

THE QUEST FOR AUTHENTICITY
BY SAUL BELLOW'S HEROES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Leta Fae Arnold
June 3, 1967

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the heroes in four novels by Saul Bellow: Joseph, in Dangling Man; Asa, in The Victim; Henderson, in Henderson the Rain King; and Herzog, in the novel by that name.

Though the circumstances in each novel vary somewhat, the conflict for each hero is the same. This paper establishes, from the novels themselves, these two as the forces in conflict: first, the demands for self-denial made upon the heroes by their Judeo-Christian world; and second, their fear of losing their own personal identity.

It further establishes that by refusing the demands made upon them for fear of losing their personal identity, they alienate themselves from this world. Finally, it examines their discovery of the quest for reconciliation as being a quest for authenticity. This quest leads three of the four to an understanding of the need for a balance between the demands for self-denial, on the one hand, and the desire for personal identity, on the other. They begin to understand that the balance is achieved by what Erich Fromm calls mature love. Fromm's theory of love is explicated fully in chapter one.

The introduction defines the existential terms alluded to already in this abstract, as well as others to be used throughout the paper. Chapter one investigates Joseph's search in terms of Fromm's theory, while chapters two, three, and four investigate each of the other three heroes, respectively, as they attempt to find their way out of the alienated position experienced by Joseph at the end of Dangling Man.

The page numbers found in the footnotes to material taken from Dangling Man and The Victim are from The New American Library paperback editions of February and April, 1965, respectively. The Henderson the Rain King references are from the Popular Library paperback edition of June, 1963. The Herzog references are from the November, 1965 edition of the Fawcett Crest paperback edition.

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INTRODUCTION

The heroes of Saul Bellow's novels Dangling Man, The Victim, Henderson the Rain King, and Herzog, all live in a Judeo-Christian world. That is, they live among those who believe that any act which results from a choice in favor of oneself is a selfish one. For example, the religionists have placed in order, "God first, others second, and self last." Even the sectarian world subscribes to such a dogma as the Rotary International motto: "Service above self." At the same time, each hero finds that the demands made upon him by such a world seem to be in conflict with his desire for personal identity.

It is the purpose of this paper to show, from the four novels themselves, that for Bellow this Judeo-Christian philosophy of the self, and the desire on the part of each hero for personal identity constitute the real conflict in these novels. Bellow has each hero attempt to reconcile these two conflicting viewpoints about the self, and he has three of the four heroes achieve some reconciliation by having them understand what Erich Fromm, whose ideas on love as the means of reconciliation are

explicated in chapter one, calls mature love or "...union under the condition of preserving one's integrity, one's individuality."¹ This love resolves the conflict, somewhat, as three of the four heroes begin to see that the two ideas about the self actually suggest the same action: the love of oneself. In Judeo-Christian terms the action is expressed in the scripture, "Love thy neighbor as THYSELF,"² a command which implies a need for love of self. This is not to imply that love of self and self-interest are the same. Rather, the paper will explore the possibility that if one cares enough about others to forget his own self-interest, he may discover his true self. Existentially the action is known as choosing in favor of one's true, genuine or authentic self.

The word "self-denial" is so familiar to the Judeo-Christian mind that it seems necessary only to say, in defining terms, that this word will be used throughout the paper to refer to the entire concept

¹Erich Fromm, The Art of Loving (New York, 1963), p. 7.

²St. Matthew, 19:19.

of the self which the four heroes find so threatening as regards their desire for personal identity.

"Selfhood", on the other hand, will be the name given to that desire. The word has more meaning for this paper if it is understood in terms of what Martin Heidegger calls Dasein.³

For Heidegger Dasein is "presence here"; da meaning a fundamental structure whereby a man is open to the experience of being, and sein, being. Heidegger's now famous word for the Being of human being, Being-in-the-world, is an important principle for Bellow. The principle establishes that Dasein and the world do not exist apart from each other. What each of Bellow's heroes is struggling to overcome is the artificial separation of himself caused by his Judeo-Christian world. While in this artificial world the demands for self-denial ask a sacrifice of self for the sake of the world, the hero desires to unite with the world for the sake of selfhood. However, even if each hero chooses to practice either absolute self-denial or complete selfhood, he still is avoiding the reality of explicitly choosing in favor of himself.

³Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, 1962), p. 25.

This choice in favor of oneself, as this paper names it, will carry with it the existential meaning of Heidegger's German word, eigentlich.⁴ This word, derived from the German eigen (one's very own), is Heidegger's word for this choice of oneself. The word in English is translated "authentic" and the abstract quality Eigentlichkeit is the English word, "Authenticity." Authenticity means man's genuine distinctive possibility as opposed to a factitious self resulting from conformity to the anonymous "they" or the crowd. The term selfhood in this paper will mean the existential desire for authenticity.

An examination of Bellow's four heroes will reveal, then,

- 1) that the Judeo-Christian world of each hero demands he practice self-denial;
- 2) that each hero, in refusing these demands for self-denial, alienates himself from his world;
- 3) that Joseph, because of his failure to choose authentically, is not reconciled to his world, but that Asa, Henderson, and

⁴Being and Time, p. 26.

Herzog achieve some reconciliation with their worlds by means of an authentic choice;

- 4) that this authentic choice made by Asa, Henderson, and Herzog takes the form of a personal choice on the part of each to love others;
- 5) that by this personal choice to love others, each finds some balance between their Judeo-Christian world's demands for self-denial and the existential desire for selfhood.

CHAPTER I

DANGLING MAN

Bellow's hero, Joseph, in Dangling Man, says of himself in a third-person entry in his diary, "He is a person greatly concerned with keeping intact and free from encumbrance a sense of his own being, its importance."⁵ Dangling Man is the record of a young American waiting to be drafted into World War II, during which time he is avoiding any encumbrances put upon him by others. Early in the book, Bellow gives evidence of Joseph's attempts to avoid such encumbrances as might rob him of a sense of his own being. Two incidents illustrate well his desire to avoid partnership with his world, partnerships which would involve identifying burdens.

The first incident is a refusal to encumber himself with the label, "married man," though Joseph has a wife. He tries to get Mr. Almstadt, his father-in-law, to agree that the old man's wife is a poor excuse for a companion, with her constant telephone conversations. The husband fails to see Joseph's

⁵Saul Bellow, Dangling Man (New York, 1965), p. 19.

veiled accusation that the marriage for the old man has not been a satisfying one. He does see enough, however, to feel almost insulted when Joseph asks him how he has stood the situation all these years. Joseph, the husband, not wanting to encumber himself with the responsibility of a husband's identification, refuses to talk to Almstadt as a fellow husband, also with an imperfect wife. He wants only that Almstadt speak the truth, as Joseph sees it; but when he senses that Mr. Almstadt has not "seen" it all these years, Joseph quickly covers up his search for the truth. He makes no effort, however, to play the part of a husband and laugh with Mr. Almstadt about his wife's neglect. Such a bit of hypocritical companionship might call for an alliance on Joseph's part. Alliances bring with them responsibilities.

At the Servatius party, the reader observes another encumbrance he is avoiding, that caused by participation in group activity. He does not enjoy such cocktail parties of friends (so-called) getting together. He prefers "...a colony of the spirit, a group whose covenants forbade spite, bloodiness, and cruelty."⁶ He goes to the party simply for something

⁶Dangling Man, p. 27.

to do. The party demonstrations of cruelty shock him, but they give him an insight that makes him less likely to seek out a group again. He records of the party,

And it came to me all at once that the human purpose of these occasions has always been to free the charge of feeling in the pent heart; and that as animals instinctively sought salt or lime, we, too, flew together at the need... to witness pains and tortures, to give our scorn, hatred, and desire temporary liberty and play.⁷

He refuses to take part in the infliction of pain--the main attraction is the hypnosis of one neurotic woman--because such involvement will necessitate being a part of the group and admitting of group needs. This act will encumber him.

Bellow uses these two incidents as a means of representing Joseph's feelings toward the actual world with which he is avoiding alliances--the world whose demands for self-denial seem to him to be robbing him of his very selfhood. Bellow establishes this conflict between self-denial and selfhood early in the book. It is a conflict between Joseph's desire to keep himself intact, and a demand from his world for him to take on its identity by participation.

⁷Dangling Man, p. 31.

To Joseph such an act will have to include self-denial.

What kind of world is this world? What are the demands for self-denial it is making upon him? First, it is a world full of appeal to the kind of man Joseph is. A history major, graduate of the University of Wisconsin, Joseph is aware of a world not yet the utopia of his undergraduate dreams. He is the citizen of a world already divided by two political ideologies--each stemming from a basic human desire for community. One is the republican form of community which Archibald MacLeish describes as perfectly balanced by a second human desire, a desire for individual freedom.⁸

This republican community has voted to enter into a world war, after an unprovoked attack by foreign powers. The country operates under the moral principle of Judeo-Christian self-denial. This idea suggests that whatever is done to benefit the self is wrong because such a practice denies the existence of others and their needs. Millions of this republic's citizens, therefore, are being asked by their fellows

⁸ Archibald MacLeish, "Loyalty and Freedom," The American Scholar XXII (Autumn 1953), pp. 393-398.

to deny themselves and fight so that such political and moral ideologies as America practices may be available to future generations. Those who remain at home are asked to deny themselves peacetime pleasures and luxuries to show their loyalty to those fighting in their behalf. Thus, ideally, each group is living for the other, rather than for himself.

The second political ideology, one that has appealed to Joseph in his earlier days, is Communism. The human desire for what MacLeish calls community beckoned many young intellectuals after the first World War. Joseph has been one such intellectual. There had been a time in his life when he was even a member of the Party. In an incident involving a former comrade, Bellow shows the reason why Joseph has left the Party. While having lunch with a childhood friend, Joseph sees a former comrade sitting across the dining room. He gets no recognition from the man after nodding to him. His friend questions what difference it might make, and Joseph makes clear that a principle is involved. The principle that Bellow wants the reader to see is the principle that says if a man refuses to give his intellectual self to Communism, a ... "party (that) doesn't want him to

think, but to follow its discipline..."⁹, he is considered nonexistent. Joseph has not wanted his intellectual selfhood to be so encumbered, and in this scene the consequences of such a choice are brought home to him. In refusing Communism's supreme demand for self-denial, he finds himself declared nonexistent.

The republican world that will draft him, as soon as they can investigate the problem caused by his Canadian birth, will ask a supreme sacrifice, also. He will be asked to lay down his life, his physical self, for others. Bellow makes the struggle of a man dangling between the decision to refuse this demand for the supreme sacrifice, and the desire to feel a part of this world at war the crux of his story.

How Joseph feels about the demand for self-denial that his country has made upon him Bellow displays in three significant passages: a scene about rationing at his brother's house; Joseph's own feelings about the war's purpose; and Joseph's insight into Mr. Franzel's "business wisdom" and his personal feelings about his possible benefits from such a war.

⁹Dangling Man, p. 23.

In the scene at his brother's, Joseph indicates his contempt for the hypocrisy of token self-denial. His brother and sister-in-law, as it happens, have decided to ration their coffee! The wife then quotes her shoe salesman brother who says Americans may be limited to four pairs of shoes within the year. In the next breath she sighs, "We couldn't get along on four pairs a year."¹⁰ Joseph thinks to himself that the contradiction is too plain to go unnoticed. The first reason, then, for his hesitancy to encumber himself with the kind of self-denial the war is demanding is his fear of being untrue to himself. His self wants to keep its identity. If he acts out a religious pretense of self-denial, as his brother's family is doing, he will lose this identity as an honest man capable of self-chosen sacrifice.

In the same conversation, after his brother has commented that Joseph's delay in going into the Army might make him miss his chances for advancement, Joseph replies, "I don't think I want to try to make an officer of myself...As I see it, the whole war's

¹⁰Dangling Man, p. 42.

a misfortune. I don't want to raise myself through it."¹¹ Here Bellow makes clear a second reason for Joseph's hesitancy to answer the demands for self-denial made by the war. That reason is a fear of using others to advance himself. Another form self-denial often takes is that of pretending to join in an effort to aid others, yet all the while making use of others to aid oneself. Joseph fears this kind of hypocritical act, too.

Finally, in the report of Jeff Forman, a war casualty, and Joseph's comments about it, Bellow identifies the third reason for Joseph's refusal to give in to the demand of his world to deny himself. His January 15 entry begins, "Look out for yourself, and the world will be best served."¹² He is quoting the philosophy of a Mr. Franzel, the tailor, and what Joseph calls his "business wisdom...If everybody takes care of number one, the general welfare is assured."¹³ Yet Joseph is bewildered by such a philosophy. "Myself, I would rather die in the war

¹¹Dangling Man, p. 43.

¹²Dangling Man, p. 72.

¹³Dangling Man, p. 73.

than consume its benefits...I would rather be a victim than a beneficiary."¹⁴ He cannot believe that self-denial could ever be for the benefit of self. For that reason, he fears any personal self-denial that he might practice. In denying himself, he might really be benefiting himself!

How ironic is the dangling position of Bellow's first hero. He is dangling because he cannot believe the possibility that the road to selfhood might just possibly include some self-denial. Joseph's dilemma stems from his world's popular interpretation of a basic tenet of the Judeo-Christian philosophy of the self; that is the popular belief that a self-denying self is most religious when its acts of self-denial result in no selfhood. Joseph, as a Bellovian hero, then, finds a conflict when he desires selfhood in a world that lives under such delusion. The irony lies in the fact that Judeo-Christian love demands a man love himself; a fact implicit in one of its commandments to be found in St. Matthew 19:19. "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." He is the first of four such existential heroes in that,

¹⁴Dangling Man, p. 56.

while he desires to keep intact a sense of his own being, he is in a Judeo-Christian world where he does not dare deny himself for his own benefit. Such a motive, to his world, would be the epitome of self-love, a Judeo-Christian sin.

Joseph then, refuses the American world's demands for self-denial not so much because he feels such an act would cause him to lose his identity, though the desire for self-identity is in him, but because he cannot see any virtue in selfish self-denial. His Judeo-Christian training has taught him that any act to benefit the self is selfish, even the pretended act of self-denial. The only acts he has seen made by Americans have been selfish acts under the guise of acts of self-denial. He does not want to be a part of that kind of selfishness.

What Joseph does not see is that his refusal to deny himself, whatever the reason, alienates him from his present world.

Joseph's alienation Bellow makes plain throughout the entire novel. In his encounters with his friends, Joseph finds they no longer know him. Finally his wife, though she at first tries to understand, begins to react against this stranger who will not even return

to the same bank and attempt to cash a second check for fear he will be refused again!

His brother's family suspect him of abnormal behavior, especially in his encounter with his niece, when he is accused of making sexual advances toward her. The supposed rebuff from his niece presages another series of scenes in which Joseph actually is rebuffed by a woman.

Kitty is a woman he has visited before, at her invitation. In his present state of alienation from his wife, on a pretext of getting a book he has loaned Kitty, Joseph goes to see her. They have the affair Kitty had wanted two years before, but when Kitty begins to talk of making Joseph happier than his wife has, hinting that he get a divorce, Joseph backs away. It is not because he is loyal to his wife--he uses that only as an excuse to Kitty. For he tells her of the idea of limits a man must put upon himself. It is because Kitty was an unobtainable object that he turned to her in the first place. Now she has no interest for him except as a place to visit during... "the onset of the dangling days..."¹⁵

¹⁵Dangling Man, p. 68.

Both the suspected sexual attraction for his niece and the actual affair with Kitty, as well as his new relationship with his wife, are evidences of Joseph's alienation from his world. Joseph resents the contempt the three women have for him. And for the same reason they count him worthless. He is of no value to any of them, but it is because he refuses to be on the grounds that it will demand of him some form of self-denial. The wife sees him as one interested only in his own future. When he is finally drafted, she tells him nothing of her future plans, and he does not ask her about them.

The niece sees him as a material failure incapable of making any contribution to her selfish desires. Joseph knows of the girl's opinion of him, but he, the older one, will not make any effort to reconcile her to him. In fact, in the scene in the attic, he refuses to relinquish the record player to her, and he whips her like a bad child when he is acting like one himself.

The third woman, Kitty, turns him away at the door when he comes by her apartment at an inopportune time. She is entertaining someone else as she has Joseph. And though he has pretended a husband's

nobility to keep from making an alliance with Kitty, he is now quite angry at her for seeking out other company than his. Joseph, then, is alienated from all three women and held of no value because he has not been willing to consider them. He has considered only himself. In so doing, he has acted in ways which assuaged his own needs only.

He treats his wife as though his situation were her fault. In the niece's case he satisfies the need to punish her for her opinion of him. Finally, he has exploited Kitty's relationship by making it a means of passing the time, nothing more. In acting selfishly, without consideration for any of the three women, Joseph alienates himself from them into nonexistence as real as the position he holds with the former Communist comrade.

Joseph, then, is a dangling man because he halts between two opinions. On the one hand, he sees selfishness under the guise of self-denial, a way of life unauthentic in his estimation, a sure path to nonexistence. At the same time what he does not see is that his conduct is a parallel to the hypocritical self-denial of his family and friends. The parallel is to be found in their end result: the loss of

personal identity.

Joseph sees his family and friends as they view him. He sees them unworthy of consideration because their conduct makes them not a part of a world he wants to be associated with. What he does not see is that his actions give him no personal identity either because, though they give him the "pure freedom"¹⁶ he says man longs for, they alienate him from the world.

In his entry for February 22, he concludes, "... we struggle perpetually to free ourselves."¹⁷ In pretending not to care, Joseph has given the appearance of being absolutely free from encumbrances. Seemingly, at the beginning of the book, this is what he desires. The resulting alienation, by such selfishness for freedom's sake, is not what he wants at all, however. For in the same entry he concludes further, "Or, to put it somewhat differently, while we seem so intently and even desperately to be holding on to ourselves, we would far rather give ourselves away."¹⁸ Why does

¹⁶Dangling Man, p. 102.

¹⁷Dangling Man, p. 102.

¹⁸Dangling Man, p. 102.

Joseph not just give himself away? He answers his own dilemma in the next statement in his diary:

"We do not know how."¹⁹

Bellow has Joseph, a twentieth century man in a Judeo-Christian world, admit that he does not know how to give himself away because in such a world he has been conditioned to believe that any act which benefits the self is selfish--even giving oneself away! Can the motive for self-denial be a love of self? Joseph dares to entertain this idea. Bellow does so by having Joseph become aware of what Erich Fromm in The Art of Loving calls separateness.²⁰

Man is life being aware of itself...This awareness of himself as a separate entity, the awareness of his own short life span, of the fact that without his will he is born and against his will he dies, that he will die before those whom he loves, or they before him, the awareness of his aloneness and separateness, of his helplessness before the forces of nature and of society, all this makes his separate disunited existence an unbearable prison.²¹

Fromm goes on to suggest that man would become insane if he could not "liberate himself from this prison, and reach out, unite himself in some form or other

¹⁹Dangling Man, p. 102.

²⁰The Art of Loving, p. 7.

²¹The Art of Loving, p. 7.

with men, with the world outside."²²

Bellow's dangling man is certainly aware of himself, and the freedom he desires is his consuming passion. At the same time, though, he sees the insanity of remaining alone, so he makes attempts to make reconciliation with his alienated world. He cannot, however, because he does not try the one remedy available to him: love of others. "The awareness of human separation, without reunion by love..."²³ is Fromm's description of the ultimate in separateness. In existential terms, this ultimate condition is called alienation.

Fromm would say, then, that Joseph's alienation is caused by his inability to love. Joseph does attempt to love. He tries several of the ways Fromm says man attempts in order to reconcile his I-ness to another. The first way is by what Fromm calls "orgiastic states."²⁴ Joseph ever so subtly tries this way in his obsession for watching the maid, Marie, and in his open admiration for her ability to

²²The Art of Loving, p. 7.

²³The Art of Loving, p. 8.

²⁴The Art of Loving, p. 9.

work as though her work were her means of purity. Like a young lover, he awaits her daily coming to clean his room. The affair with Kitty is the acting out of this sublimated affair with Marie.

Fromm names, secondly, conformity as a means of a man's losing his sense of isolation.²⁵ Joseph has tried that method before the book opens in a temporary alliance with Communism. Thirdly, Fromm says a man attempts to attain union by creative activity.²⁶ He further observes that in creative work the creating person unites himself with his material, which represents the world outside of himself. Until the time of the book's opening, Joseph is spoken of by his friends as having,

A close grasp on himself, that he knows what he wants and how to go about getting it. In the last seven or eight years he has worked out everything in accordance with a general plan. Into this plan have gone his friends, his family, and his wife.²⁷

Joseph's "materials", then, are his friends, family, and wife. He has been united with them in that he has manipulated them. Until his world began to make

²⁵The Art of Loving, p. 11.

²⁶The Art of Loving, p. 14.

²⁷Dangling Man, p. 20.

demands upon him, he has known how to handle it, but now that he is confronted with the decision to unite with this world by an act of self-denial, he rebels. He suffers separation from all its members.

The final form of escaping from separateness without achieving mature union, comments Fromm, is symbiotic love. It takes two forms: masochism and sadism.

The masochistic person escapes the unbearable feeling of isolation and separateness by making himself part and parcel of another person who directs him...The sadistic person wants to escape from aloneness and his sense of imprisonment by making another person part and parcel of himself.²⁸

In his marriage Joseph practices the sadistic form of symbiotic union. Bellow describes in detail Joseph and his wife's relationship just before the author introduces the affair with Kitty.

Ira and I had not been getting along well. I don't think the fault was entirely hers. I had dominated her for years;...Was it possible that she should not want to be guided, formed by me? I expected some opposition. No one, I would have said then, no one came simply and of his own accord, effortlessly, to prize the most truly human traditions, the heavenly cities. You had to be taught to struggle your way toward them. Inclination was not enough.

²⁸The Art of Loving, p. 16.

Before you could set your screws revolving, you had to be towed out of the shallows.²⁹

Finally Fromm calls mature love, "...union under the condition of preserving one's integrity, one's individuality."³⁰ This is the kind of love Joseph is seeking, but never finds. He does not find this kind of love because he is afraid that self-denial will cause him to lose his individuality. He thinks that this self-denial practiced by his Judeo-Christian world of friends and family, even his wife, who has denied herself all their married life for him, will cause such loss to him as they have known. This self-denial is the self-denial of early Judeo-Christian religious asceticism--the loss of one's self for the purpose of pleasing others, benefiting others.

The self-denial of which Fromm speaks is the self-denial practiced for selfish reasons. A man is selfish in the finest sense when he chooses in isolation to deprive himself of that isolation, that alienation, by giving of himself in a commitment to his world. The choice is his, and the motive behind the choice is a desire for selfhood. A man like

²⁹Dangling Man, p. 65.

³⁰The Art of Loving, p. 17.

Joseph, then, who is living under the dictum of the religious world's idea of self-denial--the denial of all selfhood, but who at the same time is aware of the existential desire for keeping his own individuality, can find a balance between these two antipodes.

He can do so by first recognizing that "...the other side of freedom is isolation."³¹ Then in order to avoid isolation, he must choose to give up some freedom and to become involved with the world. Thirdly, he must realize that while such a sacrifice is beneficial to the self, it is not selfish in the popular Judeo-Christian sense. Following that realization, he must see that this choice to become involved with his world, though it does demand acts of self-denial, is a means of selfhood. Such a realization will be his means of finding a balance between the demands for self-denial, on the one hand, and the desire for selfhood, on the other.

Joseph, Bellow's first hero, never finds that balance. At the beginning of the story, Bellow has

³¹Marcus Klein, After Alienation; American Novels in Mid-Century (Cleveland, 1964), p. 222.

Joseph describe his sense of isolation.

Living from day to day under the shadow of such a conspiracy (of strangeness) is trying. If it makes for wonder, it makes even more for uneasiness, and one clings to the nearest passers-by, to brothers, parents, friends, and wives.³²

The strangeness, the isolation, the separateness wears Joseph down during the days he is waiting for his induction papers. He finally can stand it no longer, and goes to the draft board. Even his having to leave a note for the board because they had "all gone home," is symbolic of Joseph's isolation. He writes, "I hereby request to be taken at the earliest possible moment into the armed services."³³ In a postscript he adds, "I am available at any time."³⁴

His choice is plain enough. He does not want to keep himself any longer. He feels his life "wasting away," as he tells the Spirit of Alternatives.³⁵ After his final conversation with the Spirit of Alternatives, he enters these words in his diary:

³²Dangling Man, p. 21.

³³Dangling Man, p. 122.

³⁴Dangling Man, p. 122.

³⁵Dangling Man, p. 110.

"I had not done well alone. I doubted whether anyone could. To be pushed upon oneself entirely put the very facts of simple existence in doubt. Perhaps the war could teach me, by violence, what I had been unable to learn during those months in the room. Perhaps I could sound creation through other means. Perhaps. But things were now out of my hands. The next move was the world's. I could not bring myself to regret it."³⁶

Joseph, then, does not choose to find a balance between two seeming contradictions in his life. He sees only that one form of freedom without responsibility has not worked, so he will take the other form, freedom from personal responsibility within the organized group. As his final diary entry reads,

"This is my last civilian day. Iva has packed my things. It is plain that she would like to see me show a little more grief at leaving her. For her sake, I would like to. And I am sorry to leave her, but I am not at all sorry to part with the rest of it. I am grateful for that. I am in other hands, relieved of self-determination; freedom canceled. Hurray for regular hours. And for the supervision of the spirit! Long live regimentation!"³⁷

He has failed in his attempt to keep himself from all encumbrances. Now, he is merely exchanging one means of isolation for another. He will fail again because he will not choose in favor of himself, even though

³⁶Dangling Man, p. 126.

³⁷Dangling Man, p. 126.

he has wanted to make this authentic choice. He has even attempted to make it by satisfying his own needs to the exclusion of the needs of others. In his attempts, however, he only finds himself more miserable as the days of resulting isolation pile one on top of the other. The reason he cannot choose in favor of himself and thus begin the quest for authenticity is due to his ignorance of his own personal worth. How can one choose in favor of a self that has no worth?

Bellow's hero arouses himself enough to see that, "Great pressure is brought to bear to make us undervalue ourselves."³⁸ In the same moment it dawns on him that, contradictorily, "...civilization teaches that each of us is an inestimable prize."³⁹ What follows is Bellow's finest statement in the novel about the conflict Joseph faces in believing the two views of self are contradictory.

Therefore, we value and are ashamed to value ourselves, are hard-boiled. We are schooled in quietness and, if one of us takes his measure occasionally, he does so coolly, as if he were examining his fingernails, not his

³⁸Dangling Man, p. 79.

³⁹Dangling Man, p. 79.

soul, frowning at the imperfections he finds as one would at a chip or a bit of dirt...the result is that we learn to be unfeeling toward ourselves and incurious. Who can be the earnest huntsman of himself when he knows he is in turn a quarry? Or nothing so distinctive as quarry, but one of a shoal, driven toward the weirs.⁴⁰

In these lines Saul Bellow has stated the reason for the conflict faced by each of the heroes this paper considers. Joseph is the first. He wants to give himself away, and this meets the approval of his Judeo-Christian world. However, he does not know how because the self he has to give away is of no value in their sight, and they have conditioned him to believe what they say of him is true. At the same time, he sees the need for recognizing the value of the self in this twentieth century world where the individual is a part of the crowd being driven to the enclosure. What leaves him dangling, though he has exchanged one form of isolation for another, is his fear of valuing himself too much. What he does not realize is that a choice in favor of oneself must precede any act which places value on another. The Judeo-Christian commandment, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," makes implicit the need for authenticity

⁴⁰Dangling Man, p. 79.

before the world can have any value for a man. Because of his training in values, though he knows something in him is out of balance, he does not discover what it is. In refusing to choose in favor of himself, he remains a dangling man.

CHAPTER II

THE VICTIM

Like Joseph, Bellow's dangling man, Asa Levanthal in The Victim is also being asked by his world to practice self-denial in the Judeo-Christian sense. The book opens with a family request for such a demand. He is asked to help his brother's wife to decide whether or not her younger son needs hospital care. The brother's Italian-Catholic wife and her non-English speaking mother, however, are hysterical and suspicious, respectively, over the prospects of the boy's being entrusted to strangers. The father of the sick child is working in Texas and has telephoned that he cannot come home.

The summer has already brought another demand for self-denial. Mary, Asa's wife, is away caring for her ailing mother. In their apartment Asa is lost without her. In several scenes, Bellow pictures Asa tenderly handling her things. The husband plans weekends carefully in order to avoid long periods alone in the apartment. The postcards from her, the one physical link with her, he accuses Allbee, the gentile who moves in with him, of stealing.

Unlike Joseph, however, Asa decides to accept

some of the responsibility placed upon him by his brother's family and his wife. Why he does is of interest here. Jews have been known, throughout history, to give more than lip service to laws concerning family responsibility. Of the modern Jew Maxwell Geismar claims, "The element of almost stifling domestic piety is all that thus remains of their cultural heritage."⁴¹

Asa subscribes to the same law of domestic piety that has made Mary practice filial devotion toward her mother. He lets Mary leave New York because he knows that it is the right thing to do. By the same token, he aids his sister-in-law, though he hesitates because he feels it is his brother's responsibility as father to see to the child's care. As the Jew must raise up seed of his brother's, so must an uncle take the place of the father.

However, Asa's misery is not assuaged by self-denial motivated by guilt. He simply lives within his misery out of a sense of obligation. He is practicing conformity to a pattern of conduct as old

⁴¹Maxwell Geismar, American Moderns: From Rebellion to Conformity (New York, 1958), p. 214.

as his national origin. Fromm's idea of a man's avoiding separateness by conformity is quite evident in Asa's life, when the book opens. He sees that alienation from his wife and family will be the result if he does not conform. First, Max, after all, is his brother. He remembers that Mary, earlier having broken their engagement because of an affair with a married man, needs to know he understands as a forgiving husband.

Unlike Asa, Joseph had remained free of any involvement by avoiding family responsibilities. Asa does not desire Joseph's freedom that complete denial of responsibility brings. It brings with it Fromm's separateness. He wants to be a good brother, uncle, and husband because he needs to be involved. These titles he robs himself of, however, because he fears involvement.

How does Bellow reveal this fear? As a brother, Asa hesitates to recommend the hospital for the sick nephew. He supposes that he will receive the blame for his death, should it happen. As an uncle, he suspects the sick boy's older brother of only pretending to have a good time on a Saturday outing with his uncle. He never can really tell. As a

husband, he attempts to be content without Mary, even trying to keep the apartment as she left it. In all three encounters at attempting to be himself, he is a failure. Guilt is not motive enough for self-denial.

Against this background of lesser demands is Bellow's entrance of Allbee. A gentile, Allbee comes to Asa for compensation of a job loss, for which he blames Asa. It seems that Asa has behaved unwisely before Allbee's former employer, after Allbee had recommended Asa to him. The relationship between Allbee and his employer, already a strained one, is severed when Allbee is fired, supposedly for recommending such a man as Asa. The employer suspects that Allbee had sent Asa to harass him. Against Asa's protests, mutual friends verify the likelihood of the employer's having fired Allbee for that reason.

How does one explain, though, Asa's allowing Allbee to make demands upon him? After all, Allbee is a gentile; the Jews need not have anything to do with the goyim. Geoffrey Rans, in reviewing the novels of Saul Bellow, stated that Asa is in a state of suspension like Joseph, with the summer in New York and his wife and brother gone. "At this point,

then, when Allbee appears, Asa sustains no very profound connection with life."⁴² Rans declares further that Asa must see Allbee as a human being,⁴³ but that Asa refuses to see him that way.

It is the demands Allbee makes upon Levanthal that really reveal why he fears involvement. These involvements tell him too much about himself! He finds almost harder to face than the possibility of alienation this confrontation with himself that acceptance of Allbee imposes upon him. He desires to be reconciled to his world, but hates the prospect of the existential search for reconciliation. As the editors of The Existential Imagination state in describing the burden upon a man who operates only in terms of his own consciousness, his own existence:

The burden upon man is immense. Whereas once he could turn without and find props from familiar objects, now, he must seek within, in unfamiliar, unexplored territory. Accordingly, the true hero of our time is the man who can accept absolute responsibility...⁴⁴

⁴²Geoffrey Rans, "The Novels of Saul Bellow," Review English Literature, IV, iv (1963), p. 23.

⁴³Geoffrey Rans, p. 20.

⁴⁴Frederick R. Karl and Leo Hamalian, The Existential Imagination (Greenwich, Connecticut, 1963), p. 11.

Bellow's victim of circumstances in this book can not fully face his existential responsibility. Bellow makes this plain in the Allbee-Asa relationship. Asa refuses to have anything to do with Allbee at first, and then only superficially accepts his arguments for his part in Allbee's failure. The reason Asa refuses Allbee's arguments is that Allbee is Asa's alter-ego.⁴⁵ If he confronts Allbee, he must confront himself. If he accepts Allbee's arguments for his failures as being superficial and unrealistic, he, too, must admit he had been rationalizing about his own failures. The price of reconciliation by assumption of responsibility for others is sometimes self-recognition. Joseph never knows himself. Asa Levanthal only begins to in this second book by Bellow, and Bellow has him see himself in Allbee.

It is what Asa does not want to confront about himself that makes him so belligerent toward Allbee. He hates Allbee's rationalization about the reasons for his present state. Allbee assumes no personal responsibility for his present condition, but then

⁴⁵"Portrait," Time, L (December 1, 1947), p. 112.

neither does Levanthal. Both consider themselves victims of circumstances. In the demands made upon him by his brother, his wife, and Allbee, Bellow reveals Asa's rationalizations.

Though his problem with his brother's family is not caused by his brother's absence, Asa supposes that it is. And though he can say all he wants to about how his brother is failing in his responsibility toward his family, the fact remains that the sister-in-law called him. The gentilic attitude toward him held by them, especially by the child's grandmother, makes him feel inferior, but he does not want to admit it. Though rationalizing his suspicions, he acts with superiority toward them and alienates the very family he is trying so hard to help.

The second demand, the one Mary's absence is making upon him, he rationalizes about, too. He pretends to be in perfect accord with her feeling of duty toward her mother. Guilt over his selfishness seizes him at every normal desire to have her with him. In encounter after encounter with her presence in absentia, he pretends independence. One of the tenderest acts in the book is the movement he makes with her letter when he pretends to be covering a

cough and kisses the envelope as it touches his lips. He is absent-minded, short-tempered--in short, only half himself without her, but he will not assume the husband's responsibility of being only half himself without the other. It is too strange an emotion, this lostness without her. He refuses to accept himself in that role and, in so doing, accepts the responsibility of her absence in only a superficial way, again refusing to see things as they are.

But it is the responsibility for Allbee's job loss that Asa resists the most. He refuses to accept as an equal a man who blames his condition entirely on outside circumstances. Such an acceptance would have to be followed by the truth that he, too, is blaming his circumstances for his own unhappy existence. He hates Allbee's rationalizations because they sound strangely familiar.

For example, Asa despises Allbee's dependence upon ancestral background as a reason for failure in New York. To Allbee New York is "...A very Jewish city..."⁴⁶ Blaming his ethnic origins for some of his problems, Allbee is again practicing

⁴⁶Saul Bellow, The Victim (New York, 1965), p. 70.

just what Asa does in his Jewishness. Asa does not want to see such rationalizing in Allbee because Asa, the Jew, rationalizes too. Even though Allbee refutes any claim to much ancestral honor, even what he possesses has no place, says he, in this "Jewish city." Allbee says to Asa:

You know, I'm from an old New England family. As far as honor's concerned, I'm not keeping up standards very well, I admit. Still, if I was born with my full share of it, in New York I'd have an even worse handicap. Oh, boy!--New York. Honor sure got started before New York did. You won't see it at night, hereabouts, in letters of fire up in the sky. You'll see other words. Such things just get swallowed up in these conditions--modern life. So I'm lucky I didn't inherit more of a sense of it. I'd be competing with Don Quixote. Now with you it's different, altogether. You're right at home in this, like those what-do-you-call-'em that live in the flames--salamanders. If somebody hurts you, you hit back in any way and anything goes. That's how it is here. It's rugged. And I can appreciate it. Of course, the kind of honor I'm familiar with doesn't allow that.⁴⁷

Asa uses this Jewish ancestry as a means of blaming others for his own condition. Once when leaving the office early to visit the sick boy, Asa overhears Mr. Beard, his employer, say, "Takes unfair advantage...like the rest of his brethren. I've never

⁴⁷The Victim, p. 128.

known one who wouldn't. Always please themselves first. Why didn't he offer to come back later, at least."⁴⁸ Of the boy's death, Beard takes no notice. He doesn't even give his condolences, thinks Levanthal.

Even among his more liberal fellow Jews, Asa is sensitive about his ethnic origin. In the episode with Schlossberg about Disraeli, Asa answers derogatorily when asked why he "...has it in for Disraeli."

"I don't have it in for him. But he wanted to lead England. In spite of the fact that he was a Jew, not because he cared about empires so much. People laughed at his poetic silk clothes, so he put on black; and they laughed at his books, so he showed them. He got into politics and became the prime minister. He did it all on nerve.
 "Oh, come on," Harkavy said.
 "On nerve," Levanthal insisted. "That's great, I'll give you that. But I don't admire it. It's all right to overcome a weakness, but it depends how and it depends what you call a weakness...Julius Caesar was sick with epilepsy. He learned to ride with his hands behind his back and slept on the bare ground like a common soldier. What was the reason? His disease. Why should we admire people like that? Things that are life and death to others are only a test to them. What's the good of such greatness?"⁴⁹

To accept Allbee's excuse for failure and try to help him get a job because Asa is a Jew "who knows

⁴⁸The Victim, p. 13.

⁴⁹The Victim, pp. 118-119.

about these things" (in the words of Allbee), Asa will have to face a problem in his own existence--his feeling of superiority. In this confrontation lies a partial answer to the search for a balance between self-denial and selfhood. By aiding Allbee, he can help himself. This sympathy for another, an honest attempt at accepting him as he is, gives Asa a chance to find some compatibility between responsibility to others and that for himself because a reconciliation with Allbee will help him see himself. The balance between self-denial and selfhood is to be found, then, in the ethical principle of personal responsibility being best carried out in terms of doing for others. This is not meant, by any means, to couch Asa's solution to the problem of being either a dangling man or a victim, in terms of the Christian golden rule. Yet the principle that an involvement with others is a means of achieving selfhood is Bellow's theme. As Frederick J. Hoffman states:

...the novel's (The Victim) major concern is to explore the real nature of one man's moral involvement with an obligation to another... The meaning of the facts is Bellow's enduring concern: Is there a moral debt to be paid, and by what means can it be paid? More than that, when is the debt actually discharged?⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Frederick J. Hoffman, The Modern Novel in America (Chicago, 1956), p. 207.

Allbee's problem of New England honor becomes Asa's problem of Judeo-Christian responsibility. Each man is less than the ideal in his dealings with others, but each man is that way because of his fear of loss. Each thinks ironically that it is the other who has nothing to lose. Allbee is so persistent that Asa begins to think he can lose nothing by assuming some of the responsibility for Allbee's job loss. He is convinced that he might have been one of the causes for his layoff. So Bellow begins the victim's hedging movement toward reconciliation. He does so by getting him to assume some responsibility. Joseph in Dangling Man assumed none. He avoided the victim's position, but in so doing, he alienated the world from him. Asa never has wanted that much freedom.

Asa draws the line, though, in the confrontation with the similarity between the Jew's and the gentile's rationalization about their two wives. Both men have "lost" their wives; the helplessness of Asa with Mary gone is Allbee's condition, too. Allbee keeps forcing Asa to see this similarity with his remarks about what it would be like if Mary died. Asa screams at him to shut up. Again, he refuses to admit that

Allbee might have a reason to feel lost, as Asa does, when he thinks what he would be like without Mary. He has only to remember what it is like this hot summer without her. Asa hurts Allbee by accusing him of using his dead wife as an excuse to drink, to be worthless.

In the scene with the prostitute, Bellow is at his best in revealing the ludicrousness of Allbee's position as victim. Afterwards, Asa even laughs at the picture he remembers of Allbee's struggle to find her stockings. He sympathizes with the naked woman being caught in the room between the two men's vision. Yet, he will not allow Allbee to use his wife's death as an excuse for his behavior because Asa cannot face recognition for his own condition. So, he chooses again to see himself only superficially. Making allowances for Allbee would give him answers to himself, but, in giving up this chance for self-recognition, he loses another opportunity to understand a possible relationship between self-denial and selfhood.

Real self-denial for his brother and family could give him some answers about himself also. Twice, once at the funeral home and once in his

apartment, he identifies with Max by feeling sympathy for a father's sorrow. He learns at the funeral home that Max had walked into the boy's hospital room only to find the sheet pulled over his head. He was too late. When Max enters Asa's apartment, it strikes Asa that Max "...is behaving as if he were about to enter a stranger's house."⁵¹ Alienation from his brother is made plain to Asa only after his brother has refused real aid during the family crisis. It makes an impression on him as his treatment of Max in the rest of the chapter reveals. He finally finds some reconciliation with Max. In their final conversation together, Bellow suggests this reconciliation. Asa admits to his brother that he was "...mistaken about Elena, (Max's wife), and the old lady, too." He excuses himself to Max, "Oh, well, you caught me in a bad mood the other night, Max. I'm not always like that. I hope I didn't hurt your feelings."⁵²

Max responds to Asa. They plan a visit together, when Mary, whose name Max cannot remember, comes home.

⁵¹The Victim, p. 205.

⁵²The Victim, p. 242.

Bellow then has Asa openly admit for the first time, "I guess I really don't know where I'm at when she's away."⁵³ Now they are brothers. Max has always felt this way about his wife, but he has never before been able to talk to his brother about his feelings because Max has felt Asa did not share these same feelings toward Mary. It is just that, for the first time, Asa admits to himself that he, too, needs someone. He is reconciled to Max, then, by an act of sharing a mutual need, an act of self-denial for Asa.

He also achieves some reconciliation with Mary. When he asks pleadingly on the phone, not veiling his true feelings, "Can you come soon?" she replies, 'Tomorrow', with an eagerness that astonished him."⁵⁴ Bellow confirms this reconciliation by having Mary conceive Asa's child, their first.

In this novel it is in Asa's partial reconciliation with Allbee that Bellow admits to his hero's finding only some degree of balance between self-denial and selfhood. The balance is least achieved in Asa's choice to help

⁵³The Victim, p. 243.

⁵⁴The Victim, p. 243.

Allbee, his alter-ego. As he admits this kinship and comes to Allbee's aid, he acknowledges a concern for his world, but he does not yet love it.

Asa agrees to accept some responsibility for his world by accepting, if only partially, his own failure as a man. In admitting that he and Allbee are both what they are by a choice to rationalize, Asa begins the move toward some kind of existential acceptance of existence. He chooses to come to the aid of those who make demands upon him. He sees, to some degree, that this choice to aid another is really an authentic choice because in it he finds some sense of selfhood. Since he chooses to come to the aid of others, not because of guilt, but because of concern, he is in control of his own sacrifice. The world had forced upon him no self-denial. He has chosen a route to selfhood--the route to commitment. In an authentic choice to deny himself for another, he finds some reconciliation with his world.

Finally, then Bellow's "victim" becomes a little more reconciled to his world than his dangling man, Joseph, in the previous novel. The reconciliation is not complete. Neither is the discovery that there is possibility for a balance between man's need to keep

himself and the responsibility made upon him by his environment to be concerned about his world. Asa Levanthal rejected Allbee at the beginning of the novel, just as Joseph rejected his "Spirit of Alternatives." However, Bellow shows a difference in the two men's relation to their world by placing them in dissimilar situations at the end of each story.

At the end of Dangling Man, Joseph accepts the alternative position, that of "supervision of the spirit." He sees as alternatives only these: a complete allegiance to selfhood, or a complete submission to demands for self-denial. Only ever so slightly does he see that the balance between the two can give him the identity he so wants. Never does Bellow have him admit that self-denial is the only means of escaping alienation from his world, and the only means of reconciling himself to his world. He accepts little responsibility for his dangling position, and simply allows the Spirit of Alternatives to wear him down so that he surrenders the self to an unauthentic world.

In the final scene in The Victim, at the theatre with Mary, where Asa runs into Allbee, now the gigolo

of some former successful movie star, Asa, too, still has doubts about the value of self-denial. He sees Allbee finely dressed, but as he comes nearer, Asa notices, "...an unhealthy look...the decay of something that had gone into his appearance of well-being, something intimate."⁵⁵ He comes closest to an understanding of himself and the position he was once in when Allbee first admits he did not have Asa in mind when he attempted suicide. When Asa laughs, Allbee confesses, "I must have been demented. When you turn against yourself, nobody else means anything to you either."⁵⁶

Bellow does not have Asa consciously realize that his alter-ego has again spoken. Nonetheless, that very turning against himself was Asa's position at the beginning of the book, this superficial way of looking at things, this attempt at rationalizing. In turning against himself, a self full of guilty resentment, Asa could care for no one either. At the end of this novel, Bellow's hero, however, has come nearer to the importance of self-denial as a

⁵⁵The Victim, p. 254.

⁵⁶The Victim, p. 255.

means to selfhood, though Bellow does not yet allow Asa the completely conscious answer to his question to Allbee about "...who runs things."⁵⁷

Asa Levantall does hear Allbee say he is "...only a passenger....,"⁵⁸ another name for a dangling man. While Allbee, then, still wants no involvement, Asa through involvement has now only to find out that he "runs things" by choosing to become involved with others, and, further, to find out that even though involvement may mean self-denial, it is the path to selfhood.

Bellow has Asa hear "...Mary's voice at his back"⁵⁹ in place of Allbee's answer.

The choice not to pursue Allbee as he springs "up the stairs,"⁶⁰ but to go with Mary into the darkened theatre, is the last choice the Bellovian character in this book makes. The choice is symbolic of the hero's conscious need for self-denial to benefit himself. He does not yet know that he who chooses to love himself is the one who "runs things." Bellow writes another book to say that.

⁵⁷The Victim, p. 256.

⁵⁸The Victim, p. 255.

⁵⁹The Victim, p. 255.

⁶⁰The Victim, p. 256.

CHAPTER III

HENDERSON THE RAIN KING

The hero of Henderson the Rain King has everything a Gentile upper middle class American could want. He is a World War II purple heart veteran. His father has left him three million dollars. His second wife he loves and she him. Yet, a voice within him keeps crying out, "I want. I want."

He attempts at fifty-five to ignore the voice by pretending he does not want a thing. He learns to play his dead father's violin in order to serenade the father's spirit. To satisfy his wife, Lily, he allows her to have her portrait painted, though he thinks it is ridiculous, her wanting to be on the front hall wall with the other Hendersons. He is kind to a daughter Ricey when she brings a strange baby home from boarding school. Even the pigs he keeps on the estate Henderson looks after in a kind, fatherly way. Some of them even have names, and he threatens his wife with serious consequences if she should ever run over one of them. He pretends, then, that the way to ignore the voice is to reach out for others and, in reaching out, to ignore the self from which the voice speaks.

None of these schemes work. All the while he is playing the violin to his father's spirit, he is remembering how his father wept over his brother's one rash act--a car wreck--that killed him. And with that memory comes the second one: his father had wished it had been Henderson in the crash; or so Henderson believes. He complains constantly about Lily's neglect of the house in order to sit for her portrait. He threatens not to let her hang the painting. Ricey has to return the baby. Even the pigs are objects of his wrath when the voice "I want" is speaking.

No amount of altruism for people or pigs brings him any peace from the inner voice. Mr. Bellow openly names a basic problem of being in presenting the hero at the beginning of this book with the problem from which both the dangling man and the victim suffer--the problem of finding a balance between self-denial and selfhood. His latest hero, though, has lived longer. He has done some things which neither Joseph nor Asa either cared or dared to do. He divorces his first wife, Frances, because she refused to see this dilemma of his. She laughs at his desire to enroll in medical school, and, as

Henderson puts it:

With Frances the case was hopeless. Only once after I came back from the Army did anything of a personal nature take place between us, and after that it was no soap, so I let her be, more or less. Except that one morning in the kitchen we had a conversation that set us apart for good and all. Just a few words. They went like this: "And what would you like to do now?" (I was losing interest in the farm.) "I wonder," I said, "if it's too late for me to become a doctor--if I could enter medical school." Frances...laughed at me... (and) after Frances laughed at my dream of a medical career I never discussed another thing with her.⁶¹

Henderson has attempted to live the life of a recognized individualist by rebelling against all standards of proper conduct. Anyone else but a Henderson would not have been allowed to raise hogs on an estate in this county. He is forever being brought home by the local police on charges of drunkenness and disturbing the peace. His threats to commit suicide are infantile attempts to prove Lily's love. It seems that her father committed suicide and that she goes into hysterics and begs her husband not to kill himself when he goes for his pistol. In one of the funniest scenes in the book Henderson comes downstairs in his bathrobe during one

⁶¹Saul Bellow, Henderson the Rain King (New York, 1963), pp. 14-15.

of Lily's tea parties and shakes hands with each guest repeating, "I am Henderson. How do you do." Then he goes up to his wife and says the same thing. He comments later why he did it,

No, I treated her like a stranger before the guests because I didn't like to see her behave and carry on like the lady of the house, because I, the sole heir of this famous name and estate, am a bum, and she is not a lady but merely my wife--merely my wife.⁶²

Why does he call himself a bum? A bum is one who sponges off of others. Henderson sponges his existence off others. He wants his wife to clean up and be a lady while he remains a bum. He wants his son Edward to marry well and settle down when Henderson has done neither. He thinks what he wants, then, is to identify with someone else's existence. He even tries to communicate with his dead father to put some meaning into his life. Nothing helps, not even his identifying with the pigs by dressing and acting like one.

Anyway, I was a pig man. And as the prophet Daniel warned King Nebuchadnezzar, "They shall drive thee from among men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field."⁶³

Henderson searches elsewhere for a remedy for

⁶²Henderson the Rain King, p. 8.

⁶³Henderson the Rain King, p. 21.

his condition. He tries to inflict his anger on inanimate things.

I tried with all my heart, chopping wood, lifting, plowing, laying cement blocks, pouring concrete, and cooking mash for the pigs. On my own place, stripped to the waist like a convict, I broke stones with a sledgehammer. Rude begets rude, and blows, blows; at least in my case; it not only begot but it increased. Wrath increased with wrath. So what do you do with yourself? More than three million bucks. After taxes, after alimony and all expenses I still have one hundred and ten thousand dollars in income absolutely clear. What do I need it for, a soldierly character like me? Taxwise, even the pigs were profitable. I couldn't lose money. But they were killed and they were eaten. They made ham and gloves and gelatin and fertilizer. What did I make? Why, I made a sort of trophy, I suppose. A man like me may become something like a trophy. Washed, clean, and dressed in expensive garments. Under the roof is insulation; on the windows thermopane, on the floors carpeting; and on the carpets furniture, and on the furniture covers, and on the cloth covers plastic covers, and wall paper drapes. All is swept and garnished. And who is in the midst of this? Who is sitting there? Man! That's who it is, man!⁶⁴

Henderson cannot find answers in work anymore than he can find his answers in demanding others live the life he refuses to live. He is a man, and, at the same time, he is not a man because of the voice

⁶⁴Henderson the Rain King, p. 23.

that cries, "I want. I want. It happened every afternoon."⁶⁵

No psychologist need be quoted here to substantiate that every man has basic human desires. Henderson has one, too, but he cannot find out what it is. It is not enough to want. He must set his desires upon an object, but for him nothing satisfies because Mr. Bellow's hero is doing, not being.⁶⁶

Joseph, Bellow's first hero, does nothing. He allows the Spirit of Alternatives to take him where there is regimentation and no responsibility for selfhood. Asa, the victim, Mr. Bellow's second hero, catches a glimpse of himself in the shirking of responsibility practiced by his alter-ego, Allbee. Near the end of the book Asa comes into some realization of selfhood through acts of self-denial self-chosen.

Henderson, however, is seeing himself more realistically than either of the other two heroes. He admits to a desire for something. He just does not know it is for his own selfhood. So, he sets

⁶⁵Henderson the Rain King, p. 23.

⁶⁶Geoffrey Rans, p. 29.

out to find answers, and, as he affirms, Africa, the cradle of civilization, seemed like a good place to start.

It becomes necessary at this point to declare that Henderson the Rain King is certainly one of Mr. Bellow's serious attempts to say something about the human condition. In the New York Times Book Review just several days before the publication of Henderson the Rain King, Saul Bellow published an article, "Deep Dark Readers of the World, Beware!", in which he warned against the academic pursuit of symbols instead of the simple reading of a given novel. Because the novel's publication followed so closely upon the heels of the article, Mr. Bellow's book has been reviewed several times in the light of the article's thesis. That is to say, reviewers have attempted to label Henderson the Rain King a spoof planned to catch symbol hunters at their own game. This writer addressed an inquiry to Mr. Bellow at the University of Chicago in October, 1966, to ask him if this were true of Henderson the Rain King. The reply reads in part,

Strictly between us Henderson is not at all a spoof. It's true that I wrote my little squib on the excesses of interpretation before the book appeared to warn the public

against perverse practices. I thought I was being very clever but my strategem turned out to be quite stupid for I confused everyone.⁶⁷

All this has been said simply to satisfy anyone's criticism of this interpretation of Bellow's hero in Africa, and of his findings there. Henderson is a Ulyssean hero, and his real story is that of his search for selfhood in Africa.

His travel through the hot African terrain, his arrival at the first village and his subsequent failure there and the climaxing incident among the Wariri are all made to seem like Biblical allusions. Mr. Bellow has Henderson attempt to find his selfhood in helping others as those great Jewish heroes of old did, by denying the self.

Approaching the first village, the Arnewi, he burns a bush with his cigarette lighter to get the children to gather around him. In the ensuing episode with the frogs, Henderson approaches the Biblical hero of savior from plagues. Only he bungles the job. He wants so much to get these people to love him that he can only see the need for the frogs' deaths. In his excitement over destroying the frogs,

⁶⁷See Appendix p. 106 for letter in its entirety.

Henderson does not consider the possibility that a bomb made from gunpowder and a flashlight cylinder might blow up the dam also. In other words, Henderson is so desirous of these people's favor that he fails to even take into consideration the probability that the dam might break under the force of the explosion. It does.

Henderson goes all the way, so to speak, to win this tribe's affection. He holds the bomb with lighted fuse until the flame on the shoe string has disappeared inside the cylinder. Only at the last minute does he release the bomb and run for cover. In a passage before relating his leavetaking for Africa, Henderson tells of a desire to "burst the spirit's sleep."⁶⁸ The death wish sits heavily on him. After the dam breaks, he begs the chief Itelo of the Arnewi tribe to stab him for his mistake. Earlier he threatens suicide. All of this preoccupation with death is a result of his feeling of unworthiness, a guilt over his seeming inability to be. Bellow has Henderson portray the ultimate archetype of Judeo-Christian self-denial--a guilty

⁶⁸Henderson the Rain King, p. 61.

man who is preoccupied with himself.

So poor Henderson seeks death after each mistake. All the while, however, he is seeking himself through denying himself so that others will love him. If they love him, perhaps he can think of himself as not being so terrible after all. This character is much more complex than Bellow's dangling man and still yet more complex than the victim. He does not even know if he wants to live or not. The other two, in search of selfhood, refused to aid others, Asa only later; but Henderson vacillates between personal survival and personal self-sacrifice until he does not know which Henderson he is.

The one thing that keeps him going is the voice crying, "I want. I want." That is the only reality Henderson knows. Yet he proclaims a love for reality even while admitting to dwelling outside of its environs. He is always becoming, he says. He comes close to finding a reason for his never being, only becoming, when he presses his face into the belly of the old queen of the Arnewi, Willatale. She tells him,

"Grun-tu-molani...you want to live."⁶⁹ He replies, "Yes, yes, yes! Molani. Me Molani.

⁶⁹Henderson the Rain King, p. 76.

She see that? God will reward her, tell her, for saying it to me. I'll reward her myself. I'll annihilate and blast those frogs clear out of that cistern, sky-high, they'll wish they had never come down from the mountains to bother you. Not only I molani for myself, but for everybody. I could not bear how sad things have become in the world and so I set out because of this molani. Grun-tu-molani, old lady--old queen. Grun-tu-molani, everybody!"⁷⁰

The contradiction in Henderson, then, is the contradiction of two desires: the desire for death and the desire for life, each one placed on him by the two viewpoints about man that the Christian centuries have fostered. On the one hand, man is a depraved creature, worthy only of death. Henderson believes he is depraved. That is why he sees himself as King Nebuchadnezzar, driven from among men and dwelling with the beasts of the field.⁷¹ That is why he is so comforted by the lines he runs upon in one of the books in his father's library, and searches vainly to find again. "The forgiveness of sins is perpetual and righteousness first is not required."⁷² He needs, as a man steeped in the Judeo-Christian

⁷⁰Henderson the Rain King, p. 76.

⁷¹Henderson the Rain King, p. 21.

⁷²Henderson the Rain King, p. 5.

philosophy of man's unworthiness, to feel forgiven.

On the other hand, he does not feel forgiven because he keeps listening to the voice saying, "I want. I want." He goes to Africa, not to purge himself from guilt, but because of the voice. He rejoices over grun-tu-molani, not because of his feeling of depravity, but because he wants to live. Of all of Bellow's heroes, he is the one most torn between the desire for the extreme Judeo-Christian self-denial by death and the existential need for selfhood. His own death will satisfy his guilt. His exertion of personal self will quiet the voice. What a need for balance between this guilt and this desire to live lies within this man!

Bellow has drawn a portrait so real that the reader can struggle with Henderson's attempts at reconciliation as though they were his own. His hero loves existence almost more than any other character in modern fiction. The author's constant dwelling upon Henderson's physique supports this idea of Henderson's love for life. His entire body exudes longing for it. No physical experience is too difficult for him if it holds the possibility of personal existence. If he can just be somebody.

If he can just be used by somebody. He does not know what will both quiet the voice and free him of his guilt. He has no idea that they are the same need in one and that the answer lies in finding some balance between the two desires. King Dahfu of the Wariri provides that answer for Henderson.

Henderson leaves the Arnewi with Ramilayu wanting to return to civilization. Bellow has Henderson refuse and press on a ten days' march to a tribe in the hills above the Arnewi. Henderson must have answers. He feels it is now or never for him. His experiences with King Dahfu give him the answer he has come for.

First, though, his desire to be admired and loved causes him once more to go blindly into a commitment without investigating its consequences. He moves the goddess Mummah, a great physical feat--he thinks--and becomes the Sungu--the Rain King. On a wager with the King, Henderson moves the statue that another man has seemingly attempted to move. It turns out later that the man only attempted to move the goddess because he knows consequences Henderson is ignorant of and King Dahfu fails to mention. The King does gently try to get Henderson

to remain in the stands, but Henderson must be in the arena doing. If he cannot have existence, at least he can help others to have it and perhaps find some identification among them by his doing for them. After moving the statue its required twenty feet, he recalls how he felt,

I stood still. There beside Mummah in her new situation I myself was filled with happiness. I was so gladdened by what I had done that my whole body was filled with soft heat, with soft and sacred light. The sensations of illness I had experienced since morning were all converted into their opposites. These same unhappy feelings were changed into warmth and personal luxury. You know, this kind of thing has happened to me before. I have had a bad headache change into a pain in the gums which is nothing but the signal of approaching beauty. I have known this, then, to pass down from the gums and appear again in my breast as a throb of pleasure. I have also known a stomach complaint to melt from my belly and turn into a delightful heat and go down into the genitals. This is the way I am. And so my fever was transformed into jubilation. My spirit was awake and it welcomed life anew. Damn the whole thing! Life anew! I was still alive and kicking and I had the old grun-tu-molani.⁷³

Henderson becomes the rain king, but in the threatening moment afterward he feels that they will kill him. In a dialogue in his mind between him and the people back home who will hear of his death he

⁷³Henderson the Rain King, p. 171.

names the desire uppermost in his mind.

"Listen, you guys, my great excess was I wanted to live. Maybe I did treat everything in the world as though it was a medicine--okay! What's the matter with you guys? Don't you understand anything? Don't you believe in regeneration? You think a fellow is just supposed to go down the drain?"⁷⁴

Instead of killing him they want him to perform the rites of the rain king. King Dahfu, in his wisdom, sees that Henderson has not felt any responsibility for his position. And he mockingly recalls Henderson's envy of the King's position,

"You do not have a solitary item to fear," said Dahfu. "It is innocuous. No, no," said this strange prince of Africa, "they require your attendance to cleanse ponds and wells. They say you were sent for this purpose. Ha, ha, Mr. Henderson, you indicated earlier it was enviable to be in the bosom of the people. But that is where you are now, too."⁷⁵

The rites of the rain king include whipping the gods in the arena. Mr. Bellow's scene of frenzy, of delirium, of mad abandon reminds the modern reader of a debauched civilization blaming their gods for the situation, beating their gods into granting their requests. Henderson sees the act as the ultimate

⁷⁴Henderson the Rain King, p. 174.

⁷⁵Henderson the Rain King, pp. 174-175.

evil. To force good from evil, to raise a hand against sources, to presume upon one's existence by battering at the very door of heaven Henderson cannot stand.

"Stop!" I yelled. "Quit it! What's the matter? Are you crazy? It would have been different, perhaps, if this had been a token whipping and the gods were merely touched with the thick leather straps. But great violence was loosed on these figures, so that the smaller ones rocked as they were beaten while the bigger without any change of face bore it defenseless. Those children of darkness, the tribe, rose and screamed like gulls on stormy water. And then I did fall to the ground. Naked, I threw myself down, roaring, "No, no, no!" But Tatu grasped me by the arm and with an effort raised me to my knees. So that, on my knees, I was pulled forward into this crawling on the ground. My hand, which had the whip still in it, was lifted once or twice and brought down so that against my will I was made to perform the duty of the rain king. "Oh, I can't do this. You'll never make me," I was saying. "Oh, batter me and kill me. Run a spit and bake me over the fire." I tried to hide against the earth and in this posture was struck on the back of the head with a whip and afterward on the face as well, as the women were swinging in all directions now and struck one another as well as me and the gods. Caught up in this madness, I fended off blows from my position on my knees, for it seemed to me that I was fighting for my life, and I yelled. Until a thunder clap was heard."⁷⁶

Henderson fails to learn from this experience his lessons about selfhood. First, a man cannot live irresponsibly and find satisfaction. It is the same

⁷⁶Henderson the Rain King, p. 178.

lesson Joseph would not learn. Absolute freedom to act as one chooses grants no responsibility for the lives of others. However, the moment a man acts responsibly toward others, as Henderson does in moving Mummah, he becomes responsible for his actions regardless of the reactions of others. He further fails to learn that responsible action on his part does not guarantee responsible action on the part of others. Finally, he does not see that responsible action results from a perfect love for others, not achieved without a perfect love of self.

King Dahfu teaches him these lessons, and it is through these revelations that Henderson learns that the path to selfhood is a personal choice in favor of self which carries with it some self-denial.

King Dahfu had been allowed to live in Milindi, a civilized town, to study the ways of man. He had traveled as a merchant seaman and learned how others live outside the tribe. For nine years his Uncle Horko had waited for him to finish his education so that he could return to his father's throne. "Maybe you were tempted not to come back?"⁷⁷ asks Henderson. The King's answer is the answer of a man responsible

⁷⁷Henderson the Rain King, p. 185.

for himself. "His (father's) time came, he died, and I was king. I had to recover the lion."⁷⁸

The lion becomes the central symbol of this book. It is the symbol of responsible action in the situation. It is, in addition, the symbol of freedom of choice within the bounds of existence.

Lying within the king's answer to Henderson's-- Joseph's, yea, Asa's--dilemma of whether to escape responsibility and take freedom with alienation or to accept responsibility and lose freedom, is the answer Henderson is looking for. The lessons with the lion lead him to see a way out of his dilemma.

The first lesson, that man cannot live irresponsibly and find satisfaction, he learns through the suffering the lion causes by walking between his legs so closely that he withdraws his genitals into his belly. Gradually Henderson begins to accept the position of suffering King Dahfu offers him each time he invites him into the lion's den. It is agony to go down into the dark dungeon under the palace proper and be locked in with the lion. The suffering would be unbearable except for the loveliness

⁷⁸Henderson the Rain King, p. 185.

of the king working with the lion. He now feels responsible for the king. He does not mind all of this personal suffering nearly so much as the possibility of Dafhu's execution, should he continue to keep the lioness, Atti, thought to be a sorceress, in the palace. He has chosen to deny himself for the sake of the king. The point is that he dare not do otherwise. The king, he knows, holds the key to selfhood. Henderson has never seen anyone with such a strong gift of life.

Like all people who have a strong gift of life, he gave off almost an extra shadow I swear. It was a smoky something, a charge. I used to notice it sometimes with Lily and was aware of it particularly that day of the storm in Danbury when she misdirected me to the water-filled quarry and then telephoned her mother from bed. She had it noticeably then. It is something brilliant and yet overcast; it is smoky, bluish, trembling, shining like jewel water. It was similar to what I had felt also arising from Willatale on the occasion of kissing her belly. But this King Dahfu was more strongly supplied with it than any person I ever met.⁷⁹

So even though Henderson cannot see how the lion and Dahfu's theories about him and his life with him can satisfy this raving inner voice, he reflects,

"The whole thing is crazy." Thus I reflected. But then I also had to take into account the fact that I have a voice within me repeating,

⁷⁹Henderson the Rain King, p. 185.

I want, raving and demanding, making a chaos, desiring, desiring, and disappointed continually, which drove me forth as beaters drive game."⁸⁰

And again he wrestles with the question, "How shall a man be broken for whom reality has no fixed dwelling!"⁸¹

For the first time--during the hours spent in the lion's den-- Henderson experiences some reality through personal suffering. Then, in a discussion with Dahfu he learns that the suffering he has been going through back home and the mental and physical anguish while in Africa has been a desire to suffer for others. Rhetorically he asks, "You say the soul will die if it can't make somebody else suffer what it suffers?"⁸² The king answers, "For awhile, I am sorry to say it then feels peace and joy."⁸³ This is why the gods had to be beaten, then, says Henderson. And when he remembers how he tried to prevent that very thing, he realized his second lesson: the moment a man

⁸⁰ Henderson the Rain King, pp. 186-187.

⁸¹ Henderson the Rain King, p. 187.

⁸² Henderson the Rain King, p. 187.

⁸³ Henderson the Rain King, p. 187.

acts responsibly toward others, he becomes responsible for his actions, regardless of the reaction of others.

Henderson, then, realizes that he has been too hard on himself.

"...there are some guys who can return good for evil. Even I understand that. Crazy as I am," I said. I began to tremble in all my length and breadth as I realized on which side of the issue I stood, and had stood all the time.⁸⁴

Yes, Henderson has not wanted others to suffer. He has chosen to suffer for others as a responsible action. His Judeo-Christian heritage of guilt, however, has made his natural desire to deny himself for others seem grotesquely out of character for a man as "guilty" as he. Instead of seeing on which side of the issue he has been standing all the time, he had convinced himself that any natural desire to assume responsibility for others was some form of self-righteousness his ugly self could not possibly be capable of. He is excited to know that his actions, though bungling at times, have been to do what King Dahfu says a brave man will do.

"A brave man will try to make the evil stop with him. He shall keep the blow. No man

⁸⁴Henderson the Rain King, p. 190.

shall get it from him, and that is a sublime ambition."⁸⁵

Henderson is affected by these words. "I felt a pang in my gums, where such things register themselves without my will and then I knew how I was affected by him."⁸⁶

Henderson, the doer, the becoming one, not the being one, begins to question how he can return good for evil everytime. Dahfu sees his need to be a doer, and says that everything about Henderson cries out, "Salvation, salvation! What shall I do? What must I do? At once! What will become of me? And so on. That is bad."⁸⁷

Mr. Bellow makes all too clear the problem of Henderson, then. First, he wants to act responsibly. He has lived long enough to know that it is the only way he can find selfhood, though so far he has found none because his acts have been irresponsible ones. That is, he has never considered the consequences of his responsible actions. These consequences are

⁸⁵Henderson the Rain King, p. 190.

⁸⁶Henderson the Rain King, p. 190.

⁸⁷Henderson the Rain King, p. 193.

ignored because of the great need for freedom from guilt. His actions have always been, he has thought, to free himself from guilt. Now, for the first time, he sees that perhaps he has some worth, some nobility.

The king realizes it too. Thus he begins the therapy with the lion. Henderson sees no value in roaring like a lion, walking like a lion, standing on all fours like a lion, thinking lion. He is quite embarrassed. He goes on only out of respect for the king. But the king wishes him to admire the beauty of the lion, her mastery over herself, her choice to be what she is. He tries in every way to get Henderson to quit imitating the lion and become a lion. He instructs Henderson accordingly, "Observe that Atti is all lion. Does not take issue with the inherent. Is one hundred percent within the given."⁸⁸ Then Henderson complains, "If she doesn't try to be human, why should I try to act the lion?" King Dahfu assures him that the transfer can be made. He himself has done it.⁸⁹

It is in the death scene of King Dahfu that

⁸⁸Henderson the Rain King, p. 233.

⁸⁹Henderson the Rain King, p. 233.

Henderson realizes "he has done it." Dahfu must catch a lion reported to be the soul of his father-- a young cub let loose two years before and named for his father, Gmilo. This act will secure his throne; for the people thus far have not acknowledged him king. In fact, they have distrusted his keeping Atti when her ears did not show the mark of the cub Gmilo received before being turned loose. Atti could very well be a sorceress, they believe. With the tribe, especially Buman, the local prophet, standing skeptically aside, Dahfu enters the hopo, a platform from which he will walk a narrow rope, all the while managing a net overhanging on a pulley of ropes. He must drop the net over the lion driven into a caged area directly below.

Henderson tries to dissuade him, but the king in anger stops him from giving any aid. The king must capture the lion without assistance. It is his personal responsibility as king. The rope on the pulley breaks, and the king falls to his death. Henderson in rage tries to help him, but is placed in prison after the dying king tells him that his successor is to be the Sungo--the Rain King!

Henderson escapes this fate, but takes with him the lion cub the Buman was to have released as

Dahfu's soul. Now, the king will be with him to remind him of the final lesson: that responsible action results from a perfect love for others, not achieved without a perfect love of self.

What is this perfect love? King Dahfu has defined it earlier in a discussion in the lion's den when Henderson is so fearful of Atti.

"You are avoiding again, Henderson-Sungu." His eyes were looking at me from under the softly folded velvet brim. "Change does not lie that way. You must form a new habit." "Oh, King, what can I do? My openings are screwed up tight, both back and front. They may go to the other extreme in a minute. My mouth is all dried out, my scalp is wrinkling up, I feel thick and heavy at the back of my head. I may be passing out."

I remember that he looked at me with keen curiosity, as if wondering about these symptoms from a medical standpoint. "All the resistances are putting forth their utmost," was his comment. It didn't seem possible that the black of his face could be exceeded, and yet his hair, visible at the borders of his hat, was blacker. "Well," he said, "we shall let them come out. I am firmly confident in you."

I said weakly, "I'm glad you think so. If I'm not torn to pieces. If I'm not left down here half-eaten."

"Take my assurance. No such eventuality is possible. Now, watch the way she walks. Beautiful? You said it! Furthermore this is uninstructed, specie-beauty. I believe when the fear has subsided you will be capable of admiring her beauty. I think that part of the beauty emotion does result from an overcoming of fear. When the fear yields, a beauty is disclosed in its place. This is also said of

perfect love if I recollect, and it means that ego-emphasis is removed."⁹⁰

This description is that of a man in the throes of a decision. In the wonderful vernacular so like Henderson, Bellow has his hero describe his position. "...my openings are screwed up tight, both back and front. They may go to the other extreme in a minute." What is this choice facing Henderson?

For him, unlike Joseph and Asa, the problem is not a failure to love others. He abounds with this love because he loves life and though he desires it more than any, wishes all to have it. His enormous love of life is a major theme of the book. As pig, however, he cannot make a single contribution to being, his or anyone else's, because such an "ego-centered" person as he sees himself to be is the last thing he can love. His choice, then, finally must be nothing less than a choice in favor of himself. In choosing to be lion rather than pig, Henderson, most nearly of the three heroes, finds a balance between selfhood and self-denial. He does so by authentic action. Henderson has been seeing himself only as selfish, piglike. Choosing

⁹⁰Henderson the Rain King, p. 232.

in favor of himself is an authentic action. This realization opens up for him the means to personal identity. For him, this is a step in the direction of selfhood.

Through active participation in King Dahfu's training program with the lion, though at first he participates as a favor to the king, then as a protector of the king, Henderson begins to visualize the possibilities of lion for him. What happens is that, through authentic action caused by his love for others--in this instance love for the king--Henderson stumbles upon the very key to a balance between self-denial and selfhood. That key is the choice in favor of one's best self.

Finally, he has some slight insight into the meaning of the voice. The voice that drove him to Africa was not crying for objects. It was crying out for authentic action, for commitment of one's own best self. The voice knows what possibilities lie within Henderson and demands that those possibilities be acted upon. As if he is saying to himself after each experience, "No, this is not what I want," Henderson narrows the possibilities down to one, in the confrontation with the lion--the choice in favor of himself.

Henderson chooses to see himself as lion, rather than pig. And he takes a lion cub to remind him of this choice. By participation more authentic than that of either Joseph or Asa, Henderson, at fifty-five, is nearer to finding a balance between the demand of self-denial on the part of the world and the desire for existential selfhood so evident in his great love affair with being. He is more nearly Being-in-the-world than the other two, simply by virtue of his choices, all of which boil down to the choice in favor of one's own being.

He has been thrown off balance by misunderstanding what he saw as his excessive love for others, on the one hand, and his desire for personal identity on the other. It would seem, as the Judeo-Christian world advocates, that he can lose the desire for personal identity only by loving and helping others. Henderson discovers, like Asa, though Asa speaks through his alter-ego, Allbee, that "When you turn against yourself, nobody else means anything to you either."⁹¹ This is the reason Henderson has so much trouble finding his balance. He has never acted in favor of the self he

⁹¹The Victim, p. 255.

loves. His Judeo-Christian training has been too strong. It has fooled him into believing that such a choice is bad. And he sees himself as pig when he even allows the voice, "I want, I want," an audience.

Only his love of life keeps him from stilling the voice. When he finally chooses the one possibility left that will quiet the voice, he just barely sees, as a lion cub might barely see, that the choice in favor of one's self can satisfy the voice because in loving himself, he can now freely love others. He has far greater integration than either Joseph or Asa by this conscious choice. The next step for Bellow's hero is to keep that balance. In the final scene in the book Bellow pictures how Henderson discovers he might do it. He has Henderson on the plane home, with his only baggage the lion cub, entertain a young boy orphaned by the death of his American parents, who had worked for an oil company in Persia. He has been reared by Persian servants, but will now live with grandparents in Nevada. Henderson reacts, as the reader is now prepared for him to, to the chance offered by the stewardess to lighten the boy's melancholy. Henderson gives him his dinner, and the

boy falls asleep in his lap.

This incident incites Henderson to reflect about a time at sixteen when he was working in an amusement park. He had run away from home after his father had railed upon him for not exhibiting more feeling about his brother Dick's death. He remembers an old bear, Smolak, who, too old for anything else, is forced to ride on the roller coaster to amuse the crowds. It was Henderson's job to ride with him, and he now recalls how the bear would cling to him, and he to the bear. "... by a common bond of despair we embraced..."⁹²

Henderson remembers how he used to comfort the bear, and the bear, him. Now this child clings to him as the bear did, and he clings to the child for the same reason--an embrace of despair. Only Henderson is wise enough at fifty-five to know that despair need not be his only position. Like the bear, he was cast off, too, when he was pig, and despair like the bear's was his portion. In choosing lion, he was able to balance the feeling of despair with the feeling of hope. And now, in this embrace

⁹²Henderson the Rain King, p. 299.

with the boy, he feels the sense of balance still.

He concludes, "Once more. Whatever gains I ever made were always due to love and nothing else."⁹³ This love of bear, this love of pig, now is balanced by this love of lion.

Bellow's third hero, then, finds a way to keep this balance in his life when he reflects that his love for others, this bear love, is him; that the love for himself as cowardly inauthentic, his pig love is him, too; but that the desire to love oneself, this love of lion, is also him. This answer is the cause for the "pure happiness"⁹⁴ he feels as he runs over the frozen ground of Newfoundland, during a refueling stop, with the boy in his arms. In choosing lion, in choosing in favor of himself, he has not lost the feeling he had on the roller coaster. He has regained it. He must admit that his identifying with pigs also is part of his existence. But he has regained the authenticity of his earlier years by choosing to love himself.

This, then, is the key to the search for a balance between a struggle for the demand for self-

⁹³Henderson the Rain King, p. 299.

⁹⁴Henderson the Rain King, p. 300.

denial in the Judeo-Christian sense, and a desire for selfhood in the existential sense. A choice to be concerned about others, to love others, includes an authentic choice in favor of one's self. The voice in Henderson is quieted finally by the embrace of the boy, as it has never been quieted even temporarily by his other acts of self-denial. He can love others now not as Smolak and he loved, out of a need to be loved, but because of his authentic choice to love himself as he is.

Bellow would be the last to assure his reader that the human condition allows always a perfect balance even after such a choice. He has Henderson remember that, like the bear, "...he had seen too much of life, and somewhere in his huge head he had worked out that for creatures there is nothing that ever runs unmingled."⁹⁵

⁹⁵Henderson the Rain King, p. 299.

CHAPTER IV

HERZOG

Moses Elkanah Herzog, the hero of Bellow's sixth novel Herzog is the final portrayal of Bellow's theme concerning the struggle for balance between the demand for self-denial and the existential search for selfhood. Much could be said about Bellow's characterization of Herzog. However, this chapter will attempt to show only that Herzog's search for this balance includes a refusal to see himself as he is and still love himself enough to choose himself authentically. This refusal brings him both physical and mental anguish.

In the opening lines of the book Bellow has Herzog say, "If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me."⁹⁶ The bulk of his thoughts and actions recorded in the novel prove this statement to be a rationalization. He does care immensely; so much so that he writes letters of justification to both the living and the dead. The letters are full of fascinating insight, as are many babblings of the

⁹⁶Saul Bellow, Herzog (New York, 1965), p. 7.

insane; and Bellow, with his talent for different approaches to the same theme, uses the letters as the means of exposing his hero's search. The search is the same as Joseph's, Asa's, and Henderson's; only the motif is different. And it is significant to note at this point that the subject of insanity is particularly appropriate a motif for the subject of a struggle for balance.

This struggle is not primarily a psychological one. Rather, it is a story about a man struggling for personal identity in an age of possible human castration. However, Herzog refuses to acknowledge that his present situation is the result of inauthenticity until, in the climactic scenes of the novel, his love for another human being forces him to admit that he has not always acted so as to choose himself authentically.

Finally, then, this book is about the human condition, though much of its action takes place in the mind of a man. It is also about his real struggle to avoid the responsibility of his insane condition by placing the blame for it on someone else. And it is ultimately about a man who takes upon himself the responsibility of loving another human being;

and, in so doing, finds that this love forces upon him a sane look at himself. If he is to love responsibly, he must choose, also, to take the responsibility for what he confronts about himself; that is, he must choose himself authentically.

At the book's outset, Herzog is lying on a sofa in a country home in Massachusetts, a home he has spent his entire inheritance to buy, for a second wife who has left him in favor of his best friend. Bellow has him think, "...he dreaded the depths of feeling he would eventually have to face, when he could no longer call upon his eccentricities for relief."⁹⁷

His principle eccentricities, to his way of thinking, are two: his continual capability with women, though he is forty-seven; and his ability for academic scholarship, though he is the son of an immigrant bootlegger. This man's sexual prowess is as wonderfully portrayed as Bellow's picture of Henderson's love of life. Bellow has Herzog's body and bodily functions a beautiful thing to watch. In the bathroom of Ramona, the woman with whom he

⁹⁷Herzog, p. 19.

is having an affair, Herzog's motions of cleaning up before a night together speak of his marvelous capacity for living. In his own bathroom afterwards, Herzog is the man alive. However, to him this feeling is merely an eccentricity. Thinking this way, he can avoid being man in need of union with woman. It is not good for Herzog to dwell alone, but he refuses to face that need.

He has done that twice before. The first marriage was an orthodox one with a stereotyped wife, Daisy. "As long as Moses was married to Daisy, he had led the perfectly ordinary life of an assistant professor, respected and stable."⁹⁸ The reader hardly remembers his first wife's name. It is the name Madeleine he remembers.

With Madeleine, several years ago, Herzog had made a fresh start in life. He had won her away from the Church--when they met, she had just been converted. With twenty thousand dollars inherited from his charming father, to please his new wife, he quit an academic position which was perfectly respectable and bought a big old house in Ludeyville, Massachusetts. In the peaceful Berkshires where he had friends (the Valentine Gersbachs) it should be easy to write his second volume on the social ideas of the Romantics.⁹⁹

⁹⁸Herzog, p. 13.

⁹⁹Herzog, p. 12.

Introducing both of these comments about his marriage are the words, "The paltriness of these sexual struggles."¹⁰⁰

Though he would like to believe they are paltry, his "insanity" is his refusal to see that he is flesh, as well as intellect. He had done badly in this field of endeavor as a man, and he does not want to remember that Madeleine "...had damaged him sexually and now in this respect he felt most like a convalescent."¹⁰¹ The entire first two-thirds of the novel, with the reader never meeting Madeleine or seeing Herzog approach her, is taken up with the detailed reaction of a man who has been made a fool of simply because of this eccentricity. In conferences with and letters to their psychiatrist, their lawyer, with relatives, and with friends, he defends his former innocence about her dissatisfaction of him as a husband. He is completely surprised at her preference for Gersbach, the best friend, over him. Herzog refuses to play any other role in the divorce except that of the injured party.

¹⁰⁰Herzog, p. 12.

¹⁰¹Herzog, p. 12.

The second eccentricity, to his mind, is his ability for academic scholarship. He allows himself to be ridiculed about being the only scholar in a Jewish family of businessmen. It is another means of escaping a confrontation with his inauthentic existence.

Herzog did not leave academic life because he was doing badly. On the contrary, his reputation was good. His thesis had been influential and was translated into French and German. His early book, not much noticed when it was published, was now on many reading lists, and the younger generation of historians accepted it as a model of the new sort of history.¹⁰²

He admits that his marriage to Madeleine changed his scholarly pursuits.

In marrying Madeleine and resigning from the university (because she thought he should), digging in at Ludeyville, he showed a taste and talent also for danger and extremism, for heterodoxy, for ordeals, a fatal attraction to the "City of Destruction."¹⁰³

And now she has divorced him. He loves her and their daughter and cannot understand why Madeleine has turned against him.

On the surface, Herzog just seems to be another character in fiction who has acted unwisely in

¹⁰²Herzog, pp. 12-13.

¹⁰³Herzog, p. 13.

choosing a woman with whom to spend his productive years. He seems to be the fool of a cuckold type. To avoid confrontation with himself, he must see himself that way. Then he can be guilty and still enjoy himself by being the creator of his own punishment. He keeps punishing himself for letting Madeleine and Gersbach play upon his eccentricities, and thereby, fool him completely. He is simply fooling himself in reasoning thus.

The imbalance in Herzog, then, is simply the result of inauthentic reasoning. Like Joseph, he refuses responsibility. Asa and Henderson do, too, and Herzog is just another in the line of Bellocian heroes who, in their inauthenticity, fail to find a balance between self-denial and selfhood. If he denies himself the truth about himself, he can stay just insane enough to inflict his own punishment. If he exerts any effort to effect a cure through rest, medical treatment, or confrontation with the parties whom he thinks have wronged him, he will have to admit to a desire for personal sanity. He cannot stand to admit that desire yet. Reality is too much for him. It would mean authentic action, and he refuses to take such action.

The one link between himself and the world from which he wants to escape is his young daughter, June. Madeleine has her; and Gersbach, though he has not left his wife, is with Madeleine and June much of the time. The final third of the book begins a climactic segment in which Herzog, loving his daughter for what she is of him, his flesh, plans a visit with her. While peeking through the bathroom window, he sees the naked girl being bathed by Gersbach. Herzog starts to shoot him with the gun he has picked up for that purpose, stolen from his father's desk. He cannot, of course. Bellow has not made him that insane. The possible results of a confrontation with Gersbach, and all he stands for in Herzog's life, have not faded from his mind yet, so he cannot face the thought of the results of such an act. After Madeleine had left him, he thought how he should have slapped her, beaten her, and ripped her clothes off. He did nothing then. He does not shoot Gersbach now.

Through his stupidity, however, he is forced into a courtroom scene in which the reader sees Madeleine for the first and only time. He had not thought far enough ahead to remove the gun from his

coat pocket when he picked up June, and is brought before the precinct sergeant on a misdeameanor charge when, in a minor car accident (not his fault) the police officer discovers the gun.

The sergeant has Madeleine called. Herzog waits with June on his lap, drinking a pint of milk through a straw. The two sitting there are this book's picture of the same "embracing despair"¹⁰⁴ seen in the final pages of the story in Henderson the Rain King. Though the child is innocent of what is happening, she is the reason Herzog must see Madeleine as he should have seen her before he married her. The picture Bellow makes of her lives up to every expectation. She is without affection, cruel, and completely in command of the situation. When she takes the milk carton away from June, Herzog notices that she throws it right into the waste basket, though she had not seen it except in the complete sweep of the scene as she entered the room.

In the ensuing interrogation she must be careful not to admit to adultery, while still giving cause why Herzog might want to shoot someone. Neither

¹⁰⁴The reader is referred to Chapter III, p. 78 of thesis.

gives the other away, but when she finally accuses him with, "One of those (bullets) was for me, wasn't it?", he retorts with, "And who was the other one for?"¹⁰⁵ And now he chooses to see her as the reader has been made to see her all along.

As she stared at him her color receded and her nose began to move very slightly. She seemed to realize that she must control her tic and the violence of her stare. But by noticeable degrees her face became very white, her eyes smaller, stony. He believed he could interpret them. They expressed a total will that he should die. This was for his nonexistence, he thought.¹⁰⁶

It is for June's sake that he allows himself a full look at Madeleine. He has seen her heretofore only from the safe distance that hatred for both Madeleine and Gersbach has provided for him. Now he looks at his child's mother. Earlier, in the horror experienced at finding June with him in a squad car, he remembers a passage from the Bible he read as a child, "Suffer the little children to come unto me."¹⁰⁷ And then this passage comes to him: "Give

¹⁰⁵Herzog, p. 167.

¹⁰⁶Herzog, p. 167.

¹⁰⁷Mark 10:14.

and it shall be given unto you. Good measure... shall men give into your bosom."¹⁰⁸

In the courtroom, confronted with the real Madeleine, he chooses to love June authentically. Heretofore, he has loved her only as he has himself, as a poor victim of cruel, heartless people. Now he chooses to love her enough to confront Madeleine's hatred for his past slavery to her. And in facing this contempt, he sees that his slavery was of his own making. At that moment all feeling for Madeleine dies. He cannot even hate her.

Herzog is on his way to sanity. This choice to rid himself of Madeleine's responsibility for his condition and assuming it himself makes him remember his son by his first marriage. Somehow, he plans to have the boy up to Ludeyville for a visit, and he promises himself to be a father to him, too. He asks his wealthy brother, Will, for help in rejuvenating the place so that he can work once again and be a father to his children. His brother promises help, but insists that Herzog seek medical aid. During their visit at Ludeyville, where the brother has

¹⁰⁸Luke 6:38.

driven him, Ramona calls, and Herzog invites her to dinner at the house. Will warns him of his weakness for "fatal choices", but Herzog assures him of his ability to see clearly what he must avoid.

The reader is aware that all of these actions--the care for the children and resolutions to do better, the desire to write again, and the refusal of medical aid with a simple "I'm alright"--are all patterns of action he has seen before. It is not until the final scene that Herzog speaks authentically. His actions on the surface are the same, as is his physical position--on the sofa where the reader first meets him--but he is now seeing clearly how to make authentic choices. The life force is in him still. The desire he recognized in his chosen profession lies rekindled ever so slightly within him. They are the same forces that made him buy this house for Madeleine, and that made him love her, and want to be a scholar. Herzog is not a different man.

This one fact keeps the book from reading like a melodrama about a man's failure at marriage. Herzog is no hero for Grecian times. He is a twentieth-century man in search of some meaning in his existence. He had thought he could find it

in objects: a wife and a reputation. He did not, but has temporarily excused himself by pretending no responsibility for his failure, putting all the blame on Madeleine. However, in loving June, he realizes that revenge cannot be the reason for wanting her back. By the time he confronts Madeleine in court, she is no longer the object on which he places any blame. This confrontation now offers him a glimpse into his shameful preoccupation with shifting responsibility.

Whereas, Henderson had blamed himself too much for his failures, Herzog has blamed others. His inauthentic existence has resulted in the same imbalance, however. Neither character has chosen in favor of himself, only in favor of objects. In this novel, though, Bellow tips the scales in the opposite direction from those weighing Henderson's reason for such an existence. Herzog has not seen himself as pig, only lion. He has felt superior to his family, his brothers, his colleagues, his first wife--all beings as objects. The one thing he has failed to do was what King Dahfu had such a difficult time getting Henderson to do--to choose to act out lion. The difference between Henderson and Herzog

is not so vast when viewed in these terms. They both have acted inauthentically and, as a result, neither has ever possessed any personal identity except by being eccentric.

Their search for balance follows the same pattern, too. Herzog lacerates himself by setting up appointments that he thinks will bring him pleasure, then bungles through them in misery, or deprives himself at the last minute of the pleasure. He loves the misery as Henderson loves the suffering he receives every time he tries to help others by denying himself. However, Bellow is far too fine a novelist to tell the same story twice. Henderson chooses to deny himself as a means of quieting the voice crying for existential selfhood. Herzog has chosen the route of personal gratification through the love of an object to satisfy the voice. The reader is introduced to both of them in the midst of their failure to achieve this similar goal, and their stories are the search for a balance between the two possible patterns. At the end of his sixth novel, Bellow has his hero just about as far along in finding a balance between the demands for self-denial and the desire for selfhood as Henderson is

at the end of his story. The search is the same, and the results are the same; only the roads taken by the two are different. Only in that sense, do Bellow's latest heroes differ in their search for personal identity.

Early in Herzog Bellow pictures the agony found in attempting a balance. As Herzog approaches the summer cabin of a former mistress who has invited him up for a weekend of her honeymoon with her new husband (Herzog saved her from being killed by her first husband and both bride and groom are grateful!), Herzog says of his state of being, "... (It) was so curious that he was compelled, himself, to see it..."¹⁰⁹ Here is what he saw:

...eager, grieving, fantastic, dangerous, crazed and to the point of death, "comical." It was enough to make a man pray to God to remove his great, bone-breaking burden of selfhood and self-development, give himself, a failure, back to the species for a primitive cure.¹¹⁰

This self-realization contains in it the same reasoning Henderson goes through in deciding to go to primitive Africa. He goes on in his description

¹⁰⁹Herzog, p. 117.

¹¹⁰Herzog, p. 117.

of himself to say, "But this was becoming the up-to-date and almost conventional way of looking at any single life. In this view the body itself, with its two arms and vertical length, was compared to the Cross, on which you knew the agony of consciousness and separate being."¹¹¹

In some of the most marvelous prose about the human condition ever written, Herzog asks at this point, "What was he hanging around for? To follow this career of personal relationships until his strength at last gave out? Only to be a smashing success in the private realm, a king of hearts?"¹¹² Here lies the picture he has of himself at the beginning of the book--a man with two eccentricities that have made him do what he has done, be what he has been.

At the country house while awaiting Ramona, after he has confronted himself mirrored in Madeleine's wish for his nonexistence and in June's need of a father worthy of the name, he gives his answer to the voice's question, "What do you want, Herzog?"

¹¹¹Herzog, p. 117.

¹¹²Herzog, p. 414.

He answers himself, then. "But that's just it--not a solitary thing. I am pretty well satisfied to be, to be just as it was willed, and for as long as I may remain in occupancy."¹¹³

Certainly no one reading Bellow would deny that he gives some credence to the orthodox doctrine of the will of God. Alfred Kazin says of his friend, "Saul Bellow has an orthodox Jewish background, and that is how he sees God."¹¹⁴ He does not discount another will, however--man's will. Personal choice is central in Bellow's novels. Herzog at forty-seven, has chosen within the realm of his possibilities only to be many things in many different situations. Now, he is beginning to see that the one choice open to him if he is to achieve any personal identity, is the choice in favor of Dasein--being. This must be the first choice. He made it in the courtroom scene, and the reader knows so when he starts to give a

¹¹³Herzog, p. 414.

¹¹⁴Alfred Kazin, "My Friend Saul Bellow," Atlantic Monthly; CCXV (January, 1965), p.54.

suggestion to the housekeeper as to how to avoid raising so much dust while she is sweeping. He had decided earlier that he would stop writing letters, that whatever had come over him during the last months was passing.

Suddenly the suggestion to the housekeeper, he decides can wait. He says, "...but not just yet. At this time he had no messages for anyone. Nothing. Not a single word."¹¹⁵

So far in novel form, at least, Bellow has spoken no further word either. If he does, and his earlier novels are any indication, his words will most probably portray a hero in search of a balance between the demands for self-denial his world makes upon him and his personal desire for existential selfhood. That search never really ends for Bellow's heroes. Each day brings choices to love that require he choose in favor of his best self. Though Asa, Henderson, and Herzog, unlike Joseph, make that initial choice, Bellow seems to be saying that they must make it in every situation to keep the balance he has them find momentarily at the end of each of

¹¹⁵Herzog, p. 416.

their stories. By having no hero's story go beyond this momentary discovery, perhaps he is saying that the situation must determine what choice will be that best choice.

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APPENDIX

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL THOUGHT

November 18, 1966

Dear Miss Arnold:

Strictly between us Henderson is not at all a spoof. It's true that I wrote my little *quib* ~~commentary~~ on the excess of interpretation before the book appeared to warn the public against perverse practices. I thought I was being very clever but my strategem turned out to be quite stupid for I confused everyone. People thought that I was being devilishly ironical but I was in truth saying something quite simple, namely that people would far sooner dig out symbols from a book than read it. I myself as a reader am as naive and gullible as I can be. There is only one way to read a novel--simplemindedly. The truth is that academic experts have come between the reader and his book pretending to hold the one and only true and indispensable key to its meaning. The only key one needs is the key the writer himself has invariably provided. One can't put symbols into a novel as one would stick cloves into a ham before roasting.

With best wishes.