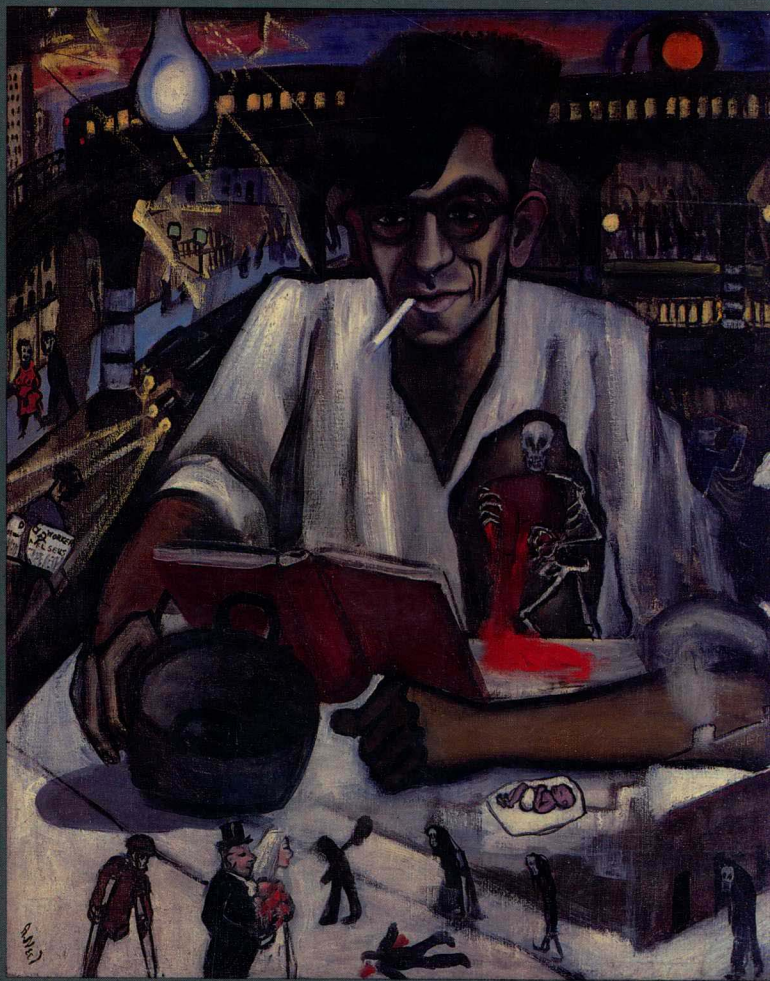


Modern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

Saul Bellow's
Herzog

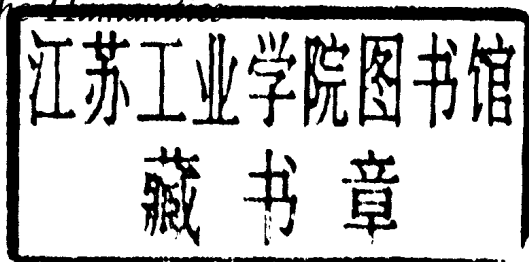


Saul Bellow's
Herzog

Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom

*Sterling Professor of the Humanities
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Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best critical interpretations of Saul Bellow's novel *Herzog*. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Donna Stowe and Paul Barickman for their assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction sets *Herzog* in the context of Bellow's career, with its long polemic against literary modernism, and its related nostalgia for Jewish normative tradition. The chronological sequence of criticism begins with Tony Tanner's appreciation, which accepts Moses Herzog as the modern mind laboring with the burden of ideas.

Gabriel Josipovici charts the passage of Herzog, who rejects both "crisis ethics" and "potato love," and instead accepts responsibility for himself. In Sarah Blacher Cohen's view, Herzog surmounts egotism and achieves community through his resilient wit.

In a dissenting judgment, Richard Poirier discovers an unfortunate complicity in the self-aggrandizing cultural stances of Herzog and of Bellow. Far more Bellovian, Daniel Fuchs joins Bellow in *Herzog's* humanist critique of what Bellow insists upon regarding as Freud's severity and rigidity on the issues of psychic over-determination.

In a defense of Madeleine Herzog's character, Ada Aharoni argues that Madeleine is the psychic center both of Herzog's existence and of the novel. Jonathan Wilson, in this volume's final essay, locates the novel's "deep subject" as Herzog's sense of ambivalent manhood because of his position as an intellectual in a society that defines masculine reality in terms of business and politics. This accounts (according to Wilson) for the paradox that Herzog becomes healthier at the expense of part of his intellectual vitality.

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Introduction

I

By general critical agreement, Saul Bellow is the strongest American novelist of his generation, presumably with Norman Mailer as his nearest rival. What makes this canonical judgment a touch problematic is that the indisputable achievement does not appear to reside in any single book. Bellow's principal works are: *The Adventures of Augie March*, *Herzog*, *Humboldt's Gift*, and in a briefer compass, *Seize the Day*. The earlier novels, *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, seem now to be period pieces, while *Henderson the Rain King* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* share the curious quality of not being quite worthy of two figures so memorable as Henderson and Mr. Sammler. *The Dean's December* is a drab book, its dreariness unredeemed by Bellow's nearly absent comic genius.

Herzog, still possessing the exuberance of *Augie March*, while anticipating the tragicomic sophistication of *Humboldt's Gift*, as of now seems to be Bellow's best and most representative novel. And yet its central figure remains a wavering representation, compared to some of the subsidiary male characters, and its women seem the wish-fulfillments, negative as well as positive, of *Herzog* and his creator. This seems true of almost all of Bellow's fiction: a Dickensian gusto animates a fabulous array of secondary and minor personalities, while at the center a colorful but shadowy consciousness is hedged in by women who do not persuade us, though evidently once they persuaded him.

In some sense, the canonical status of Bellow is already assured, even if the indubitable book is still to come. Bellow's strengths may not have come together to form a masterwork, but he is hardly the first novelist of real eminence whose books may be weaker as aggregates than in their

component parts or aspects. His stylistic achievement is beyond dispute, as are his humor, his narrative inventiveness, and his astonishing inner ear, whether for monologue or dialogue. Perhaps his greatest gift is for creating subsidiary and minor characters of grotesque splendor, sublime in their vivacity, intensity, and capacity to surprise. They may be caricatures, yet their vitality seems permanent: Einhorn, Clem Tembow, Bateshaw, Valentine Gersbach, Sandor Himmelstein, Von Humboldt Fleisher, Cantabile, Alec Szathmar. Alas, compared to them, the narrator-heroes, Augie, Herzog, and Citrine, are diffuse beings, possibly because Bellow cannot disengage from them, despite heroic efforts and revisions. I remember *Augie March* for Einhorn, *Herzog* for Gersbach, *Humboldt's Gift* for Humboldt, and even that last preference tends to throw off-center an apprehension of the novel. Augie March and Herzog narrate and speak with tang and eloquence, yet they themselves are less memorable than what they say. Citrine, more subdued in his language, fades yet more quickly into the continuum of Bellow's urban cosmos. This helps compound the aesthetic mystery of Bellow's achievement. His heroes are superb observers, worthy of their Whitmanian heritage. What they lack is Whitman's Real Me or Me Myself, or else they are blocked from expressing it.

II

Few novelists have ever surpassed Bellow at openings and closings:

I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent. But a man's character is his fate, says Heraclitus, and in the end there isn't any way to disguise the nature of the knocks by acoustical work on the door or gloving the knuckles.

Look at me, going everywhere! Why, I am a sort of Columbus of those near-at-hand and believe you come to them in this immediate *terra incognita* that spreads out in every gaze. I may well be a flop at this line of endeavor. Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America.

The end and the start cunningly interlace, very much in the mode of *Song of Myself*, or of the first and last chapters of Emerson's *Nature*. Augie

too is an American Transcendentalist, a picaresque quester for the god within the self. *Ethos* is the *Daimon*, both passages say, with Augie as *ethos* and Columbus as the *daimon*. One remembers the aged Whitman's self-identification in his "Prayer of Columbus," and it seems right to rejoice, as Whitman would have rejoiced, when Augie comes full circle from going at things, self-taught and free-style, to discovering those near-at-hand, upon the shores of America. That is Bellow at his most exuberant. When weathered, the exuberance remains, but lies in shadow:

If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me, thought Moses Herzog.

Some people thought he was cracked and for a time he himself had doubted that he was all there. But now, though he still behaved oddly, he felt confident, cheerful, clairvoyant, and strong. He had fallen under a spell and was writing letters to everyone under the sun. . . . Hidden 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.

Perhaps he'd stop writing letters. Yes, that was what was coming, in fact. The knowledge that he was done with these letters. Whatever had come over him during these last months, the spell, really seemed to be passing, really going. He set down his hat, with the roses and day lilies, on the half-painted piano, and went into his study, carrying the wine bottles in one hand like a pair of Indian clubs. Walking over notes and papers, he lay down on his Récamier couch. As he stretched out, he took a long breath, and then he lay, looking at the mesh of the screen, pulled loose by vines, and listening to the steady scratching of Mrs. Tuttle's broom. He wanted to tell her to sprinkle the floor. She was raising too much dust. In a few minutes he would call down to her, "Damp it down, Mrs. Tuttle. There's water in the sink." But not just yet. At this time he had no messages for anyone. Nothing. Not a single word.

Another *ritorno*, but this time the cycle has been broken. Augie March, like Emerson and Whitman, knows that there is no history, only biography. Moses Herzog has been a long time discovering this truth, which ends his profession, and Charlie Citrine also goes full-circle:

The book of ballads published by Von Humboldt Fleisher in the Thirties was an immediate hit. Humboldt was just what everyone had been waiting for. Out in the Midwest I had certainly been waiting eagerly, I can tell you that. An avant-garde writer, the first of a new generation, he was handsome, fair, large, serious, witty, he was learned. The guy had it all. All the papers reviewed his book. His picture appeared in *Time* without insult and in *Newsweek* with praise. I read *Harlequin Ballads* enthusiastically. I was a student at the University of Wisconsin and thought about nothing but literature day and night. Humboldt revealed to me new ways of doing things. I was ecstatic. I envied his luck, his talent, and his fame, and I went east in May to have a look at him—perhaps to get next to him. The Greyhound bus, taking the Scranton route, made the trip in about fifty hours. That didn't matter. The bus windows were open. I had never seen real mountains before. Trees were budding. It was like Beethoven's *Pastorale*. I felt showered by the green, within . . . Humboldt was very kind. He introduced me to people in the Village and got me books to review. I always loved him.

Within the grave was an open concrete case. The coffins went down and then the yellow machine moved forward and the little crane, making a throaty whir, picked up a concrete slab and laid it atop the concrete case. So the coffin was enclosed and the soil did not come directly upon it. But then, how did one get out? One didn't, didn't, didn't! You stayed, you stayed! There was a dry light grating as of crockery when contact was made, a sort of sugarbowl sound. Thus, the condensation of collective intelligences and combined ingenuities, its cables silently spinning, dealt with the individual poet. . . .

Menasha and I went toward the limousine. The side of his foot brushed away some of last autumn's leaves and he said, looking through his goggles, "What this, Charlie, a spring flower?"

"It is. I guess it's going to happen after all. On a warm day like this everything looks ten times deader."

"So it's a little flower," Menasha said. "They used to tell one about a kid asking his grumpy old man when they were walking in the park, 'What's the name of this flower, Papa?' and the

old guy is peevish and he yells, 'How should I know? Am I in the millinery business?' Here's another, but what do you suppose they're called, Charlie?"

"Search me," I said. "I'm a city boy myself. They must be crocuses."

The cycle is from Citrine's early: "I felt showered by the green, within" to his late, toneless, "They must be crocuses," removed from all affect not because he has stopped loving Humboldt, but because he is chilled preternaturally by the effective if unfair trope Bellow has found for the workings of canonical criticism: "Thus, the condensation of collective intelligences and combined ingenuities, its cables silently spinning, dealt with the individual poet." There is no history, and now there is also no biography, but only the terrible dehumanizing machine of a technocratic intelligentsia, destroying individuality and poetry, and stealing from the spring of the year the green that no longer is to be internalized.

III

Bellow's endless war against each fresh wave of literary and intellectual modernism is both an aesthetic resource and an aesthetic liability in his fiction. As resource, it becomes a drive for an older freedom, an energy of humane protest against over-determination. As liability, it threatens to become repetition, or a merely personal bitterness, even blending into Bellow's acerbic judgments upon the psychology of women. When it is most adroitly balanced, in *Herzog*, the polemic against modernism embraces the subtle infiltrations of dubious ideologies into the protesting Moses Herzog himself. When it is least balanced, we receive the narrative rant that intrudes into Mr. Sammler's cosmos, or the dankness that pervades both Chicago and Bucharest in *The Dean's December*. Like Ruskin lamenting that the water in Lake Como was no longer blue, Bellow's Alexander Corde tells us that "Chicago wasn't Chicago anymore." What *The Dean's December* truly tells us is that "Bellow wasn't Bellow anymore," in this book anyway. The creator of Einhorn and Gersbach and Von Humboldt Fleisher gives us no such figure this time around, almost as though momentarily he resents his own genius for the high comedy of the grotesque.

Yet Bellow's lifelong polemic against the aestheticism of Flaubert and his followers is itself the exuberant myth that made *Augie March*, *Herzog*, and *Humboldt's Gift* possible. In an act of critical shrewdness, Bellow once associated his mode of anti-modernist comedy with Svevo's *Confessions of*

Zeno and Nabokov's *Lolita*, two masterpieces of ironic parody that actually surpass Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* in portraying the modernist consciousness as stand-up comic. Parody tends to negate outrage, and Bellow is too vigorous to be comfortable at masking his own outrage. When restrained, Bellow is too visibly restrained, unlike the mordant Svevo or the Nabokov who excels at deadpan mockery. Henderson may be more of a self-portrait, but Herzog, scholar of High Romanticism, better conveys Bellow's vitalistic version of an anti-modernistic comic stance. Bellow is closest to Svevo and to Nabokov in the grand parody of Herzog-Hamlet declining to shoot Gersbach-Claudius when he finds the outrageous adulterer scouring the bathtub after bathing Herzog's little daughter. Daniel Fuchs, certainly Bellow's most careful and informed scholar, reads this scene rather too idealistically by evading the parodic implications of "Moses might have killed him now." Bathing a child is our sentimental version of prayer, and poor Herzog, unlike Hamlet, is a sentimentalist, rather than a triumphant rejecter of nihilism, as Fuchs insists.

Bellow, though carefully distanced from Herzog, is himself something of a sentimentalist, which in itself need not be an aesthetic disability for a novelist. Witness Samuel Richardson and Dickens, but their sentimentalism is so titanic as to become something different in kind, a sensibility of excess larger than even Bellow can hope to display. In seeking to oppose an earlier Romanticism (Blake, Wordsworth, Whitman) to the belated Romanticism of literary modernism (Gide, Eliot, Hemingway), Bellow had the peculiar difficulty of needing to avoid the heroic vitalism that he regards as an involuntary parody of High Romanticism (Rimbaud, D. H. Lawrence, and, in a lesser register, Norman Mailer). Henderson, Bellow's Gentile surrogate, is representative of just how that difficulty constricts Bellow's imagination. The Blakean dialectic of Innocence and Experience, clearly overt in the scheme of the novel, is at odds with Henderson's characteristically Bellovian need for punishment or unconscious sense of guilt, which prevails in spite of Bellow's attempts to evade Freudian overdetermination. Though he wants and indeed needs a psychology of the will, Bellow is much more Freudian than he can bear to know. Henderson is a superbly regressive personality, very much at one with the orphan child he holds at the end of the novel. Dahfu, of whom Norman Mailer strongly approved, is about as persuasive a representation as are his opposites in Bellow, all of those sadistic and compelling fatal ladies, pipe dreams of a male vision of otherness as a castrating force. Bellow disdains apocalypse as a mode, but perhaps the Bellovian apocalypse would be one in which all of the darkly attractive women of these novels converged

upon poor Dahfu, Blakean vitalist, and divested him of the emblem of his therapeutic vitalism.

Without his polemic, Bellow never seems able to get started, even in *Humboldt's Gift*, where the comedy is purest. Unfortunately, Bellow cannot match the modernist masters of the novel. In American fiction, his chronological location between, say, Faulkner and Pynchon exposes him to comparisons he does not seek yet also cannot sustain. Literary polemic within a novel is dangerous because it directs the critical reader into the areas where canonical judgments must be made, as part of the legitimate activity of reading. Bellow's polemic is normative, almost Judaic in its moral emphases, its passions for justice and for more life. The polemic sometimes becomes more attractive than its aesthetic embodiments. Would we be so charmed by Herzog if he did not speak for so many of us? I become wary when someone tells me that she or he "loves" *Gravity's Rainbow*. The grand Pynchonian doctrine of sado-anarchism scarcely should evoke *affection* in anyone, as opposed to the shudder of recognition that the book's extraordinary aesthetic dignity demands from us. It is the *aesthetic* failure of Bellow's polemic, oddly combined with its moral success, that increasingly drives Bellow's central figures into dubious mysticisms. Citrine's devotion to Rudolf Steiner is rather less impressive, intellectually and aesthetically, than the obsessive Kabbalism of *Gravity's Rainbow*. If Steiner is the ultimate answer to literary modernism, then Flaubert may rest easy in his tomb.

IV

And yet Bellow remains a humane comic novelist of superb gifts, almost unique in American fiction since Mark Twain. I give the last words here to what moves me as the most beautiful sequence in Bellow, Herzog's final week of letters, starting with his triumphant overcoming of his obsession with Madeleine and Gersbach. On his betraying wife, Herzog is content to end with a celebration now at last beyond masochism: "To put on lipstick, after dinner in a restaurant, she would look at her reflection in a knife blade. He recalled this with delight." On Gersbach, with his indubitable, latently homosexual need to cuckold his best friend, Herzog is just and definitive: "*Enjoy her—rejoice in her. You will not reach me through her, however, I know you sought me in her flesh. But I am no longer there.*" The unmailed messages go on, generously assuring Nietzsche of Herzog's admiration while telling the philosopher: "*Your immoralists also eat meat. They ride the bus. They are only the most bus-sick travelers.*" The sequence magnifi-

cently includes an epistle to Dr. Morgenfruh, doubtless a Yiddish version of the Nietzschean Dawn of Day, of whom Herzog wisely remarks: "He was a splendid old man, only partly fraudulent, and what more can you ask of anyone?" Addressing Dr. Morgenfruh, Herzog speculates darkly "that the territorial instinct is stronger than the sexual." But then, with exquisite grace, Herzog signs off: "*Abide in light, Morgenfruh. I will keep you posted from time to time.*" This benign farewell is made not by an over-determined bundle of territorial and sexual instincts, but by a persuasive representative of the oldest ongoing Western tradition of moral wisdom and familial compassion.

The Prisoner of Perception

Tony Tanner

His face was before him in the blotchy mirror. It was bearded with lather. He saw his perplexed, furious eyes and he gave an audible cry. My God! Who is this creature? It considers itself human. But what is it? Not human of itself. But has the longing to be human.

This is Moses E. Herzog, the central figure in Bellow's most recent novel, entitled *Herzog*. (His name almost certainly derives from Joyce's *Ulysses* where there is a minor character called Moses Herzog who is a put-upon Jewish merchant. It may also contain a distant reference to the famous and very brave mountaineer, Maurice Herzog.) This book—Bellow's most impressive to this date—seems to summarise and contain all the questions, the problems, the feelings, the plights, and the aspirations worked over in the previous novels, and it follows them out to their extremest reaches. It seems to be the result of a conclusive grappling with the gathering preoccupations of years. Herzog himself is clearly a descendant, if not a summation, of Bellow's other main characters—worried, harassed, brought down, messed up. (His private life is at a point of chaos—for he is trying to recover from a disastrous second marriage which has just ended in divorce. He is condemned to perpetual compulsive introspection, the victim of memories which refuse to be shut out, racked by endless, nagging cerebration. He seems terribly isolated and cut-off, wandering the congested city streets, brooding apart in lonely rooms.) The book contains few actual

From *Saul Bellow*. © 1965 by Tony Tanner. Barnes & Noble Books, Totowa, New Jersey, 1965.

incidents in the present—an abortive trip to Vineyard Haven, a night with a girl friend, a visit to Chicago to see one of his children which ends with a car crash, the return to an old tumble-down house in the country which was where his second marriage reached its ultimate crisis. The significant action mainly takes part in his head. People and incidents teem through his memory, precipitating great bouts of agitated soul-searching and pounding speculation. More than that, his mind heaves under the weight and pressure, not only of his personal worries, but of the modern city, the innumerable problems of the modern age; ultimately it finds itself struggling with the deepest questions and mysteries of Man himself. His mind seems compelled to take on itself the burden of the whole world, the problem of mankind; yet as a physical being his relationships are fouled up, he is separated from his children, he is one of the struggling sweating mass—powerless, something of a failure, not a little lost. Yet his mind will not be stilled. There is irony as well as urgency in his predicament and Bellow excels himself in this book by presenting not only the importance, but also the curse and the comedy of intense consciousness. (Herzog's is a representative modern mind, swamped with ideas, metaphysics and values, and surrounded by messy facts.) It labours to cope with them all. The book enacts that labour.

At first sight, the meaning of the book might seem to be the sum of all the dozens of ideas that course through Herzog's mind. Yet a more careful view reveals a deeper, subtler intent. The book moves from a corrosive restlessness to a point of temporary rest, and the most important meaning is in that actual movement: the internal labour finally gives way to a glimpse of peace. A consideration of the form and technique of the book can help us to understand this better. A brief opening passage shows us a "tranquil" Herzog, alone in his old country house during the "peak of summer." Then it takes us back to the start of all his troubles. "Late in spring Herzog had been overcome by the need to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to clarify, to make amends." This compulsion to *understand*—typical of Bellow's protagonists—manifests itself in Herzog's habit of making endless notes and jottings, recording fragmentary thoughts, and observations. More than that he gets into the habit of writing letters—to friends, relations, dead ancestors, politicians, philosophers, finally even to God. Many of them are unfinished, none of them, as far as we know, are ever sent. Perhaps they are all imaginary, part of his internal continuum, sudden moments of excited hyperconsciousness when the mind engages in silent partnerless dialogues—"having it out," trying to clarify. Meanwhile Herzog is often sitting or lying down, "in the

coop of his privacy." For the bulk of the book we are in that coop with him—going over things, witnesses of this endless, silent self-examination. It is not systematic: like his life it is mismanaged and patternless. He cannot organise the mixed swarm of facts, notions and ideas: "consciousness when it doesn't clearly understand what to live for, what to die for, can only abuse and ridicule itself." For much of the book Herzog suffers from "unemployed consciousness."

The book has to bring us not only the excitement of the ideas, but the strain, the futility, the near insanity which Herzog experiences. So the reminiscences and the thoughts and the letters flow, one into the other, like a troubled stream. There are sudden interruptions, extremely vivid, graphic evocations of New York or Chicago—unrelated, sudden heightenings of external pressure. The harsh noise and density of the city seem only to drive Herzog deeper into himself. He is never more lost in thought than on the subway. Significant human contact is minimal; even with Ramona, his current girlfriend, he seems ultimately detached, only intermittently stimulated to a brief sexual activity accompanied by a little incipient emotion. He can recall many affairs; he loves his brothers and children; he has long talks with certain friends. But for the most part he seems quite incapable of any genuine relationships. His memory is densely populated—yet he moves like a solitary, sealed up in himself, ridden by a million thoughts. Writing letters to the void, while reality ebbs away from him.

But a counter-movement grows increasingly strong—a desire to reengage simple reality, a yearning for a reprieve from this excess of solitary cerebration, a desire to pass beyond the impossible task of mental justification. His first instinct had been to explain. By the end he is meditating:

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.

The book follows out his doomed attempts to explain and synthesise until we can feel with Herzog the need and the possibility for some new commencement and calm somewhere on the other side of "explanation." At the end Herzog is tranquil in his country house—as we glimpsed him at the start. Now we understand that tranquillity. But only because we have experienced to the full the turmoil which preceded it.

We shall have to look more closely at some of the ideas that Herzog wrestles with for they are crucial ideas in Bellow's work. But it must first

be emphasised that Herzog is in no normal state: it is part of the meaning of the book that these ideas are being turned over by a mind in the throes of a riot of subjectivism. He is often in the state he finds himself enduring in Grand Central Station “both visionary and muddy . . . feverish, damaged, angry, quarrelsome, and shaky.” On a train he will start various letters to people as various as Adlai Stevenson, Ramona, Nehru, Commissioner Wilson—and himself. His reaction at the time is typical:

Quickly, quickly, more! . . . Herzog now barely looking through the tinted, immovable, sealed window felt his eager, flying spirit streaming out, speaking, piercing, making clear judgments, uttering final explanations, necessary words only. He was in a whirling ecstasy. He felt at the same time that his judgments exposed the boundless, baseless bossiness and wilfulness, the nagging embodied in his mental constitution.

The sealed window—the soaring mind: the certainty as to the importance of his thoughts—a suspicion that they result from a ridiculous *tantrum*. That is typical Herzog. He cannot select or filter his thoughts. “I am a prisoner of perception, a compulsory witness.” This is a mind with no certainties, no calm programme, no sure focus. A mind in pain. “He wrote to Spinoza. *Thoughts not causally connected were said by you to cause pain. I find that is indeed the case. Random association, when the intellect is passive, is a form of bondage.*”

Like many another alienated observer, he wonders if anguish and detachment are the necessary condition of his calling. “Moses had to see reality. Perhaps he was somewhat spared from it so that he might see it better, not fall asleep in its thick embrace. Awareness was his work; extended consciousness was his line, his business. Vigilance.” Looking at his brother, a man immersed in business, Herzog contrasts himself—“a man like me has shown the arbitrary withdrawal of proud subjectivity from the collective and historical progress of mankind.” But he says this in self-mockery, and by the end he drops the idea as a vain-glorious falsehood. Gradually, the prisoner starts to emerge. Here is a crucial moment after a heavy spell of speculation and vast generalisations:

But then he realized that he did not need to perform elaborate abstract intellectual work—work he had always thrown himself into as if it were the struggle for survival. But not thinking is not necessarily fatal. Did I really believe that I would die when thinking stopped?