

# Quest of Reality in Herzog via Autobiographical Miens

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*'One of my themes is the American denial of real reality, our devices for evading it, our refusal to face what is all too obvious and palpable.'* (Saul Bellow)

**Key Words:** Reality, Autobiographical, Herzog, Letters, Alienation

## Abstract

Saul Bellow is one of the most influential figures in twentieth-century American literature. Bellow's work explores the most important cultural and social experiences of his era: the impact of the holocaust, the urban experience of European immigrants from a Jewish perspective, the frantic failures of the Vietnam War, the ideological seductions of Marxism and Modernism besides, the changing attitudes concerning gender and race. In his entire oeuvre one of the most important themes is the efforts to explore reality via different protagonists. The present paper attempts to trace the elements of reality in the novel *Herzog* in which Herzog, the protagonist incessantly strives to search the ultimate reality of life via the autobiographical allusions ranging from the family background and miserable relationships to ideas of ideology and values.

## Introduction

The character of Herzog in many ways reflects a fictionalized Saul Bellow. Both Herzog and Bellow grew up in Canada, the sons of bootleggers who had emigrated from Russia (St. Petersburg). Both are Jewish, lived in Chicago for significant periods of time, and were divorced twice (at the time of writing; Bellow would go on to divorce four of his five wives). Herzog is nearly the same age that Bellow was when he wrote the novel. The character of Valentine Gersbach is based on Jack Ludwig, a long-time friend of Bellow who had an affair with Bellow's second wife, Sondra. (*Dangling Man*, 164) Similarly, Ramona is based on Rosette Lamont, a professor of French whom Bellow dated after divorcing his second wife Sasha Tschachbasov. Both Lamont and Ludwig reviewed *Herzog* without mentioning the autobiographical elements, the latter favorably describing it as "a major breakthrough." (*Dangling Man*, 167) Asked about these similarities, Bellow said "I don't know that that sort of thing is really relevant. I mean, it's a curiosity about reality which is impure, let's put it that way. Let's both be bigger than that." (*Dangling Man*, 153)

Herzog, the protagonist of the novel, is an ordinary man in his forties, usually a period of high fecundity, but he has to face a personal issue. A total breakdown of his traditional values, initiating with the break-up of his second marriage, pushes him to reevaluate his view of reality, truth and his existence. His burning desire to put some in order the injustices he committed to others and especially the need of some answers about why others treated him unfairly to trace the quest to find the real values of life. He feels depressed by other people and as Marcus Klein points out: "Bellow's alienated hero before he is alienated is a terribly oppressed individual and it is with the feeling of his oppression that the fiction no doubt begins." Consequently, the grievance Herzog has against his ex-wife Madeleine and her accomplices on his personal catastrophe provokes the majority of his inner and outer actions. As a well educated intellectual whose book on Romanticism won a lot of esteem among other academics,

he appreciates all philosophers and scholars who influenced the way of thinking of each historical era. Accordingly, he experiences a requirement to make a synthesis of their ideas to find a universal truth about human life and happiness. Simultaneously, he looks for a narrative that will set the history of developing human consciousness in a clear order. The analysis of social and private tasks should help him to come to a concrete conclusion about the worth of life.

He appreciates reality with eyes of an isolated, alienated individual whose personal life has been completely ruined. He feels estranged from society and its values, but also from those Jewish culture, values and history his Jewish parents brought from Russia.

Herzog, like Saul Bellow himself, was brought up very modestly, his family not having money to waste. Yet when he returns to the days of his childhood in his memories, an image of a contented family arises. The more penury in life they had, the more their lives were rich in emotions, especially love. Father Herzog was admired by his wife and his children, no matter what peculiar situation he has got himself into, no matter how little money he earned. Their love was not limited by any parameter or criteria, because he was loved as a bread-winner and a similar immense love Herzog felt for his mother. She yearned for an exquisite life of her children, regardless of the cost. Thanks to flashbacks Moses now realizes that his first marriage with Daisy was not as imperfect as he thought. It was quite peaceful, Daisy being an obedient and caring wife trying to manage the household the best way she could. They had some problems as in every partnership, but it was not anything serious. Regardless of how much Daisy tried, Herzog was not gratified. He thought life with her too ordinary, thus he craved for something more. As he later says: "I gave up the shelter of an orderly, purposeful, lawful existence because it bored me, and I felt it was simply a slacker's life." (*Herzog*, 109) His relationship with Madeleine was something diametrically opposite. Madeleine was more of a beauty than a home-bird. She had spectacular ambitions, starting from her conversion to Christianity and finishing with Herzog's defeat as a highly-esteemed scholar. Thanks to her faculty of an unnoticed manipulation of people, she managed to push Herzog to marry her and after some time she almost succeeded in the destruction of his life.

The apprehension of sanity too is worth mentioning. As the novel begins, there is a claim by the main character: "If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me." (*Herzog*, 33) This is apparently a self-contradictory statement and expresses one of the most important notions of the novel. Initially, the affair of Herzog's insanity appears crystal clear. He occupies a broken-down old house, once bought with a vision of a happy rural family life with his second wife. He is presently sharing his refuge with wild animals only, having almost no contact with anyone. Besides, he writes letters that are never sent. Most of them are kept within the periphery of his mind. Such a state usually does not correspond with a commonly accepted idea of sanity. Writing highly emotional letters about his private life at one moment and serious, precisely elaborate letters of social, political philosophical concerns in the other - without any apparent connection to mental state of an individual - could be hardly considered as sane. However those signs could be misleading, because sanity is only a label constructed and judged by man. In addition, the construct of Herzog's insanity was a part of Madeleine's, his ex-wife, well-plotted plan to defeat him and enthrone herself to his position as a highly regarded intellectual. She wanted his surroundings to think he is insane and it got so far that even he, for some time, had doubts about his own sanity. In a letter addressed to Madeleine's aunt Zelda, he wrote:

As long as I was Mady's good husband, I was a delightful person.

Suddenly, because Madeleine decided that she wanted out –

Suddenly, I was a mad dog. The police were warned about me and

there was talk of committing me to an institution....You took

Madeleine's word as to my mental condition and so did others. (*Herzog*, 41)

During the mental procedure of questioning about life and death matters, the "healing process", he understands that no such a person could honestly accept what is or is not insanity. Having experienced how vulnerable people are towards ingeniously thought-out anecdotes, stories and half-truths when they hear them from a persuasive actor such as Madeleine or her lover Gersbach, he decides to find out his own real truth. As Sidney Finkelstein clarifies Herzog's point of view: "Sanity is only an adjustment to a respectable conventional life that has no real values." Moreover, Herzog realizes that people living under the rules of modern life accept values which are as per him, superficial, because they remain under the influence of ideas, notions and ideologies. Ideology plays an important part in the life of every human being, but the question is whether we really need such ideologies.

He adds that Madeleine "brought ideology into his life." (*Herzog*, 341) Her own ideology she accepts as the real one. This is not to say he had not been under the influence of ideologies before he met her. He just admits the inevitability of their closer contact, and without this experience he would not become conscious of the shallowness of the life he used to live. The years of struggles and suffering, but also happiness with Mady should have shown him some important facts about reality and about himself as well. Nevertheless, other people tried to show him how reality works. He called them "Reality Instructors": A very special sort of lunatic experts to inculcate his principles. Sandor Himmelstein, Valentine Gersbach, Madeleine P. Herzog, Moses himself. Reality instructors. They want to teach you – to punish you with – the lessons of the Real. (*Herzog*, 135) Herzog, however, himself was tagged as a "reality instructor" provided that he had his own subjective view of reality, which he tried to share with his surroundings. Accordingly, though Moses tutored people in "reality" as well. Valentine Gersbach, his ex-friend, was not honest with Herzog and did not tell him about his affair with Madeleine yet he comforted him when Moses was in despair, not to mention that Gersbach felt confident enough to advise Moses about the way Madeleine should be treated, even pampered. Valentine showed as Herzog's well known and erudite adviser and companion. Similarly Himmelstein, a lawyer who believes only in money, pragmatism, the rottenness of people and society, tried to lecture Herzog in the concepts of reality. Yet, even he as a wise guide through reality has some psychological problems, and thus has to visit a psychiatrist.

On this ground,, not being normal is nothing surprising for Herzog. Nonetheless, one has to admit that Herzog acts quite oddly in some situations. When he starts to write letters in the middle of the lecture or when he addresses his letters to dead people, it may seem a bit peculiar. However, he tries to clarify his behavior to his brother: "Will, I'm excited, not sick". Moses is aware that his manners may seem strange to others but he thinks it a part of the process he has to go through to touch the truth. In any case, he feels the need to defend himself when his relatives want him to go to hospital:

Well, you mustn't be distressed about me. I'm in a peculiar state,  
but not in a bad one. I'd open my heart to you, Will, if I could find  
the knob. There's no reason to be upset about me. By God, Will,  
I'm about to cry! How did that happen? I won't do it. It's only  
love. Or something that bears down like love. It probably is love.  
I'm in no shape to buck it. I don't want you to think anything  
wrong. (*Herzog*, 339)

The habit of letter writing though may seem absurd is an important episode to decide the inclination of Herzog towards reality, illusion, truth, insanity. The letter compositions are meant to be a means of dealing with questions Herzog attempts to answer. The most serious ones are concerned with modern society and the values of human life. Through the letters he could be in contact with people living or dead, even with God. One of the characters says: "A letter gives one a chance to consider – think matters over, and reach a more balanced view." (*Herzog*, 107)

Nevertheless, his communication is always only one-sided and thus inconsequential. This could be one of the main reasons why he gets into such a desperate state of existence and being. He never gets answers to his questions of paramount importance. Further, there is the incompetence of a meaningful two sided communication among other characters. They are too personal to find any common interest and there is always one of them subordinated to the other in some way. Madeleine, Herzog's second wife, feels the strong need to humiliate Herzog and one of her tools is communication, both verbal and non-verbal. Verbal communication is connected with the system of sounds - language. Moses wants to reach the truth with written language as he is not very skilful when it comes to outer contact with people. Language is a tool he masters perfectly and feels confident using it. As Corner highlights: "His [Herzog's] mind is predominantly verbal; because he experiences the world as a text, he seeks to represent it as a text." (372)

However, as he understands that the truth is hidden neither in questions, nor in answers. The crux lies in the process itself. On that account, Martin Corner explains in his article on Herzog:

Thought can be no liberation from the confusions of life if it gives in to "the delusion of total explanations" (H, p.166), the idiocy of having an answer for everything: "readiness to answer all questions is the infallible sign of stupidity" (H, p. 155). Truth, even the absolute truth of metaphysics, is not a claim to explain everything, to have all answers. Such a claim would represent the ultimate absorption of reality into thought, and Herzog, though engaged on an inclusive project of his own, is made to sense that total explanation is the defeat, not the fulfillment, of understanding. (372)

Each individual has his own "truth" or is influenced by other "truths". This fact can be traced in history, as well as in the present day. Any ideology is based on something that people accepting such an ideology call a truth, although such a phenomenon is not transmittable, but is highly subjective.

The pattern and fashion of people to whom the letters are addressed is eccentrically accidental. It is an amalgamation of different personalities and characters, from influential philosophers to people who are in some way related to the fate of Herzog. Yet, each letter and each person plays his own important part in the quest for truth of the main protagonist. He wants to find something he could believe in. It should be something real and deep, the essence of a human being and the sense of life. Herzog finds it very difficult in the modern time, under

the influence of different ideologies. This inner struggle is aggravated by the fact that he is not able to manage with the outer world. He is not successful when it comes to contact with other people. He is imprisoned in his inability to act in the outer world and the crisis of his self, of his ideologies. As, the inner and the outer world affect each other and one cannot function without the other, he needs to solve both problems in his inner and outer world. The problem starts off with the break-down of his outer world: both his two marriages were a failure. The break up with his first wife Daisy was very difficult and the only positive result which came from this relationship was their son Marcus. With Madeleine, it was a total catastrophe. It nearly ruined him. He attempts rather strives to resolve his situation with letters, real or mental, because he is not able to defend himself when it comes to a face-to-face situation. The question is to what extent he is really incapable of taking a step forward and what is just laziness and fear of getting too involved with people

William Shakespeare in his play *As You Like it* has mentioned the classical role a man plays during his journey on earth from birth till death

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts,

Ironically the classical and natural aforementioned journey neither suits nor befits Herzog. The modern world, for him, appears to be absurd with bizarre elements. Consequently, the society appears insulated and excessively influenced by the idea of decline. He maintains that: "Living amid great ideas and concepts, insufficiently relevant to the present, day-by-day, American conditions..."<sup>63</sup> is the cause of many of the present problems. The way people behave appears immoral and he directly encounters the lack of human values. Moses comments on freedom rather sceptically: "...people can be free now but the freedom doesn't have any content. It's like a howling emptiness." (*Herzog*, 45)

The notion that nothing really occurs as it follows from reality may be disturbing. His own self is ambiguous. His appearance is of a man from a working class, yet he is an intellectual. Furthermore, the world apparently full of paradox seems absurd. Although self-assured Himmelstein instructs Herzog in reality, he regards him as an intellectual and asks him to talk to his daughter Carmel about books and even the marriage of Herzog and Carmel comes to his mind:

"Prof, while you're here, I don't ask anything from you"(in return for bed and board, he meant) "but I'd appreciate it if you'd take an interest in her mental development. This is her chance to know an intellectual – a famous person – an authority. Will you talk to her?"

"About what?" "Books – ideas. Take her for a walk. Discuss with her. Please, Moses, I'm begging you."  
..." If Carmel was a little older, I'd say, marry her." (*Herzog*, 96)

In his despair, Herzog decides to take revenge and almost murders Gersbach, as a traitor and seducer, and Madeleine for her betrayal and all the torment she has brought to his life. However, he finally finds himself unable to commit such a dastardly act. Not only heartlessness of such a deed manifests itself, but also the absurdity, which he formerly did not notice, suddenly arises in his mind. Finally, Herzog gained the ability to see the world beyond his own interpretations. (cf. Corner, 2000) He managed to perceive “reality” without being subjective exclusively.

... Gersbach, when he looks so sugary, repulsive, poisonous, not an individual but a fragment, a piece broken off from the mob. To shoot him! – an absurd thought. As soon as Herzog saw the actual person giving an actual bath, the reality of it, the tenderness of such a buffoon to a little child, his intended violence turned into theatre, into something ludicrous. He was not ready to make such a complete fool of himself. Only self-hatred could lead him to ruin himself because his heart was “broken”. How could it be broken by such a pair? (*Herzog*, 265)

This experience is significant for his further mental development. The grotesqueness and absurdity of the world is revealed to full extent. Nonetheless, Herzog refuses to share the opinion of modern intellectuals as he once did.

This little demon was impregnated with modern ideas, and one in particular excited this terrible little heart: you must sacrifice your poor, squawking, niggardly individuality – which may be nothing anyway (from an analytic viewpoint) but a persistent infantile megalomania, or (from a Marxian point of view) a stinking little bourgeois property – to historical necessity. And to truth. And truth is true only as it brings down more disgrace and dreariness upon human beings, so that if it shows anything except evil it is illusion, and not truth. But of course he, Herzog, predictably bucking such trends, had characteristically, obstinately, defiantly, blindly but without sufficient courage or intelligence tried to be a marvelous Herzog, a Herzog who, perhaps clumsily, tried to live out marvelous qualities vaguely comprehended. (*Herzog*, 99)

Presumably, Herzog has finally found the condition of balance. At the end, he reflected: “‘ But what do you want, Herzog?’ But that’s just it – not a solitary thing. I am pretty well satisfied to be, to be just as it is willed, and for as long as I may remain in occupancy.” (*Herzog*, 325) Apparently, a state of acceptance of the outer world together with profound love of life was finally reached.

## Conclusion

All novels portray a hero in a difficult, life-changing situation Herzog; apparently reflecting Saul Bellow himself presents a hero in a nearly insane state of mind, who has recently undergone a complicated divorce with his second wife. Owing to this break-up, he is compelled to reconsider his former life and values and the letter writing serves as a unique means of dealing with the oppressive reality. Herzog isolates himself in a fractured abandoned house where he frames his letters and ponders about life. At first, he appears full of hatred accompanied by feelings of injustice. His anger nearly directs him to a violent act of revenge. Yet, this act is not accomplished as he realizes the pointlessness of it, in a view of the absurdity of life. Therefore, he returns to the countryside, where he finally reaches mental balance. The truth in Herzog is found after a total rejection of any intellectual and moral values. The hero enjoys the state of not being involved in any institution. Saul Bellow often depicts reality and the world as absurd and comic entities. The absurdity of the world is tangible in *Herzog* where the protagonist and other main characters behave eccentrically in various situations but with plausibility for life that every life is worth living, no matter how absurd it may be.

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