler's "Prussian Socialism," the commonplaces of the Wasteland outlook, the cheap stimulants of Alienation, the cant and rant of pipsqueaks about Inauthenticity and Forlornness. I can't accept this foolish dreariness. We are talking about the whole life of mankind. The subject is too great, too deep for such weakness, cowardice – too deep, too great, Shapiro (74-5).*

Herzog jeers modern philosophers, calling Spengler's work "*the canned sauerkraut*," existentialists "*pipsqueaks*" and their philosophical debate "*the cant and rant*." He also comically understates the influence of the bleak view of civilisation ("*the Wasteland outlook*") perpetuated by Nietzsche, Spengler, T.S. Eliot, Heidegger and various existentialists (Roth 2010). But then there is a change in tone: he refuses to "*accept this foolish dreariness*" and

offers solemn and straightforward words of caution devoid of ironic exaggeration: "*We are talking about the whole life of mankind.*" "*The analogy of the decline and fall of the classical world will not hold for us*" (75) is a call for change. Herzog finds an alternative to the vision of a man's fall in the Biblical message: "Man liveth not by Self alone but in his brother's face" (272). Before he succeeds in affirming the value of community, however, he needs to prove the existentialists wrong. Bellow makes him comically question their theses; for instance, referring to Heidegger's philosophy of quotidian, Herzog asks provocatively: "*Dear Doktor Professor Heidegger, I should like to know what you mean by the expression 'the fall into quotidian.' When did this fall occur? Where were we standing when it happened?*" (49). By downplaying the seriousness of Heidegger's claim, Herzog expresses his opposition to it.<sup>17</sup> Bellow strengthens his disapproval of nihilism through the comic construction of Herzog as someone whose conduct confirms the existentialist outlook. Although the protagonist never endorses this attitude, he nonetheless suffers from its effects: the rejection of ordinary life (his need to complete letters being more pressing), alienation, anguish, the inauthenticity of his relations with other people, and, finally, his disintegrated consciousness, including his absurd desire for Gersbach and Madeleine's death. Fuchs calls it "modern disintegrated consciousness," an existentialist trait: "the for-itself projecting to be the in-itself" (158-9). Herzog may speak of such values as charity (48), faith (93), transcendence (163), belief in reason (165), yet his actions do not reflect his ideals, which is a source of comedy in the novel. His nearly solipsistic state of mind, where he considers only his experience and knowledge certain to exist and where his "I" is not related to others, removes him from the quotidian and gives rise to the gloomy void.

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<sup>17</sup> For a detailed analysis of the meaning of Heidegger's "fall into quotidian," see Chapter 1: 34-5.

### 3.4. The shift from self-centred to multi-faceted perspective

Only when Herzog realises his flaws, which entails his stepping out of his egotism and seeing himself and others in proportion, does his growth become possible. The moments of realisation emerge in the second part of the novel; the most crucial one occurs in the scene where Herzog flies to Chicago with the intention of killing Madeleine and Gersbach. However, the first change in his generally egotistical perspective and ironic style is found in the Napoleon Street passages. There Herzog suspends introspection and recalls his childhood; simultaneously, the narrator drops his humorous tone in favour of an elevated and lyrical one.<sup>18</sup> If we agree that reminiscing about the past is similar to watching mental images, then Herzog is a spectator – not of himself, however, as has been the case so far, but of other people, his beloved family members. In these passages he breaks away from his habit of obsessively observing and focusing on himself.<sup>19</sup> Another conspicuous aspect of this section is the absence of Herzog's letters or notes. Though a letter to Nachman does open the Napoleon Street passages, Herzog stops writing after just a few lines and begins to recall his childhood. He returns to the letter at the end of the passages only to abort it, having realised that he does not even know Nachman's address. Moreover, he suddenly sees no point in asking Nachman why he fled when Herzog spotted him, which is why he was writing (129), because he knows the answer: Nachman's wife committed suicide and "Nachman ran away because (who could blame him) he would have had to tell Moses all about it" (149). His realisation that he lacks Nachman's address and his recognition of his friend's difficult life prove that Herzog is able to both relate to reality and include others in his perspective.

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<sup>18</sup> This does not mean that Herzog does not recall any amusing moments from his childhood; the scene with Ravitch, the Herzogs' boarder in Montreal, is highly comic. See *Herzog* (136).

<sup>19</sup> With a few exceptions of comic expressions of sentimentalism, which are a sign of his self-centredness. See *Herzog* (141, 143).

Likewise, the attention that he gives to his family by reminiscing about them indicates a change in his perspective from inward to outward.

Soo-Hymn Lee's definition of "the Jewish Consciousness of the Self" is "a consciousness of human relationship in which each "I" is related to all others, diachronically with all past and future generations, and synchronically with all the contemporaries on earth. This consciousness entails humanistic morality between human beings" (Lee 58). It is apparent that it is towards this type of consciousness that Herzog is moving. In the Napoleon Street passages, the protagonist relates his "I" to past generation (his ancestors) and to contemporaries (Nachman), which creates the anticipation of the potential for a lasting transformation from his centring attention on himself to centring attention on others.

This change in perspective is not stable, however. In the chapters that follow Herzog's recollections of Napoleon Street, the comic tone resumes; likewise, Herzog himself returns to writing his mental letters. Nevertheless, these moments of the protagonist's recognition of his flaws become more and more frequent. Moreover, they no longer resonate with comedy, as they did in the first part of the novel, which underlines his move from ironic egotism towards a harmonious view of the world around him. For instance, foreseeing what his visit to Ramona's is going to be like, Herzog admits that "[a]gainst his will, like an addict struggling to kick the habit, he would tell again how he was swindled, conned, manipulated, his savings taken, driven into debt, his trust betrayed by wife, friend, physician" (156). But soon after "the realization would come over him that he had no right to tell, to inflict it, that his craving for confirmation, for help, for justification, was useless. Worse, it was unclean" (157). Herzog is able to look at himself critically and broaden his point of view by including others in it. Even the grammar of the last sentence quoted reveals the shift in Herzog's perspective away from himself and towards other individuals. The verbs "to tell" and "to inflict" require objects and "confirmation, help, justification"

require agents; by using these words, therefore, Herzog takes other people into consideration and demonstrates that he is no longer a prisoner of the perception of himself only. He is able to direct his attention towards others. Yet to Ramona his problems are crucial and she enjoys filling the role of a supporter of the needy Herzog. Therefore, he comes to the conclusion "that his particular brand of short-sightedness, lack of realism, and apparent ingenuousness conferred a high status on him" (157). Consequently, one could go so far as to charge Ramona with enabling Herzog's egotism, because the stronger his self-pity becomes, the more generous her heart grows: "For Ramona it [Herzog's weakness] evidently surrounded him with glamour" (157). This observation should not dominate the reader's view of Ramona, however, because she is a positive character in significant ways: she is the only person with whom Herzog sustains a relationship in the story and she encourages him to experience the ordinary (i.e., to appreciate the senses, to engage in daily activities, to care for others etc.).<sup>20</sup>

In another moment of realisation, Herzog admonishes himself for writing his futile, bothersome letters: "But that's all wrong! thought Herzog, not without humor in his despair. I'm bugging all these people – Nehru, Churchill, and now Ike, whom I apparently want to give a Great Books course" (162). Again he turns his attention away from himself, admitting that his messages, if sent, would simply bother the recipients. Through this realisation he expresses the ability to empathise with other individuals' feelings. In addition, by being capable of predicting his addressees' reaction to what he wishes to tell them, Herzog becomes realistic, which, according to Lee, is another feature of the Jewish Consciousness of the Self (Lee 61).

If the above represent Herzog's quite serious realisations of his egotistical nature, then the humour lies in the descriptions of the states and actions that aggravate his condi-

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<sup>20</sup> See Chapter 1: 41-3 for a discussion of the role of Ramona in Herzog's life.

tion and revive his self-centredness. Speaking about his heart, Herzog comically exaggerates that "[a]ll the while his heart is *contemptibly* aching," hence, "[h]e would like to give this heart a shaking, or put it out of his breast. Evict it." After all, he hates "the humiliating comedy of heartache" (166). In another instance, he accurately evaluates his situation: "What I seem to do, thought Herzog, is to inflame myself with my drama, with ridicule, failure, denunciation, distortion, to inflame myself voluptuously, esthetically, until I reach a sexual climax" (208). In this summary of the protagonist's flaws, Bellow employs exaggeration and amusing imagery (the comparison of Herzog's self-concern to sexual intercourse, vocabulary conveying a comic effect: inflammation, distortion, ridicule, drama) to criticise Herzog's preoccupation with his suffering, seen by many critics not only as Romantic self-glorification but also as Jewish masochism (Chavkin 161, Clayton 194). At this point in the story, Herzog fluctuates between a comic self-centred perspective and a strengthening embracement of others in his consciousness.

Such a shift in viewpoint is also reflected in Herzog's actions, which, in contrast to his actions in the first part of the novel, now regularly focus on other people. For instance, the protagonist visits the courthouse to meet Simkin, his lawyer; although Simkin turns out to be busy, he decides to wait for him and listens to four court trials. Shortly before, he was considering the principles of justice in reference to the lie offered him by Madeleine and Gersbach, which he enlarges to the size of a crime:

(...) shall I put those two on the stand under oath, torture them, hold a blowtorch to their feet? Why? They have a right to each other; they seem even to belong together. Why, let them alone. But what about justice? – Justice! Look who wants justice! Most of mankind has lived and died without – totally without it. People by the billions and for ages sweated, gypped, enslaved, suffocated, bled to death, buried with no more justice than cattle. But Moses E. Herzog, at the top of his lungs, bellowing with pain and anger, has to have justice. (...) I am a mess and talk about justice (220).

This passage, saturated with irony, shows that Herzog realises that he does not qualify for justice because Madeleine and Gersbach's betrayal is not a crime. The only judge in this case is their conscience. Moreover, it is not in fact the betrayal that torments Herzog but his own self-pity; he needs to abandon this and forgive himself his errors. There is no court that conducts trials for transgressions against oneself. Herzog's self-indulgence is such a transgression, because its consequences prove debilitating and harmful for him. By listening to random cases, he is exposed to a much larger sense of evil and social injustice and the suffering of others. In these cases justice must come from an external source; with Herzog, however, he is his own jury and judge. While he listens to the cases, he turns his attention from himself to the other people present in the courtroom. Fascinated, he observes the magistrate (225), the offenders, becoming particularly engaged in trying to comprehend the actions and attitude of Aleck, one of the defendants (229), and ponders social disintegration, denaturalisation and modern society's ills, which the trials represent. In the intermission, Herzog recalls his mother, her beauty, her love and, finally, her death, to which he remained indifferent as an adolescent. Now, at forty-seven, he admits his mistake of having been "a bookish, callow boy" at the time. He remembers his brother Willie at her funeral and understands his crying to be the manifestation of a "tender heart" (235). He recognises and seems to regret his faults and he is able to see the good in others. During the representation of the fourth case, which concerns the murder of a baby, Herzog becomes so disturbed by the cruelty of the baby's parents and so involved in following the trial that, for the first time in the novel, he chooses to listen to the people around him rather than his own thoughts: "he had not time to think of this [his failure to conceive of the enormity of this crime]" (238). This objectivity, unprecedented early in the novel but found more and more frequently later on, is interrupted, however, and Herzog's focus lands again on himself and others' perceptions of him. Leaving the courthouse, he stumbles into a woman with a cane

and interprets her facial expression to mean "*Thou fool!*" (240). The return of the comic tone suggests that Herzog has not yet overcome his limited perception.

In the next chapter, though, a noticeable change in Herzog's mentality occurs. The protagonist impulsively flies to Chicago with the intention of killing Madeleine and Gersbach, because he has been told that they have been abusing his daughter Junie (100). He harbours hatred towards and, consequently, mocks his perceived wrongdoers from the onset of the story – e.g., Madeleine is "*the bitch, a terror!*" (55), Gersbach – "a frequent weeper of distinguished emotional power" (43), "heavy, slow-moving" "flamboyant, ass-clutching brute" (58, 102). Yet Herzog is also capable of thinking about them in human terms: "And if, even in that embrace of lust and treason, they had life and nature on their side, he would quietly step aside. Yes, he would bow out" (52). This is only a tentative promise, however: he continues to hurl invectives at his ex-wife and ex-friend (155, 159, 254), contradicting his pledge to "bow out." Enraged by the rumours of their cruel treatment of Junie, he resolves to take revenge on the couple. The comedy inherent to Herzog's plan is exposed as early as the description of his drive to their house in a rented falcon which is storming, the thread of life in him is quivering and the curve of the road is "burning with sunset dust." With that a humorous, implausible justification for his supposed right to murder Madeleine and Gersbach is offered:

It did not seem illogical that he should claim the privilege of insanity, violence, having been made to carry the rest of it – name-calling and gossip, railroading, pain, even exile in Ludeyville. (...) But they had done something else to Herzog – unpredictable. (...) They had opened the way to justifiable murder. They deserved to die. He had a right to kill them (254).

When Herzog arrives at their home, however, his attention turns from his egocentric ravings to Madeleine and Junie's clothing, which has been hung out to dry. Glimpsing Madeleine through a kitchen window, he pauses to observe her expressions and movements. He longs to see his daughter, so he proceeds around the house. When he spots Junie through a

bathroom window, he experiences an influx of tender emotions and, regarding her lovingly, he tries to determine whom she inherited her physical traits from. Here "the Jewish Consciousness of the Self" seems to be revived in the protagonist: he relates himself diachronically to both past generations and future generations as he remarks upon the resemblance between Junie's face and the faces of his forebears. Suddenly, a second figure enters the bathroom: Gersbach, who is preparing to bathe Junie. Scrutinising Gersbach's every movement, Herzog shifts his usual focus on his weight and brightly-coloured hair to his "not unkindly" tone of voice, "grumbling smiles," occasional laughter and, finally, his gentleness (257). When Gersbach is scrubbing the bath, Herzog contemplates what brought him here: "[h]e might have killed him now." Yet he then withdraws, having realised that "[f]iring this pistol was nothing but a thought" (257) and that "[t]o shoot him! – an absurd thought," because "[a]s 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). The scene portrays Herzog stepping out of his preoccupation with his pain and desires and entering a broader outlook, including a focus on reality and other people. The bathroom window provides a symbolic border between these two modes of consciousness, for it is through this window that the confrontation with his rival, which leads to the shift in his perspective, takes place. As noted earlier, the absence of irony in the majority of this scene (255-8) implies that for Herzog it is a significant moment of change. It has been demonstrated that thus far in the story humour has been used to criticise Herzog's faults or relieve his pain. The lack of humour in this scene, therefore, suggests that Herzog's change of consciousness is not an object of attack. On the contrary, the solemn tone with which the scene is described seems to silently applaud Herzog's step towards transcendence.

The growth of this broader perspective, which includes a balanced view of himself and others, is visible in the succeeding chapters of the novel. Two examples should suffice to illustrate this growth. After his secret visit at Madeleine and Gersbach's, Herzog still intends to obtain the custody of Junie. He decides to visit Phoebe, Gersbach's wife, and tries to convince her to help him win the case by filing for divorce and testifying against Madeleine and Gersbach. Phoebe does not want to admit that she is aware of her husband's infidelity, however. She wants to retain the old order of the house and, at the cost of having to keep up appearances, be able to provide a secure future for her son. Phoebe also refuses to help Herzog because she has heard rumours about his unbalanced states and was advised by her psychiatrist to stay away from him. Herzog defends himself: "All that hysterical stuff is finished" (263). Then, accepting that he does not have the power to affect her, he leaves. As he does so, though, he takes Phoebe by the hand and kisses her on the head. The "softer kindness in Herzog's expression" (264) holds no irony. For the second time in the story he pities someone other than himself (previously he offers tacit sympathy to George Hoberly, Ramona's ex-boyfriend, who is still in love with her).

Herzog extends similar kindness to Lucas Asphalter, his friend, who in the beginning of the novel is the individual that tells him about Madeleine's affair with Gersbach (43). Towards the end of the novel they meet again, and Asphalter proceeds to describe an exercise prescribed by his psychiatrist, the objective of which is to imagine one's own death. Asphalter's description is comic and through the use of comedy Bellow once more attacks Heidegger and existentialist philosophers, who proclaim the necessity of facing death. Herzog, who might have performed a similar exercise himself earlier in the story (that is, if Bellow had decided to use him to ridicule existentialism in this way), finds the notion very alarming and his response to Asphalter's account of his experience is rather cordial: "Don't feel so bad, Luke. Now listen to me. Maybe I can tell you something about this. (...) There

is something funny about the human condition, and civilized intelligence makes fun of its own ideas. This Tina Zokóly [Asphalter's psychiatrist] has got to be kidding, too" (271). His simple kindness and the gentle humour that he directs at "civilized intelligence" are meant to relieve his friend's tribulation. Unlike before, Herzog delivers a comic remark that has a real recipient and a charitable purpose.

This significant shift is sustained until the conclusion of the novel. The day following his ill-invented visit to Madeleine and Gersbach's, Herzog is stopped by the police. Taken to the police station for the possession of a revolver and questioned, Herzog makes a resolution to himself: "No more of this hectic, heart-rent, theatrical window-peering; no more collision, fainting, you-fight-'im-'e-cry encounters, confrontations" (303). Herzog seals his promise with a reconciliation to his incomprehensible fate: "*The dream of man's heart, however much we may distrust and resent it, is that life may complete itself in significant pattern. Some incomprehensible way. Before death. Not irrationally but incomprehensibly fulfilled*" (303). Upon leaving the police headquarters, the protagonist feels liberated from the flaw of his egotism, which led him to desire and almost cause Madeleine and Gersbach's deaths. This change in his perspective of himself and others continues when Herzog invites Ramona for dinner, picks some flowers in the garden (because he knows that she is fond of them) and finally decides to stop writing his letters. He now perceives the world and other individuals to be as unique as he himself is. Chavkin (1984) in his paper on suffering in Bellow's fiction refers to Daniel Majdiak and his proposition that in Romantic thought the salvation of humanity depends on love, which "allows us to see others 'as unique individuals.'" Chavkin believes this idea to be fundamental in Bellow's novels (Chavkin 165). The author's vision of love echoes that of Iris Murdoch's who believes love to be "the extremely difficult realization that something other than one's self is real" (Murdoch as quoted in Farnsworth 2). Due to the intensity of his pain, Herzog commits a mis-

take: seeing himself as unique and more valuable than anyone else. His recovery is only possible when the Romantic and essentially Judeo-Christian notion of love replaces his self-obsession. It takes the course of the novel for this change to take place and its long-term consolidation is not possible for the reader to foresee.

### **3.5. Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter was to show the forms and functions of comedy in *Herzog*. Bellow uses humour to relieve the tension between Herzog's inner tribulations and his genuine desire for a calm heart and mind. This comic perspective of his agony evokes sympathy for him. Furthermore, Bellow intends the novel to satirise the existentialist ideas of void and the worthlessness of everyday life. Repeated comic use of images of "fall into the quotidian" and decay especially emphasises Herzog's disagreement with the bleak view of humanity proposed by modernist thinkers. The protagonist's obsessive introspection, a result of his egotism, is also an object of ridicule, because it resembles the Romantic belief in the superiority and originality of the self, which Bellow aims to criticise in his work. However, the Napoleon Street passages, which appear midway through the story and serve as a contradiction to Romantic self-glorification, mark Herzog's gradual departure from his self-centred vision to an all-embracing one. The roots of such a vision are present in both the Judeo-Christian tradition and the Romantic philosophy of salvation through love and appreciation of other individuals as equally unique. The slow metamorphosis of Herzog's perspective, though not fully consistent before the end of the novel, is characterised by the noticeable, yet not total, deviation from the dominating tone of comedy. Herzog towards the end alternates between a humorous and authentic view of himself and others. While comedy alleviates Herzog's pain and provides a defence mechanism against his misfortu-

nate, it is also employed to criticise his flaws. The shift in his perception and his eventual return to stability are registered in a solemn and realistic tone interwoven with a lyrical and lofty style.

## Conclusion

In addition to being a talented humourist, which we saw in the last chapter of this thesis, Saul Bellow was also a great prose stylist. In *Herzog* and his many other novels he employs abundant metaphors, lyricism, American street idiom enriched with Yiddish and French, and metaphysical and religious allusions to create vivid characters and stories. Indeed characterisation can be regarded as the most developed part of Bellow's craft as a writer – both his strength and weakness. *Herzog* provides an apt example: the development of the main protagonist is made at the expense of a more developed plot and minor characters. One must hold the author responsible for the relatively uneventful narrative and, consequently, little dramatic suspense, for most of the story takes place in Moses Herzog's head and his letters and thoughts are the source of the reader's knowledge about him and other characters. The answer as to why Bellow focused so intensively on one protagonist at a time can likely be found in his absolute belief in the character as the main ingredient of a good novel, on which he elaborates in his Nobel lecture in 1976:

(...) in great contemporary works, Sartre's *Nausea*, Camus's *The Stranger*, or Kafka's *The Castle*, there are no characters; you find in such books not individuals but – well, entities. "The novel of characters," he [Alain Robbe-Grillet] says, "belongs entirely in the past. It describes a period: that which marked the apogee of the individual." (...) Character? "Fifty years of disease, the death notice signed many times over by the serious essayists," says Robbe-Grillet, "yet nothing has managed to knock it off the pedestal on which the 19<sup>th</sup> century had placed it. It is a mummy now, but one still en-

throned with the same phony majesty, among the values revered by traditional criticism" (Bellow 1976: 1).

Bellow vehemently rejected "the death notice" of "the novel of characters" and in his works he would try to reinstate the exaltation that characters had achieved in 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature, which, unlike modernist literature, promoted the complexity, potential and strength of the individual. *Herzog* with its single fully developed personality, Moses Herzog, can be interpreted as Bellow's protest against the modernist tendency to downgrade the significance of the individual and emphasise his worthlessness in the face of the hostility of the external world. The existentialist writers that Bellow refers to in his Nobel speech express in their works the themes of the impotence of individual and the exhaustion of values. By presenting in his novel the figure of Herzog, who seeks and finds meaning in ordinary experience and proves strong enough to endure his crisis, Bellow opposes the modernists' verdict of the death of a character. His vision glorifies the vitality and virtue of the individual and reveals a total commitment to the exploration of protagonist's depths.

Bellow's rich characterisation of Herzog, that of a mad professor uncontrollably writing letters to various intellectuals, is to show the powerful grip that ideas may have on people who base their understanding of the world on theoretical constructs. Like Herzog, a professor himself, academics prove especially susceptible to relying on theoretical knowledge to comprehend the world and overcome life's problems. The result of doing so, an existence in isolation and detachment from everyday life, is what Bellow suggests is the most harmful consequence of pursuing the categorisation of experience. Herzog, who has spent much of his life exploring the depths of the philosophy of history, cannot deal with his personal and emotional crisis. His dependence on the philosophy of, for instance, Hegel or Spinoza to understand his own condition drives him into agitation, confusion and distress, which, in turn, ruin his familial life and affect negatively his relation to the external world. By examining this process, I have argued that Bellow seeks to warn us that educa-

tion may remove an individual from ordinary life (Bellow as quoted in Steers 30). With *Herzog*, the author asserts that wisdom does not necessarily, and definitely not in Herzog's case, accompany a university education. To gain true insight requires time and its source is the experiences of everyday life and interaction with others. The involvement in such experiences is conducive to change and, eventually, progress.

The ordinary life, which I argued to be the reality that Herzog loses sight of for the bulk of the novel, is the proving ground for his wisdom, "the strength of an individual's virtue," as Herzog writes in his letter to Monsignor Hilton. Bellow's fundamental virtues include a connection with nature, brotherhood, dignity, a sense of responsibility for others and for oneself, forgiveness, truth, tradition, balance and, finally, love. Herzog realises that the various theories that he revisits in order to find an answer as to how to attain these values cannot offer him any clear answers. Instead, he discovers them gradually through his exposure to the experiences of life: a relationship with Ramona, a visit to the courthouse, a visit to Madeleine's home, a day out with Junie, a return to his cottage in Ludeyville and his recollections of his childhood. While Herzog's personality can in many ways be considered extraordinary due to, for example, his obsession and imbalance, minor characters such as Ramona, Mrs. Tuttle and his family members are the embodiment of the ordinary. Through his interaction with them, Herzog comes to realise the significance of the simple life and the pleasures, beauty and kindness which that life affords.

Herzog's preoccupation with the past, one sign of his detachment from the present, prompts him to re-enact the values and behaviours exhibited by his parents, which he believes to have been the measure of their virtue. Herzog is ultimately in search of some quality which will provide him with enough strength to face the facts of his life, endure his pain and continue his existence with dignity. This appears to be a desire harboured by many, which may explain why Bellow's novel became such a success among readers upon publi-

cation.<sup>21</sup> Herzog's story had an appeal to people because it described a commonplace fragmentary human condition and the need for meaning and harmony. Moreover, it promised the possibility of a release from incapacitating isolation and asserted the value of brotherhood. Finally, it proved that there is space for both strong characters in the contemporary novel and strong individuals in contemporary life: a person should not be consigned to the role of an administrative number in the registry office, which the modern world often imposes on them.

As I have argued in Chapter 2 and 3, while Bellow makes Herzog appreciate his early childhood and the values of his parents, he at the same time mocks his narcissism and conviction in his uniqueness. One might argue that the author could have employed a second character to represent one of these opposing attitudes so that Herzog would not need to become the repository of comic contrasts. But it is precisely by using such a contrary protagonist that Bellow is able to express his interest in the exploration of the complexity of a single consciousness. Comedy is the author's tool to release the tension in the disparities of Herzog's character and save him from falling into utter depression and suffering from an irreversible sense of chaos and sorrow. Humour also serves as a means of exposing, ridiculing and, eventually, defying narcissism on the one hand and nihilism on the other. It requires a specific kind of attitude and some degree of familiarity with Bellow's personal views to discern and correctly interpret the meaning of comedy in the novel. Once one has become sensitised to its presence and function, it is clear that amusing undertones represent an important motif running through the novel. As I illustrated in Chapter 3, the irony is strongest when Herzog is criticising himself and his antagonists and dissipates when his perception of himself and others changes. The author's strategy of using humour in his representation of the main protagonist leads to the preservation of the balance between the

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<sup>21</sup> *Herzog* remained on the bestseller list in the United States for many months in 1964 and 1965 (Atlas 340).

reader's distance from and identification with him. On the one hand, we sympathise with Herzog; on the other, we recognise that his agony and self-pity are part of his perverse self-gratifying nature.

Bellow's faith in the strength of the individual, which in the case of *Herzog* compels him to develop a vivid protagonist with the potential for true growth, is a crucial element of his vision of humanity. This vision extends beyond the idea of the exhaustion of the novel of characters and aims to revive and encourage rich characterisation, the construction of identifiable personalities. Moses Herzog is Bellow's mouthpiece, brought into being to assert the worth of the quotidian and fundamental moral principles: the value of family, the importance of memory and tradition, the potential for order and progress.

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