



# Books

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## LITERARY HORIZONS

### Fragile Bits and Pieces of Life

**S**AUL BELLOW begins his new novel, *Herzog* (Viking, \$5.75), with this sentence: "If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me, thought Moses Herzog." The book continues:

Some people thought he was cracked and for a time he himself had doubted that he was all there. But now, though he still behaved oddly, he felt confident, cheerful, clairvoyant, and strong. He had fallen under a spell and was writing letters to everyone under the sun. He was so stirred by these letters that from the end of June he moved from place to place with a valise full of papers. He had carried this valise from New York to Martha's Vineyard but returned from the Vineyard immediately; two days later he flew to Chicago, and from Chicago he went to a village in western Massachusetts. Hidden in the country, he wrote endlessly, fanatically, to the newspapers, to people in public life, to friends and relatives and at last to the dead, his own obscure dead, and finally the famous dead.

Herzog, now in his late forties, has been a student and teacher and has written two scholarly and well-received books, but he has come to an impasse. He has been twice married, and both marriages have collapsed, the first through his fault, the second, he believes, through his wife's. When we meet him, he is, as Bellow's characters are likely to be, at the end of his rope. "Late in spring Herzog had been overcome by the need to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to clarify, to make amends."

Through the writing of letters, most of which are never sent, he carries on the process of self-analysis that seems to him so important. His letters reveal the operations of a brilliant and well-stocked but at the moment erratic mind. Herzog knows the answers that the great thinkers have given to the problems of man and the universe, and he knows that he has to find his own answers. The letters are a

device that could have been abysmally dull, but, as Bellow has handled them, they are lively, sometimes profound, and always revelatory. We know with remarkable clarity what is going on in Herzog's psyche.

Herzog is often reminded of events in his past, and in flashbacks the reader gets an account of the recent weeks, the weeks of crisis, and sees something of the earlier years. Herzog deserted his first wife, Daisy, to marry Madeleine, and it was at the latter's urging that he bought an old mansion in the Berkshires and spent in renovating it a small fortune inherited from his father. The marriage was a mess, and Madeleine left him, taking their child. Since the divorce he has been having an affair with a young woman in New York City but has avoided matrimony.

Although the story comes out in fragments, which are not always in chronological order, so that we have to piece it together, we come to know what Herzog's life has been like and what has led to the present crisis. We see something of his family, and we have a detailed account of his miserable life with Madeleine. After each glimpse of the past, Herzog returns to the letters, in which he expresses the constant turmoil of his mind.

Herzog goes to Chicago to see his daughter, and it is arranged for him to have an afternoon with her. Everything seems to be going well when he has a minor automobile accident. Because he is carrying a revolver—this is carefully explained—he is held by the police. Madeleine, more vicious than usual, comes for the child. On the way to the police station, he continues his meditations: "But what is the philosophy of this generation? Not God is dead, that point was passed long ago. Perhaps it should be stated Death is God. This generation thinks—and this is its thought of thoughts—that nothing faithful, vulnerable, fragile can be durable or have any true power." He continues: "Per-

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haps what had made him faint was not the accident but the premonition of such thoughts. Nausea was only apprehension, excitement, the unbearable intensity of these ideas."

He returns to the Berkshires and settles into his long-abandoned mansion. He repeats the book's first line, "But if I am out of my mind, it's all right with me." Now, however, we know that he is not out of his mind, and we also understand why he is in a state of crisis. During the next few days he writes letters more furiously than ever, and begins to achieve some sort of stability. He writes to God: "How my mind has struggled to make coherent sense. I have not been too good at it. But I have desired to do your unknowable will, taking it, and you, without symbols. Everything of intensest significance. Especially if divested of me." Although he knows that

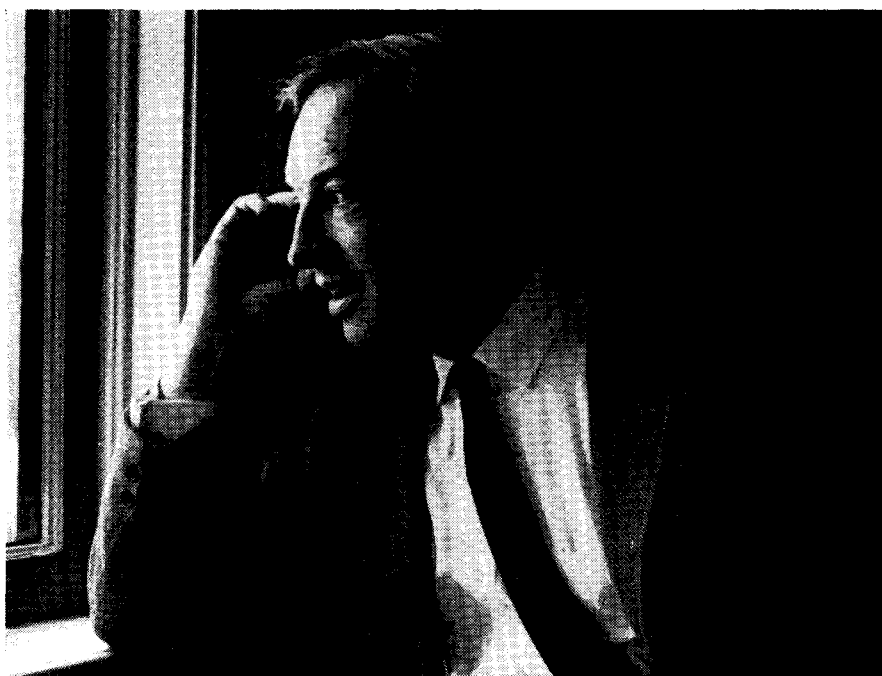
"the bitter cup would come round again, by and by," in the present he has found joy.

In Bellow's fine novelette *Seize the Day*, the central character, a slob of the first order, who hates but cannot change his nature, has a kind of mystical experience which convinces him that change is possible. Henderson, in *Henderson the Rain King*, is redeemed by the fantastic rites of King Dahfu. Herzog, on the other hand, seeks salvation by way of the intellect. He is aware that his problems are not new, and he knows what other men have made of them. (He refers to Nietzsche, Whitehead, Buber, Freud, Hobbes, and many others.) He is a man of ideas, though he is also a man of powerful emotions. He is driven, just as Wilhelm and Henderson are, but he is not driven blindly, as they are.

*Herzog* is not an easy novel to read; in fact, it is almost as difficult as Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, which in some ways it resembles. It is a challenge to the reader—which is by no means a bad thing. If the reader gives himself to the book, it is an exciting experience, because Bellow has so successfully dramatized his hero's philosophical quest. At one point he speaks of "the daily comedy of Moses F. Herzog," and it is true that Moses, like most of Bellow's heroes, is something of a clown, but he is also a tremendously serious man. He is full of contradictions, and it is by showing him in all his complexity that Bellow gives him life. That he has many qualities and experiences in common with his creator is obvious enough, but he is a creation, an individual in his own right. A novel that is certain to be talked about and written about for a long time to come, *Herzog* re-enforces my conviction that Bellow is the leading figure in American fiction today. —GRANVILLE HICKS.

**The Author:** In the weeks preceding the publication of *Herzog*, a novel that many observers feel will dramatically enhance Saul Bellow's reputation, the forty-nine-year-old writer was spending his working days at the Belasco Theater in New York, where his play *The Last Analysis* is in rehearsal. (Subject to the usual hazards of the trade, it will open on Broadway September 29th.) At a time when his career seems to be moving towards a stunning climax, Bellow appears remarkably calm, modest, yet quietly self-assured. A man of medium height and build, he has doleful, heavy-lidded eyes, a theatrically chiseled nose, graying hair, and a kind of tired, battered good looks. Like Herzog, he has the brooding air of a man who has been through a lot.

His colleagues at the Belasco Theater consider him an entirely admirable



—Jeff Lowenthal.

Saul Bellow: "Every writer borrows what he needs from himself."

freak—a writer without temperament who equably submits to cuts. In a rumpled summer suit, he sits quietly on stage, introducing an element of sobriety and intellectual detachment into what is normally an ego-ridden madhouse. Among the performers, many of whom had never heard of him, there is the beginning of a Bellow cult, with copies of his five earlier novels making the rounds. Sam Levene, an actor known on occasion to be difficult, has been surprisingly placid—a happy state attributed in part to the awe he feels for Mr. Bellow, whom he calls "The Scholar."

For Saul Bellow, his theatrical adventure is a fascinating immersion in a new milieu. "When I'm at my typewriter," he explained, "I'm a law unto myself, but here I have to share my authority. It sometimes comes hard. Humanly speaking, though, it's nice to come out of my room, to break out of the anchorite's existence."

His excursion into playwriting came as a result of prodding from Lillian Hellman, who felt that the dialogue of his novels would be effective on stage. She proposed that they adapt together an earlier novel, *Seize the Day* (1956), but, as Bellow explained, "I don't like to fool around with something I've already done." Miss Hellman became otherwise occupied, and Mr. Bellow worked intermittently on this play for four years. After doing a reading in Greenwich Village of an early draft, he found himself in "a terrible theatrical fever."

"I'm beginning to be accepted by the performers," he remarked. "But then I'm hard to rebuff; I have a high tolerance.

Of course, they sometimes strike me as being a little absurd about their prerogatives. I find it all a little feudal." When someone mentioned comedian Tom Poston to him, Bellow asked in genuine perplexity: "Who? The postman?" It turned out he had never heard of that actor. And in discussing *The Last Analysis* Bellow was far more the intellectual concerned with ideas than the playwright interested in theatrical ploys.

The play deals with an aging vaudevillian who also dabbles in psychoanalysis, and it is at once a farce—full of antic bits—and a serious commentary on American life. "*The Last Analysis*," Bellow explained, "is a satire on intellectual solemnity, on the metaphors that capture the imagination. I dread the power of metaphor. You get a fix on some particular explanation, and you can be struck by the relevance of that explanation to everything that comes along. As a writer, of course, I know very intimately the power of metaphors. And I take Freud to be a system of metaphors—nothing more. That doesn't mean that metaphors don't have profundity. But does anyone have the right to be fatalistic about them?"

Bellow was understandably skittish about discussing the sources of *Herzog*, which concerns the travails of a cultivated but tormented man. "Every writer borrows what he needs from himself," he explained. Readers will inevitably try to match the pieces of the novel with Bellow's own life. "I consider *Herzog* a break from victim literature," he said. "As one of the chieftains of that school, I have the right to say this." (He was