

# Herzog

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by  
Saul Bellow

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**First  
Published**

**1964**

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## ANALYSIS

*Herzog* (1964)

Saul Bellow

(1915-2005)

“*Herzog* (1964) is an intense revelation of the life and experiences of a middle-aged Jewish intellectual, presenting his involvements with two wives and other women, with his children, with a friend who betrays him, and with his careers of teaching and writing. He is led through neurosis almost to suicide and emerges ‘pretty well satisfied to be, to be just as it is willed’.... Moses Herzog, a professor of history in New York City, undergoes a crisis when his wife Madeleine divorces him. To find surcease he goes to Martha’s Vineyard and occupies himself composing letters in his mind and on paper, addressed to friends and public figures, living an dead, on issues that plague him. Told that Madeleine and her lover, Valentine Gersbach, once Herzog’s best friend, are neglecting his daughter June, he rushes to Chicago to get custody of the girl and even plans to murder his former wife and onetime friend. Serio-comic misadventures frustrate his plans, and he goes back to Massachusetts...[with] no messages for anyone’.”

James D. Hart

*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83)

‘Where shall a contemporary novel begin? Perhaps unavoidably: with the busted hero reeling from a messy divorce and moaning in a malodorous furnished room; rehearsing the mighty shambles of ambition (‘how I rose from humble origins to complete disaster’); cursing the heart-and-ball breakers, both wives and volunteers, who have, he claims, laid him low; snarling contempt at his own self-pity with a Johnsonian epigram, ‘Grief, sir, is a species of idleness’; and yet, amidst all this woe, bubbling with intellectual hope, as also with intellectual gas, and consoling himself with the truth that indeed ‘there were worse cripples around.’

This is Moses Herzog, hero-patsy of Saul Bellow’s extremely, if also unevenly, brilliant new novel. Herzog is a representative man of the sixties, eaten away by those ‘personal relations’ which form the glory and the foolishness of a post-political intelligentsia. He is a good scholar, but cannot complete his books. He rips off imaginary letters to great men, finessing their wisdom and patronizing their mistakes. He is a lady-killer, ‘aging’ at forty-seven and worried about his potency. He is a loving father twice-divorced, who each time has left behind him a child as token of good will. He is a true-blue Jewish groaner, and perversely, groans against fashionable despair. Inside or outside our skins, we all know Herzog: *Hypocrite lecteur—mon semblable—mein shlemiehl*. Hungering for a life of large significance, eager for ‘a politics in the Aristotelian sense,’ he nevertheless keeps melting into the mercies of women, each of whom, in sequence, really understands him.

*Herzog* is Bellow’s sixth novel and in many ways the most remarkable. All of his books—whether melancholy realism, moral fable or picaresque fantasia—represent for him a new departure, a chosen risk in form and perception. Bellow has the most powerful mind among contemporary American novelists, or at least, he is the American novelist who best assimilates his intelligence to creature purpose. This might have been foreseen at the beginning of his career, for he has always been able to turn out a first-rate piece of discursive prose; what could not have been foreseen was that he would also become a virtuoso of fictional technique and language.

Behind Bellow’s writing there is always a serious intention, but as he grows older he becomes increasingly devoted to the idea of the novel as sheer spectacle. His last few books comprise a hectic and at times ghastly bazaar of contemporary experience; they ring with the noise of struggle; characters dash in and out, glistening with bravura; adventures pile up merrily, as if the decline of the West had not been definitely proclaimed; the male characters plunge and rise, mad for transcendence; the women (a little tiresomely) are all very beautiful and mostly very damaging. And the language spins.

Before and, I hope, after everything else has been said, *Herzog* should be praised as a marvelously animated performance. It is a book that makes one greedy for the next page, the next character. Racing ahead like a sped-up movie, the action covers a brief time in the life of Herzog and nimbly reaches back and forth to segments of his immigrant childhood in Montreal, his failed marriages, his intellectual spiralings, and his recent lady-hopping.

The minor figures are drawn in sharp caricature, without the distinction of psychological probe or nuance, and sometimes, when Bellow's zest becomes compulsive, a little over-focused. There are foul-mouthed lawyers, boiling with drug-store wisdom, professional chicanery and 'potato love'; a couple of tough-spirited aunts; a sadly ineffectual father fumbling at bootlegger; a professor who loves, solely but purely, his monkey. There are Herzog's ladies of the season: Sono, a Japanese doll who soothes the spirit and, Oriental style, washes the back of Master Moses in an Upper West Side bathtub while cooing at him in baby French, 'mon professeur d'amour,' and Ramona, bravely marching into middle age with an overload of 'understanding' and graduate credentials in sex, who 'entered a room provocatively...one hand touching her thigh, as though she carried a knife in her garter belt.'

And then the demons, the evil spirits: Madeleine, the wife who betrays; Valentine Gersbach, the best friend with whom she does it. A talentless buffoon-double of the talented hero, Valentine Gersbach (what a name!) booms out the latest highbrow cant in his great bearish voice and ends by lecturing to Hadassah clubs on Martin Buber. Toward Valentine, Bellow is merciless, yet one is seldom troubled by this open display of aggression; for there is no pretense in this novel that we are being shown a world which exists, self-sufficient, apart from the neurotic inflammations of the central figure. Gersbach is a clown, a windbag, a traitor, the kind of man who makes intellectuals wish they were dead when they hear him parroting their words; yet he is utterly alive, one waits for him to reappear on the page, and finally even he wins a moment of humane redemption: secretly, angrily Herzog watches Gersbach bathing his (Herzog's) little girl and must admit to himself that the act, though done by a betrayer, is yet done with tenderness.

Madeleine is drawn with pure venom, a sentiment capable of generating in writers, as in other men, great quantities of energy. She is, naturally, a beauty; she piddles in Russian intellectual history and Catholic conversion; she out-manuevers the slumping Herzog not merely at sexual games (where she has, after all, the advantage of youth) but also in intellectual competition. When Herzog complains about her extravagance, her arrogance, her paranoia, she replies with the great modern rationale: 'Anyway, it'll never be boring.' A moony schoolgirl meets Madeleine, and describes her in a phrase embodying the great modern cant: 'She gives a sense of significant encounter.' With her postures of depth, screeches of enthusiasm, learned references and distinguished airs, Madeleine is the female pseudo-intellectual done, and done in, once and for all. The portrait is unjust, an utter libel, but a classic of male retaliation.

Herzog himself is not, in the traditional sense, a novelistic character at all. He is observed neither from a cool distance nor through intimate psychological penetration. We experience him intensely, entering his very bones; yet, trapped as we are in his inner turmoil, we cannot be certain that finally we know him. For Bellow has not provided a critical check: there is no way of learning what any of the other characters, by way of Jamesian correction, might think or feel about Herzog. Bellow offers not a full-scale characterization but a full-length exposure of a state of being. We do not see Herzog acting in the world, we are made captive in the world of Herzog. The final picture is that of Herzog in cross-section, bleeding from the cut.

In one sense, then, there is a complete identification between Bellow and Herzog: the consciousness of the character forms the enclosing medium of the novel. But in a more important respect Bellow manages skillfully to avoid the kind of identification which might lead one to conclude that he 'favors' his central character or fails to see through his weaknesses and falsities—a fault that could radically distort the line of vision by which everything is to be considered. That Herzog cannot accurately perceive the other figures in the novel and that we are closely confined to his sense of them, is true and in ways I shall later suggest, a limitation. But not a crippling limitation. For it soon becomes clear that, while totally committed to Herzog's experience, Bellow is not nearly so committed to his estimate of that experience.

Things, to be sure, do not always work out neatly. There are sections in which the malice toward Madeleine gets out of hand, so much so that one suspects Bellow of settling private scores. And while the device of having Herzog compose imaginary letters is often amusing—‘Dear Doktor Professor Heidigger, I should like to know what you mean by the expression ‘the fall into the quotidian.’ When did this fall occur? Where were we standing when it happened?’—one becomes somewhat irked at being unable, at times, to grasp which of the letters are serious, that is, Bellow’s opinions, and which are not, that is, Herzog’s conniptions. Ambiguity? No doubt. We all know about this prime blessing of modern literature; but there are occasions when the uses of ambiguity can themselves be ambiguous, shading off into confusion or evasiveness. For the most part, however, *Herzog* marks a notable advance in technique over Bellow’s previous books. He has become a master of something that is rarely discussed in criticism because it is hard to do more than point toward it: the art of timing, which concerns the massing, centering and disposition of the characters and creates a sense of delight in the sheer motions of the narrative.

Bellow has also found a good solution to a technical problem which keeps arising in the contemporary novel. Most readers, I imagine, groan a little when they see a novelist wheeling into position one of those lengthy and leaden flashbacks in which, we know in advance, the trauma will be unveiled that is to explain the troubles of time-present. These flashbacks, by now one of the dreariest conventions of the novel, result in a lumpiness of narrative surface and blockage of narrative flow. But Bellow has managed to work out a form in which the illusion of simultaneity of time—a blend of past with the present-moving-into-future—is nicely maintained. Instead of the full-scale flashback, which often rests on the mistaken premise that a novelist needs to provide a psychiatric or sociological casebook on his characters, Bellow allows the consciousness of the narrator to flit about in time, restlessly, nervously, thereby capturing essential fragments of the past as they break into the awareness of the present. Through these interlockings of time—brief, dramatic and made to appear simultaneous—he creates the impression of a sustained rush of experience.

Bellow began his career as a novelist of somber intellectuality: his impressive early book *The Victim* asks almost to be read as a fable concerning the difficulties of attempting to secure moral judgment in our day. With *Augie March* he made a sharp turn, casting aside the urban contemplativeness and melancholy of his previous work, and deciding to regard American life as wonderfully ‘open,’ a great big shapeless orange bursting with the juices of vitality. Though in some ways his most virtuoso performance, *Augie March* suffers from a programmatic exuberance: it is fun to watch the turns and tricks the suddenly acrobatic Bellow can execute, yet hard to suppress a touch of anxiety concerning his heart-beat. With *Augie March* Bellow also began to work out a new fictional style, for which there may be some predecessors—just possibly Daniel Fuchs and Nathanael West—but which in the main is an original achievement. By now it has come to be imitated by many American Jewish novelists as well as by a few gentiles trying wistfully to pass, but none of these manages it nearly so well as Bellow himself.

What Bellow did was to leave behind him the bleak neutrality of naturalistic prose and the quavering sensibility of the Jamesian novel: the first, he seemed to feel, was too lifeless and the second insufficiently masculine. Beginning with *Augie March*—but none of this applies to his masterful novella, *Seize the Day*—Bellow’s prose becomes strongly anti-literary, a roughing up of diction and breaking down of syntax in order to avoid familiar patterns and expectations. The prose now consists of a rich, thick impasto of verbal color in which a splatter of sidewalk eloquence is mixed with erudite byplay. Together with this planned coarsening of texture, there is a great emphasis on speed, a violent wrenching and even forcing of images, all the consequence of his wish to break away from the stateliness of the literary sentence. Analytic refinement is sacrificed to sensuous vigor, careful psychological notation to the brawling of energy, syntactical qualification to kinesthetic thrust. (One is reminded a bit of action painting.) Psychology is out, absolutely out: for to psychologize means to reflect, to hesitate, to qualify, to modulate, to analyze. By contrast, the aim of Bellow’s neo-baroque style is to communicate sensations of immediacy and intensity, even when dealing with abstract intellectual topics—to communicate, above all, the sense that men are still alive. Toward this end he is prepared to yield niceties of phrasing, surface finish, sometimes even coherence of structure.

It is a style admirably suited to the flaming set-piece, the rapid vignette, the picaresque excursion. But it is not so well suited to a sustained and complex action, or a lengthy flow of experience, or a tragic plot, or

what George Moore, in discussing the nature of fiction, called the 'rhythmic sequence of events.' In *Augie March* there is a run of action but hardly a plot; in *Herzog* a superbly-realized situation but hardly a developing action; and in both of these novels, as well as in *Henderson*, not so much of a 'rhythmic sequence of events.' That is why, I think, none of them has a fully satisfying denouement, an organic fulfillment of the action. In principle these books could continue forever, and that is one reason Bellow finds it hard to end them. He simply stops, much against one's will.

Finally, Bellow's style draws heavily from the Yiddish, not so much in borrowed diction as in underlying intonation and rhythm. Bellow's relation to Yiddish is much more easy and authoritative than that of most other American Jewish writers. The jabbing interplay of ironies, the intimate vulgarities, the strange blend of sentimental and sardonic which characterizes Yiddish speech are lassoed into Bellow's English: so that what we get is not a sick exploitation of folk memory but a vibrant linguistic and cultural transmutation. (Precisely at the moment when Yiddish is dying off as an independent language, it has experienced an astonishing, and not always happy, migration into American culture. In two or three decades students of American literature may have to study Yiddish for reasons no worse than those for which students of English literature study Anglo-Saxon.)

One of the most pleasing aspects of *Herzog* is that Bellow has brought together his two earlier manners: the melancholy and the bouncy, the 'Russian' and the 'American,' *Seize the Day* and *Augie March*, yet retains its vividness and richness of texture. The writing is now purer, chastened and a great deal more disciplined. There is a similar marshaling of Bellow's earlier themes. For some years now he has been obsessed with that fatigue of spirit which hangs so dismally over contemporary life. *Seize the Day* shows a man utterly exhausted, unable so much as to feel his despair until the wrenching final page. *Augie March* shows a man composing a self out of a belief in life's possibilities. Of the two books *Seize the Day* seems to me the more convincing and authentic, perhaps because despair is easier to portray than joy, perhaps because the experience of our time, as well as its literature, predisposes us to associate truth with gloom.

In any case, what seems notable about *Herzog* is that nothing is here blinked or evaded, rhetoric does not black out reality (*Herzog* declares himself 'aging, vain, terribly narcissistic, suffering without proper dignity'); yet the will to struggle, the insistence upon human possibility, is maintained, and not as a mere flourish but as the award of agony. *Herzog* learns that '...To look for fulfillment in another...was a feminine game. And the man who shops from woman to woman, though his heart aches with idealism, with the desire for pure love, has entered the female realm.' Not, perhaps, a very remarkable lesson, but worth learning when the cost comes high. More importantly, *Herzog* says about himself, wryly but truthfully, that he is a man who 'thought and cared about belief.' To think and care about belief: that is the first step toward salvation.

For all its vividness as performance, *Herzog* is a novel driven by an idea. It is a serious idea, though, in my judgment, neither worked out with sufficient care or worked into the grain of the book with sufficient depth. *Herzog*, he tells us, means to write something that will deal 'with a new angle on the modern condition, showing how life could be lived by renewing universal connections, overturning the last of the Romantic errors about the uniqueness of the Self, revising the old Western, Faustian ideology....' This time clearly speaking for Bellow, *Herzog* declares himself opposed to 'The canned sauerkraut of Spengler's "Prussian Socialism," the commonplaces of the Wasteland outlook, the cheap mental stimulants of Alienation, the cant and rant of pipsqueaks about Inauthenticity and Forlornness. I can't accept this foolish dreariness. We are talking about the whole life of mankind. The subject is too great, too deep for such weakness, cowardice....'

And in the magazine *Location* Bellow has recently written an attack on the 'the "doom of the West" [which] is the Established Church in modern literature.' It is a Church, he says, which asserts the individual to be helpless among the impersonal mechanisms and sterilities of modern life; it cultivates self-pity and surrender; and it is wrong. Bellow has touched on something real. Talk about 'the decline of the West' can be elitist rubbish. The posture of alienation, like any other, can collapse into social accommodation. Cries of despair can become mere notes of fashion. When the motif of alienation in the literature of modernism during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries signified an act of truth, courage and sometimes rebellion too, now it can easily become the occasion for a mixture of private

snobbism and public passivity. Yet may not all ideas suffer this sort of outcome in a culture which seems endlessly capable of assimilating and devaluing everything?...

Bellow is being just a little too cavalier in so readily disposing of a central theme of modernist literature. Surely, as it was manifested in the work of writers like Joyce, Flaubert, Eliot and Baudelaire, the sense of alienation expressed a profound and even exhilarating response to the reality of industrial society.... There is a discrepancy between what the book actually is—brilliant but narrow in situation and scope—and the sweeping intentions that lie behind it; or in other words, between the dramatic texture and the thematic purpose. In the end one feels that *Herzog* is too hermetic a work, the result of a technique which encloses us rigidly in the troubles of a man during his phase of withdrawal from the world. The material is absorbing in its own right; it is handled with great skill; but in relation to the intended theme, it all seems a little puny.

Bellow has conceived of the book as a stroke against the glorification of the sick self, but the novel we have—as picture, image, honest exposure—remains largely caught up with the thrashings of the sick self. One wants from Bellow a novel that will not be confined to a single besieged consciousness but instead will negotiate the kind of leap into the world which he proclaims, to savor the world's freshness and struggle against its recalcitrance, perhaps even to enter 'politics in the Aristotelian sense.'

Meanwhile, critics and readers, let us be grateful.”

Irving Howe  
“*Herzog*” (1964)  
*The Critic as Artist: Essays on Books 1920-1970*  
(Liveright 1972) 181-91

“*Herzog*, Bellow’s stunning performance as a novelist, catches *Herzog* falling apart from rage over his wife’s betrayal of him with his best friend. In his pain he feels impelled ‘to write letters, to explain, to have it out, to express, to set straight, to intervene, to put into perspective, to balance, to remedy, to justify, to confess, to atone.’ The verb list, Bellow’s standard device for expressing desire, is so inclusive it obscures how much *Herzog* uses his mind for very different purposes.

*Herzog* is smart enough not to be smart about himself. He uses his intelligence as a weapon against the turmoil of his personal life. Ostensibly in pursuit of a great synthesis of Western thought, *Herzog* is best at manipulating and exploiting abstractions to break the connections between his ideals and his life in order to retain his self-love. Even the form of his thought, the letter, is a discrete communication which invites no response and gets none. The dense intellectual content of the novel and the immense charm of *Herzog*’s sharpness about social philosophy serve as a smokescreen for a personality so essentially rigid and narcissistic it can encompass no negative or critical idea of itself. Enshrining an adorable self-image in seductive abstractions, *Herzog* permits his life to remain rigidly set on a course of destructiveness and frustration. This novel in which *Herzog* claims to look for universal truth is a documentation of the benefits a man derives from ignorance of himself.

*Herzog* is, of course, objectively the ‘wronged’ party in the triangle, displaced by his best friend not only in the love of his wife, but in the affections of his child. But he uses his victimization to conceal his malice and get what he wants. The family values *Herzog* professes to feel again and again are values he attaches to his mother and brothers, not to any of the families he forms himself as a man. It is the family in which he was nurtured that he wants; it is to be a son, not a father. Not seeing or knowing himself permits him to think of himself as a man but still derive the benefits of being a child.

Selective vision is a technique *Herzog* learned from his mother. ‘Mother *Herzog* had a way of meeting the present with a partly averted face.’ He applies her method to getting what he wants by appearing to be stupid. One of his childhood memories is of a cold day in January when his mother pulled him on a sled and was met by an ‘old baba in a shawl’ who said, ‘Why are you pulling him daughter! daughter don’t sacrifice your strength to children.’ ‘I wouldn’t get off the sled. I pretended not to understand. One of life’s hardest jobs, to make a quick understanding slow. I think I succeeded,’ thinks *Herzog*.

Not knowing himself gets Herzog off the hook of responsibility. The failure of his marriage permits him to win his otherwise unobtainable goal—to be cared for, protected, and worried over by his older brothers, who turn up to lend money, bail him out, give him advice. Even his sense of failure as a man revives the warmth of his Depression childhood. His disappointment with his wife stirs up memories of his mother and his love for her beautiful, suffering face. His first wife, whom he describes as a moody but ‘dependable Jewish woman,’ was like her; for his second, he marries the aggressive side of himself and finds he cannot live with it. (He complains that his wife edged him out of university life and then got a graduate degree herself.) He seeks out women who, though they may bring no happiness or may even wreak havoc in his life, do not challenge his bond to his mother and his childhood.

What Herzog takes from his family is a tendency to manipulate emotions to avoid deep adult attachments. He uses sentimentality about the idea of family as a tool for avoiding his wives and children. Believing he wants custody of his little girl, he gets excellent advice from his lawyer about how to obtain it. But his intelligence immediately fails. He overhears a child abuse case in court on the way to his lawyer, flies to his little girl, gets a gun and resolves hysterically to protect her. He finds her being lovingly bathed by his former best friend. During the following day, which he spends with her, it is he who involves her in a car accident and gets arrested for possession of the gun. His comic ineptitude and great rush of sentiment win him credit for wanting his child while making it difficult for him to obtain her, and further involve his brothers in his life, for they must rally round to bail him out of jail. This absentminded professor’s lack of clarity about himself expresses his exploitiveness.

Herzog’s mind moves toward the highest human ideals, even as he behaves badly. While others blame him, he remains enshrined in his intellectual idealism, attacking not his own faults but other people’s faulty arguments. In a letter to Erwin Shrodinger on *What Is Life*, Herzog disapprovingly mulls over some of Shrodinger’s comments on human nature: ‘Reluctance to cause pain coupled with the necessity to devour... a peculiar human trick is the result, which consists of admitting and denying evils at the same time. To have a human life, and also an inhuman life. In fact, to have everything, to combine all elements with immense ingenuity and greed. To bite, to swallow. At the same time to pity your food. To have sentiment. At the same time to behave brutally.’ He objects to this omnivorousness as immoral.

But Herzog has life all ways at once by expressing his rage through love. The fabled affectivity of this family man takes the form of manipulating other people’s sentiment for his own use. Playing the stumblebum, the wise fool, the total victim, Herzog victimizes others, not only through his dependency but by arousing expectations he will not fulfill. To his wife he offered the life of intellect, but used his superior abilities to wound her; to his new lover he offers his depth of emotion, his genuine sentiment, yet he mocks her even as he shows her off. Even as he enjoys her he remains contemptuous of the extent of her sexual desire. His first wife was too like his mother, his second too like himself. His lover is unreal. But his ability to both involve and frustrate all of them only strengthens his tie to his mother and his sense of himself as the beloved, helpless son who must be pulled through snowstorms because of the sheer delicacy of his mind.

Bellow’s brilliance as a novelist is eclipsed only by his sentimental infatuation with his characters. He subscribes to Herzog’s view of himself as ‘a man who tired to be a marvelous Herzog, a Herzog who, perhaps clumsily, tried to live out marvelous qualities...’ Bellow arouses expectations for Herzog which Herzog surely cannot fulfill. At his country house, in which birds have built nests and vines grew through the walls, Herzog lies down, happy, cared for, visited by his reassuring brother, awaiting his lover’s sexual ministry. His woman and his brother praise him for accepting the mammoth responsibility of visiting his son by his first wife for one day. Bellow suggests he will work again, this is a new beginning. But it is change by retrogression, by going back.

The wash of Bellow’s sentiment covers the infantile rigidity of a character who is a prisoner by necessity, who stays locked in himself, lying down happily. He feels too ill-used to live, he will be cared for. Both conditions return him to his greatest sense of security and self-love.... Bellow’s power as a novelist makes real and arresting the plight of the man who fears his own rage, who pays for his intellectual combativeness by his failure with women, the man who is his own adversary.”

Josephine Hendin  
*Vulnerable People: A View of American Fiction since 1945*  
(Oxford 1978) 100-03

“*Herzog* (1964) was an enormous critical and financial success. Bellow depicts in this complex meditative novel the intense psychological struggles of his professor-protagonist, who is on the verge of a mental breakdown as a result of his divorce from his second wife and the betrayal of his best friend. In search for an explanation, he writes ‘letters’ to the living and the dead, to the famous and the ordinary. As he recollects and ponders his past, Herzog, who teaches a course entitled ‘The Roots of Romanticism,’ finally rejects the nihilistic impulses of modern literature and contemporary culture.”

Allan Chavkin  
*The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2*  
(D.C. Heath 1990) 1855-56

Michael Hollister (2015)