

## “Strange Things, Savage Things”: Saul Bellow’s Hidden Theme · Keith M. Opdahl

FROM AMONG the words that might sum up Saul Bellow in the way that “The South” does William Faulkner or “courage” does Ernest Hemingway, I would choose “sensuality”—surprisingly, I admit, since we seldom think of Bellow in this light. Bellow treats sex with neither the explicitness of John Updike nor the mysticism of Norman Mailer. His protagonist struggles not to get the girl but to get over her or away from her. Because sex is something Bellow’s women impose on the men—I think of Stella tempting Augie in *The Adventures of Augie March* or Ramona in *Herzog* entertaining a distracted and resentful Moses—the Bellow protagonist is really something of a prude.

If the mere existence of this theme is striking, however, Bellow’s use of it and the degree to which it has shaped his work are even more so. By “sensual” I mean that area of life that encompasses both intense sensation and sexuality, the first somehow becoming the second. And in these terms the sensual in Bellow’s work is not a matter of human relations (a subject explored by Victoria Sullivan) nor of sexual hygiene (see Robert Boyer’s “Attitudes toward Sex in American ‘High Culture’”), but a matter of setting and metaphysics. Sex is everywhere and nowhere; it permeates Bellow’s imaginative world with an overwhelming presence and yet is seldom remarked by the protagonist. In a very real sense Bellow’s protagonists are all the same character and suffer the same predicament: they are victims of the forces that lie behind sexuality, so that the anger of their women is nothing compared to the threat that lies just beyond the vision—the threat of an immense and angry force to which sexuality belongs.

Bellow uses sex, in short, to define our place in the universe. To his imagination, most interestingly, the sensual exists on a continuum with the energies that drive the universe and so is related to them: the sensual may hint at what we are, may dramatize at times our creaturely existence, which we must accept to be healthy—a central fact Bellow makes concrete in his masterly evocation of faces and bodies—and may at other times remind us of our perishable physical being, which the mind or the spirit sees as a cosmic putdown, the dying animal to which our consciousness is tied. Is man really an accident of nature? Bellow doesn’t think so for a minute, and the special potential in sex for tenderness and force, love and exploitation makes it a litmus test of reality.

And what kind of evidence exists for such a reading? The best evidence lies in the structuralist approach, as we seek the central tale to which Bellow returns, dressing old bones in new clothes. Sensuality provides a remarkably coherent explanation of the evolution of Bellow’s fiction. But Bellow’s imag-

ery embodies this theme as well, and so too when we plumb them do the motives of his characters. To seek evidence for this theme is soon to suffer an embarrassment of riches, for Bellow has hidden his theme in a peculiar way, as though he sought to be found out, or perhaps more accurately hoped to hide it, like Poe's Purloined Letter, in the foreground of our vision. Bellow dismisses the sensual in his work by making it central, and he does so not because he thinks it irrelevant or is himself a prude, but because of the metaphysics—the ambitious metaphysics—of his view. To examine the theme of sensuality in Bellow's work is to realize that his career has been shaped by a fascinating and ambitious attempt to solve by means of his imagination one of the hoariest and most vexing of our philosophic problems.

## I

Like just about everything else in this world, Bellow's fiction could be given a Freudian interpretation. Each of his protagonists suffers from a problem that makes sex one of the novels' centers. I don't mean a Masters and Johnson kind of disability, though Herzog hints at one, but a more general emotional or intellectual anxiety expressed indirectly. All the protagonists suffer some sort of sensual guilt, for example: Joseph of *Dangling Man* remembers a boyhood fear that he contained "something rotten," and sexuality makes Asa Leventhal in *The Victim* extremely nervous. The protagonist of *Henderson the Rain King* begins his narrative by discussing the women he has abused, and Herzog has a strong reaction to sexual abuse—his face gets hot and his breath becomes troubled as well it might since he's recently discovered he's been cuckolded.

Bellow's fiction is also Freudian in the way it plays off male against female. Again and again, the woman is replaced in the protagonist's life by a male, and particularly by a father figure. Leventhal has lost his wife Mary for a summer, leaving a gap Allbee fills. Tommy Wilhelm has put women behind him to seek a father, while Henderson flees his wife for the African Prince Dahfu. In *Mr. Sammler's Planet* the women compete with a dying man for Sammler's attention. Charles Citrine must in *Humboldt's Gift* learn to shut out the world—defined in part as his sexy girlfriend—and Joseph in Bellow's first novel is left alone all day by his working wife, which encourages the visit of a dubious male.

Bellow's women are most "present" in their absence then: the protagonist often feels childishly abandoned, and seeks not so much a lover as a parent, especially a father who will love and express confidence in him, sending him forth with a sense of his worth. In this Bellow's fiction is presexual, as the protagonist seeks the personal strength that would make a sexual relationship possible. But then the father figure also awakens certain intense emotions, for

many of the novels find their climax in the violent death of the father figure, suggesting a resented sensuality perhaps, or mixed currents of affection and hostility.

Such patterns reveal depths that may be troubled, particularly since the protagonists so obviously avert their eyes. They live in a world charged with a sexuality they don't dare recognize, perhaps because they project it onto the world. Joseph of *Dangling Man* (1944) comments on everything but sex, as his long wait for the draft in World War II gives rise to thoughts of determinism and death. And yet he describes few scenes that don't have a sexual tinge—a party in which tipsy women are hypnotized and insulted; a family dinner in which Joseph spans his nubile niece; a series of dreams in which an “ancient figure”—pushy, ingratiating, repulsive—kisses Joseph on the lips. Joseph is in fact a fastidious young man, and his growing bad temper, which finally makes him volunteer for the army, providing the novel's plot, derives as much as anything from his rejection of an unclean world. “I go in the body from nakedness to clothing and in the mind from relative purity to pollution,” he says of his daily rising. The pollution is malice, but it is also sexuality, as Joseph describes almost everything in sexual terms. Joseph's mother-in-law “powders herself thickly, and her lips are painted in the shape that has become the universal device of sensuality for all women.” A lamp post is a woman bending over a curb. Joseph spans his niece “with her long hair reaching nearly to the floor and her round, nubile thighs bare.”

Is Bellow aware of this theme? I suspect not, at least in this first novel. For when Joseph visits the sensual Kitty, with whom he'd had an adulterous affair, and finds her with another man, he shuts it from his thoughts, feeling rather a general sense of the world's uncleanness as he returns home in a streetcar filled with “a young soldier and a girl . . . both drunk,” and a woman in a short skirt, of whom, Joseph says, the conductor remarked, “she's out on business,” showing his yellow teeth in a smile.” On his way to Kitty's he had imagined the city to be a “swamp where death waited in the thickened water, his lizard jaws open.”

Students of Bellow's work will recognize a connection between Joseph's dreams, moreover, and the homosexual rape described in *Herzog*. In *Dangling Man* Joseph dreams of himself in an alley at dusk:

Suddenly I heard another set of footsteps added to mine, heavier and grittier, and my premonitions leaped into one fear even before I felt a touch on my back and turned. Then that swollen face that came rapidly toward mine until I felt its bristles and the cold pressure of its nose; the lips kissed me on the temple with a laugh and a groan. Blindly I ran, hearing again the gritting boots. The roused dogs behind the snagged boards of the fences abandoned themselves to the wildest rage of barking. I ran, stumbling through drifts of ashes, into the street.

An almost identical event in *Herzog* is described as a homosexual rape, in which the young Moses, in an alley at dusk before snarling dogs, is attacked from behind by an unshaved stranger. "And between the boy's thighs this red skinless horrible thing passed back and forth, back and forth, until it burst out foaming." Is it possible that Bellow here recounts an actual experience, perhaps as traumatic as Hemingway's famous mortar wounds? Bellow is said to be much more autobiographical in his fiction than is generally thought, but he is also capable of using the experiences and psychologies of friends—*Augie March* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* both grew out of the experiences of others. But the occasion is important to understanding Bellow's imagination either way, for if it is not autobiographical (and Bellow's protagonist is wounded every bit as much as Hemingway's), Bellow's use of it in such graphic, terrorized terms in novels twenty years apart is even more telling: first and last, Bellow is absorbed by the combination of impersonal sex and violence.

Few first novelists are in control of their material, and the young Saul Bellow was no exception. Much of the strength of his second novel, *The Victim*, however, derives from his successful struggle to control his theme, so that the novel published three years later is light years beyond *Dangling Man*. The material is more consciously sexual, and the theme of sensuality shapes the plot, as an oppressively rich and colorful world is personified in the character of Kirby Allbee—"all being"—who encroaches upon the protagonist's life. That protagonist, Asa Leventhal, is all too vulnerable because of his loneliness (his wife is visiting her mother) and his guilt over his nephew's death, not to mention the job he fears he does not deserve. Sensation scares him to death, so that as Allbee creeps ever closer to him, reading his mail, touching his hair, taking a whore in his bed and finally using his oven to attempt suicide, he feels himself drowning in the physical world. Allbee's promiscuous and unstable physical presence makes *The Victim* a parable of the flesh, as though he personified the oppressively hot summer. As he closes in on Asa, his charges of injustice (he claims Asa cost him his job years before) seem pale compared to the physical assault.

I don't think we've realized how painful the protagonist finds simple physical sensation. Colors pierce, sounds threaten, faces loom as they might to a child or a psychotic. The protagonist is so sensitive to the physical world that the color red, as Augie says, "would make you giddy and attack your heart with a power almost like a sickness . . . causing spat blood, spasm and rot." The world to Bellow is unclean, a view that grows from his intense description (since an intense, isolated detail seems naturally hallucinated), but which also derives from sexuality and violence. On a hot morning Leventhal is awakened by cries outside his window where a man tries to grab a woman while two soldiers, presumably her companions, watch amused. The scene haunts Asa:

... he really did not know what went on about him, what strange things, savage things. They hung near him all the time in trembling drops, invisible, usually, or seen from a distance. But that did not mean that there was always to be a distance, or that sooner or later one or two of the drops might not fall on him.

It is Leventhal's moral sense—his gut feeling that the physical world will somehow punish him for his sins—that makes this powerful. He lives, in that era before air conditioning, in a literal summer hell. The "drops" of violent sexuality are the harsh, impersonal, mechanical grab of sex we can associate with the naturalism of Bellow's youth, the epitome of which is the crowd, the steaming millions out of which the pushy Allbee steps one summer night. To the Bellow protagonist the crowd is the flesh, as in the park in which Allbee appears, in the softness of all those bodies and in the way those eyes stare, revealing as Bellow never fails to note all kinds of desire. The crowd reminds the protagonist of the species, extending back in time through countless numbers to the mystery of our origin and the strange guess, the hint and smell, of some kind of purpose. The crowd is thus sexuality and metaphysics, the mystery of our flesh made real; and while it evokes a deep sympathy for our vulnerability, it also evokes the impersonal lunge of the species, the blind, mechanical and sometimes violent need to reproduce, the creature "using the individual," as Rogin reflects bitterly in the story "A Father-To-Be." "The life force occupied each of us in turn in its progress toward its own fulfillment, trampling on our individual humanity, using us for its own ends like mere dinosaurs or bees."

The crowd's potential for violence, its testimony to the blind process of reproduction, in which sex is technology, makes it the true antagonist of many of the novels, as in the next work Bellow seems to have begun (though it was not published until 1956) "Seize the Day." For after Tommy Wilhelm, an ex-salesman down on his luck with a divorce and a mistress and a failed nerve, has been rejected by two fathers—his real one and a spurious one who cheats him—he stumbles out into the street, an angry and broken man. And there he sees the epitome of the life force that has done him in: in the "gassy air" of upper Broadway, Bellow writes,

almost motionless under the leaden spokes of sunlight ... sawdust footprints lay about the doorways of butcher shops and fruit stores. And the great, great crowd, the inexhaustible current of millions of every race and kind pouring out, pressing round, of every age, of every genius, possessors of every human secret, antique and future, in every face the refinement of one particular motive or essence—I LABOR, I SPEND, I STRIVE, I DESIGN, I LOVE,

I CLING, I UPHOLD, I GIVE WAY, I ENVY, I LONG, I  
SCORN, I DIE, I HIDE, I WANT.

The gentle Tommy has literally drowned in this “inexhaustible current,” and what is more, he suffers from the life force within, for it has led him to make his mistakes—to quit college to become a movie actor for example—and even to be self-destructive, as his aggressions are turned upon himself. In “Seize the Day” the world and the forces that drive it are more quietly expressed than in *The Victim*, but are in fact more dreadful, tackier—like the storefronts of upper Broadway—and crueler and less amenable to survival; “the strange things” that Leventhal fears are here dramatized in people, most of whom hide a fierce will behind a sneaky pretense. Tommy is so hemmed in, so defeated, so unable to find hope anywhere, really, that his climax involves not acceptance of the world but transcendence of it.

We can't be sure where Bellow got his idea of the “life force.” Clearly it owes much to Theodore Dreiser and just as much to Bellow's own imaginative perception. Charles Darwin is central. But it also owes a great deal to Wilhelm Reich, who not only defines a world charged with sexuality, but who also like Bellow saw an intimate connection between the life force and character. Tommy barely speaks to a woman in the course of his story, and yet, as sex plays about the fringe of his consciousness—in his wife's wrath or in the cruel curve of a bather's genitalia—he is a classic case of Freudian anxiety, traceable to sexual repression. He embodies the Reichian psychology, in which the world is charged with orgone energy, a life-giving power that is physical and associated with sexual energy but which the neurotic blocks, so that it makes him sick. Tommy needs more than anything to open himself—he's locked in by a kind of emotional armor. He is rigid and constricted: he has trouble breathing because his chest is so tight. When at the end he manages to flow in good Reichian fashion, when he has been beaten everywhere, having lost money on grain speculation, and stumbles into a funeral parlor to weep openly before the corpse of a stranger, his rigidity like his pretense is dissolved. If he is publicly humiliated in this final, powerful scene, he is also publicly true, the businessman's Authur Dimmesdale, and for the first time is open, full of feeling, with the relief and the triumph of purged emotion.

## II

By the time of *The Adventures of Augie March* in 1953, Bellow was highly conscious of his sexual theme, and it led him to develop striking parallels between his characters and their setting in a way reminiscent of Balzac. If the masses represent the impersonal, fierce and sexy life force, then it is telling that Augie (described by Bellow as on a “fantasy holiday”) lives happily among

the masses, conspicuously free of Leventhal's gloom and Wilhelm's pain. Augie is at home among all the things Leventhal feared—mental weakness, violence, sex. He defines himself as a man of love who accepts everything life brings his way. *Nothing* bothers him, for he is, he tells us, a physical creature, totally uninhibited, completely at home in his body. While the Machiavellians who surround him make decisions in terms of thought and power, weaving incredible ideologies, Augie listens to his flesh, and is a hotblooded, spontaneous creature of his glands. "We were susceptible to love," the illegitimate Augie says of the Marches. Like his Momma and the retarded Georgie, Augie is full of "blood-loaded, picturesque amorousness."

What makes *The Adventures of Augie March* even more remarkable, however, is the way in which Bellow uses his plot to "test" Augie's sexy character. Even here, in a novel with vivid characterization, sex is important for what it means. Behind the accommodation that critics loved, and the new rough energy that he showed was still possible in the Jamesian Fifties, Bellow had attempted an ambitious experiment. Augie was not only to be happy, he was to triumph. He was to show that goodness is physical, first of all—the point of the "blood-loaded, picturesque amorousness"—and that in a world of harsh force, the good can prevail. Thus Augie is beat up as a Jew on a winter afternoon—and shrugs it off. A good heart and a loving nature are practical in a Darwinian world; they are as much a part of our physical universe as competition. Maybe, Augie says of Grandma Lausch's militant fierceness, "it wasn't so necessary to lie."

It is Augie's fellow man who would make lies necessary, of course, but the novel stresses that such forceful, predatory people almost have to be hard to match the harsh life force flowing about them. Sex is atmospheric in Bellow's work because Bellow's imagination is substantial—it works in terms of substances, metaphorically, pointing always toward some essence and yet always perceiving the connection of that reality to people. *Augie March* finds much of its power in the way it proceeds on this parallel course, the Machiavellians responding to a harsh universe even as they appear to represent it.

And what is this force to which they respond? Bellow is a realistic novelist, catching the quiver of power stations and subways and the elevated. Cities do pulse, just as Augie describes them; they are charged with an energy not always distinguishable from flying grit. But Bellow's idea of force is a cluster of many other ideas as well, ranging from petty human malice to a sense of cosmic evil, from the Darwinian idea of fierce conflict to what Leventhal sees in the sun: "something inhuman that didn't care about anything human and yet was implanted in every human being too, one speck of it, and formed a part of him that responded to the heat and glare . . ." Our capacity for cruel indifference mates us to the indifferent universe. But do other capacities mate us to a different kind of universe? Bellow follows Wilhelm Reich in equating cosmic

to biological force. Is there a physical equivalent to man's spiritual energy? Because goodness is so seldom sexy, the question to the well-meaning, gentle protagonists is a practical one as well.

A more fastidious protagonist might well have felt in Augie's world a need for cleansing, and such is certainly the case with many of the other protagonists. They would have felt a need for peace, too, for Augie's world is exhausting: the young man is worn out by sensation. No wonder he yearns for a quiet place to enjoy what he calls the "axial lines" of harmony. Bellow's confession that *The Adventures of Augie March* was a "fantasy holiday" masks the fact that it was the first of a new set of novels, comprising a second stage in the evolution of his canon. *Dangling Man* and *The Victim* and "Seize the Day" can be viewed as rejections of the physical world. Joseph's final immersion in the army—certainly a "crowd"—is bitter and despairing. Leventhal's need to accept the flesh is belied by the symbolism of the gas that almost kills him, seeping from Allbee's suicide oven. And Tommy Wilhelm finds no help in the human creatures around him.

But by the time of *The Adventures of Augie March*, Bellow had swung to the view that we must accept the flesh, and that—in a way reminiscent of the views of Wilhelm Reich—we can even find salvation in it. Thus Augie is physical, and Bellow's next novel also celebrates the physical. And why did Bellow change? His unpleasantly intense world offers as convincing a reason as any: the sensational world is close to intolerable without some redeeming value, and indeed, its very intensity suggests a hidden power: might it not reasonably be expected to yield up a kind of wisdom?

The liberal in Bellow had a hand too, for what Bellow's quest amounted to in the end was nothing less—in the terms of his imagination—than discovering good in the midst of evil, a theme that makes *Henderson The Rain King* as exciting intellectually as it is funny. The story of an American millionaire's trip to an imaginary Africa, where he meets two tribes, *Henderson* is the sexiest of all of Bellow's novels—perhaps the reason Bellow published an essay at the same time warning his readers against "symbol-hunting." Henderson worries desperately about his teeth, well known for their sexual connotations, and has a run-in with equally sexy frogs. He flees to Africa because of his trouble with his wives and the fact that he scared another woman to death. He is jealous of his friend's marriage, and when he enters the African interior, for which we might read his interior, he finds two tribes living out sexual stereotypes, one meek and loving and the other fierce and active.

Eugene Henderson is really a flattering version of Freudian anxiety—anxiety defined as a cosmic yearning. Because of the two tribes, one governed by a queen, the other by a king, it's impossible not to see *Henderson* as a sexual allegory. And yet Bellow goes much deeper than stereotypes, for he uses these tribes for metaphysical purposes, too, as each reacts differently

to the African drought, suggesting a different version of what is real, or at least a different way of controlling it. The first tribe, the Arnewi, embody a loving goodness in a harsh desert. The second tribe, the Wariri, are about as gentle as the Pittsburgh Steelers, and in fact represent the harsh force, the malicious willfulness, amongst which Augie sought to survive. The Wariri beat their gods—and perform Henderson tells us “savage customs of the night.” Just as Bellow hoped to snatch a loving goodness from the coals of force in *Augie March*, so he would find a source of good in *Henderson* among the abominable Wariri.

And the source of that good was really rather reasonable, for Prince Dahfu keeps pet lions under the palace—the lion being the tribe’s totem. Although the lions have eyes like “circles of wrath,” embodying the angry element Bellow sees in reality, they are also graceful and self-sufficient. Their beauty lies in their total impersonality and indifference—qualities that would be a tonic to an anxious worrier like Henderson. In simpler terms, Henderson needs the kind of strength the lion has: Henderson’s “badness” is clearly the result of his personal weakness. And while Henderson had fought with his wives, Dahfu cherishes his, all forty of them, and despite the fact that if he fails even one of them sexually he will be strangled.

Dahfu’s ease is thus remarkable and gives the precise definition to Henderson’s anxiety. Although Bellow never says so, it is sexual, and Henderson, who is cured by female lions, finds in his deepest Africa what amounts to a sexy joke: Henderson as Rain King inherits Dahfu’s family, with all its duties and conditions. “Your Highness,” Henderson croaks to a dying Dahfu, “What have you pulled on me?”

*Henderson* too like *Augie March* proceeds on a double track, as Henderson lives among certain qualities in people and sees those same qualities as principles (either physical or metaphysical) in the setting. The nervous charge of Augie’s Chicago becomes a glittering, metallic desert light. Augie had glimpsed the “axial lines,” which could be found “with the help of love,” and without which, he says, “your existence is merely clownery, hiding tragedy.” Henderson glimpses a strange pink light which he says speaks to him, a lovely light that contrasts with the cold look of death in an octopus’ eyes. Bellow here indulges what we might call the medieval cast to his mind, for just as he sought to express a cosmic principle in metaphoric terms in the earlier novels, so he now embodies similar abstract principles in a concrete form—a cow, a lion, a bear—that is comic and thus camouflages what I think is Bellow’s secret, which is that he means such things after all. Might goodness survive in a naturalistic universe? It certainly might if it finds its center in the flesh, among savage tribes and wild beasts. Henderson rejects the Wariri in a confusing shift that mars the novel, but Bellow’s fantasy was clear: the destructive Henderson would discover goodness in the midst of destructiveness, and the key element, at least in Bellow’s dramatization of the theme, would be sexual.

### III

Bellow's last three novels are filled with a repugnance toward sex that marks a new and different direction in his thought. No longer does he embrace the Lawrentian idea that we must "accept" the conditions of our biological life, including mortality. No longer does he accept the notion that to avoid the disadvantages of the flesh—death, disorder, a limit to freedom—is to avoid life itself, including love or family, and to become a monomaniac pursuing an idea to the exclusion of all else.

In *Henderson*, rather, Bellow feels that the world may indeed be "evaded"—that is, transcended in one way or another. In fact the world he portrays must be transcended, for it is unclean, cluttered, trivial, destructive of human life. Looking back from these later novels, we realize that every novel has been driven to a moment of peace in which the protagonist finds the world shut out and his perceptions, those ever painful perceptions, reduced. More and more Bellow dramatizes the world's triviality in sexual terms, showing sex to be grotesque, comic, awful. An inept professor sends a diaphragm to his vacationing wife; a black pickpocket forces an old man to view his genitals; a beauty uses the protagonist's foot to masturbate in a classy restaurant. Bellow's rejection of the world reaches the point at which the world is not even important enough to be evil—it's superficial, rigid, thin, and best portrayed by the ridiculous machinations of a contrived plot.

But Bellow did not leap to this new idea at once: it is the tension created by the shift that makes *Herzog* (1965) one of Bellow's very finest novels and perhaps one of the great novels of the world. The old attitudes linger in *Herzog*, so that almost every paragraph balances an appreciation of beauty that is transcendent in its delicacy with a revulsion with a world that must finally be rejected. More importantly, Bellow finds his drama in this tension, as he portrays a protagonist who is himself in transition from the old "personalist" view—based on a biological or Lawrentian bias—to a new, rational (and comparatively abstract) view. Thus the ultimate antagonist in this novel is not Herzog's ex-wife Madeleine, who kicks him out of the house and then abuses his daughter June, but Herzog's girlfriend Ramona, who hopes to cure Herzog's grief with her comforting sex. Ramona espouses a form of body-mysticism, arguing that Herzog need only follow the bidding of his flesh and he will be whole.

Ramona, moreover, is only part of the sensuality in this novel. Herzog is a cuckold, lives among such sex-crazed citizens as a cabbie who describes his previous evening's intercourse, and travels in a subway scrawled with graffiti. Having brooded about a report that Madeleine and Gersbach have locked June in a car, Herzog is propelled to Chicago by the sex crimes he witnesses in a New York court room.

And the texture of the novel is charged with sexuality, too: Herzog notes in a crowd—always a crowd—“the big legs of women and blotted eyes of men, sunken mouths and inky nostrils” while above “an escaped balloon was fleeing like a sperm.” Even the climax of the book, as Herzog gazes upon the man who stole his wife, has a curious sexual flavor, as the hidden Herzog, “looking down his open shirt front” as Gersbach bathes Junie, “saw the hair-covered heavy soft flesh of Gersbach’s breast.”

Herzog is not only touched by the “strange things, savage things” Leventhal fears in *The Victim*, he is immersed in them, as he muses that the model of all creation is the ocean and then describes himself watching Madeleine “as though he were submerged, through the vitreous distortion of deep water.” To the theater imagery which shapes this book we must add that of water: Moses swims in a medium that is the essence of sensuality. Here for example, are Herzog and Madeleine on a New York street.

“Aren’t you coming? What are you doing?” said Madeleine. Perhaps he was not yet fully awake. Herzog was loitering for a moment near the fish store, arrested by the odor. A thin muscular Negro was pitching buckets of ground ice into the deep window. The fish were packed together, backs arched as if they were swimming in the crushed, smoking ice, bloody bronze, slimy black green, gray-gold—the lobsters were crowded to the glass, feelers bent. The morning was warm, gray, damp, fresh, smelling of the river. Pausing on the metal doors of the sidewalk elevator, Moses received the raised pattern of the steel through his thin shoe soles; like Braille. But he did not interpret a message. The fish were arrested, lifelike, in the white, frothing, ground ice. The street was overcast, warm and gray, intimate, unclean, flavored by the polluted river, the sexually stirring brackish tidal odor.

“I can’t wait for you, Moses,” said Madeleine, peremptory, over her shoulder.

Bellow obtains the sense of immersion by noting the sensations we usually filter out of our consciousness: the feel of the air on our skin, the pressure of the uneven ground on our shoesoles. Light is a medium in which Herzog swims, an effect Bellow achieves by making it damp and fragrant, something felt by the skin. But the point is Bellow’s double effect of loveliness and dissolution, of the exquisite and the over-ripe, of this world and, because of the Braille “message,” some other, deeper one. The bloody fish on the “white, frothing, ground ice” contrast with the delicate feel of the raised pattern beneath his shoes. The foreground is soiled, disturbing; the distance is delicate and fragrant, full of hints. The fish themselves are both lovely—colorful, rich,

lifelike—and awful, corpses bent with their bloody bronze. Bellow actually describes the air twice, seeing it first as neutral—“warm, gray, damp, fresh”—and then as impure, “unclean, flavored by the polluted river, the sexually stirring brackish tidal odor.”

In what is Bellow’s finest novel, then, Bellow mixes beauty and revulsion, and he does so not only in his descriptions. Moses’ appreciation of this beauty makes Madeleine impatient—it is Moses’ receptivity to sensation, his passive enjoyment of the world, that distracts and unmans him. The Madeleines of this world demand fiercer stuff than a love of beauty. Almost overwhelmed by a harsh and unclean world, Moses must discover some way to cope with it: the “story” of this book is finally the record of those attempts, as Moses undergoes an attempted cure by Ramona and then overreacts, muddling his way finally to the sense of ease at the end, dramatized by the fact that he’s no longer afraid of her sexiness.

Moses Herzog might be the only cuckold in history who doesn’t worry about his sexual powers; even as it shapes the structure, sex seems the only thing in this novel not pondered. But then Moses consciously rejects the physical world: noting that Tante Taube has a sheeplike look, he warns himself that “such a figurative habit of mind . . . was likely to ruin him some day.” Moses seeks rationality, coolness, the dry virtues of citizenship, which he prefers now to the physical and imaginative preoccupations of the Romantics he’d studied. If the novel does not quite achieve this dryness—ending as it began in a kind of tension—Bellow’s next novel succeeds, as Arthur Sammler in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* brings Herzog’s desire to fruition. Elderly and rational, his passions totally checked, Mr. Sammler is surrounded in New York by a bunch of creeps whose unbounded desire finds expression in sexuality. He is shouted down at Columbia by students who charge that the old man can know nothing because he’s impotent. He’s figuratively raped by the black pickpocket and mentally raped by the people who insist on telling him about their sex lives. Everyone is obsessed with sex, while violence floats about the city—the culture is breaking down, as indeed it was at the time, so that the much criticized *Sammler* might be the best book that Bellow could have written during such a period.

Bellow’s story really makes good sense: in the midst of the confused New York scene, Mr. Sammler seeks only to do the decent thing, to say farewell to a dying friend and to return a stolen manuscript. But Bellow now appears bad-tempered, and rejects the world completely, not only in the secondary characters—the dying man’s daughter is more concerned with her sex life than her father’s death—but in his descriptions, which are sour and full of revulsion. “The sunlight was yellow, sweet,” Sammler thinks, “it was horrible.” Bellow begins to describe the meat wholesaler’s area in New York with an eye to its color and vitality: “The sides of beef and pork, gauze-wrapped, blood-spotted.

Things edible would always be respected by a man who had nearly starved to death." But the subject is too much, and as Sammler notes rats as big as dachshunds, his attitude turns: "You were not sure whether the rawness came from the tidewater or the blood. . . . Try to stroll here. The pavements were waxed with fat."

Such passages reflect an almost programmatic advance in the rejection of the physical world begun with *Herzog*. Most people are asleep, Sammler notes, and adds that "individuals like Sammler were only one stage forward, awakened not to purpose but to aesthetic consumption of the environment"—a sense of physical beauty Sammler rejects because of its "doggish hind-sniffing charm." Mr. Sammler rejects figurative thinking too, leaning away from the flesh to a world of pure thought. And so too does Charles Citrine in Bellow's latest novel to date, *Humboldt's Gift* (1975). To Citrine too the world is crazy, consisting of two males, the great dead poet Humboldt, who was made desperate by a Philistine culture, and the living but equally desperate Cantabile, a small time Chicago hood who smashes Citrine's Mercedes and forces him at gunpoint to watch him defecate. The clutter and contrivance of the novel reflect Bellow's rather low opinion of our American culture, and embody some of Bellow's best and worst writing, as though Bellow were Faulkner, mixing it all up. Citrine's memories of Humboldt, with whom he quarreled and broke, are Bellow at his best (and may have been written as early as 8 or 10 years before publication). The Cantabile material, as well as a plethora of other characters and events—the sex pot Renata, who betrays Citrine, the pal Thraxter and the divorce lawyers, who betray him too—all of these characters blend to produce the kind of frantic, superficial, sliding world that might belong to pop music, say, or the sleazier movie companies. In the age of Watergate, of course, such a world might be our reality.

Can Charles Citrine "accept" such a world? He almost drowns in it, but consciously develops the ability to turn away from it to his own mind. The world pursues him (as another ex-wife demands money), chases him down, threatens to drown him, but he grows in his power to shut it out, a power based on a religious faith deriving from Rudolf Steiner and American Transcendentalism. Finally manipulated and rejected by Renata, Citrine finds peace in a much more spartan way of life.

Thus Bellow has come full cycle. The later sections of *Humboldt's Gift* have a touch of the black and white abstractness of *Dangling Man*. And Charles Citrine, confronted with gangsters who are comically equivalent to World War II, succeeds in doing what Joseph sought: to dismiss the distracting world and to get down to his own business, conducted pretty much in his own head. Bellow's latest art has suffered, I think, not only because he is abstract, having lost interest in the physical world that supplied his rich detail, but because his low opinion of the actual world permits him to indulge in coincidence and

contrivance as a type of realism. To Charles Citrine, the world is third-rate melodrama, and barely to be tolerated.

What can we make of all this? I don't want to say that every word Bellow writes is obsessed with the sensual, of course. Like every good realist, Bellow is bemused by phenomena such as the American's inability to listen (*Augie March*) or the adoption of roles (*Herzog*) or the mediocrity's need for distinction ("Seize the Day"). He plays with imagery and lighting, and loves ideologies of all kinds. And yet it's clear that in every one of the novels the world pursues the hero, tormenting him and using him, distracting him from what he knows is important. Bellow's genius lies in the variety of ways he has dramatized this oppressive world, every one of which contains some component of the sensual. As Bellow has found himself caught between mind and flesh, the intellectual and the instinctual, he has sought to discover a mysticism of matter, seeking the good that balances the pure force of naturalism, and then has shifted to a spiritual mysticism that shuts out the social world of man and makes matter mere appearance.

Both impulses belong to the fact that Bellow's greatest strength as a writer is his incredible sensitivity to the physical world, which gives not only his intensely evocative description but the pain that drives him to understand matter. In his novels Bellow has taken on nothing less than the burden of the Twentieth Century, seeking tangible (imaginative) evidence of a reality besides the naturalistic one. If goodness resides in matter, so be it, though Bellow was never able to be more than vague about it. If goodness resides in spirit, then so be that too, Bellow feels, and so writes in *Humboldt's Gift* one of the few novels in which private religious experience is incorporated fully into the novel.

But perhaps the greatest significance of this theme is in Bellow's art, and particularly in the very fine unity it has achieved. To acknowledge the sensual theme is to bridge the rather large gap between the social side of Bellow's awareness and the metaphysical, two distinct emphases that often make critics appear to talk about two different writers. Sex is a sensitive measure of social status, and perhaps a barometer of social health. But it also transcends the social, rooted as it is in physical structure. Sex pulls the mysteries of the flesh and the spirit into the city street, especially in terms of the crowd, and so unifies our various identities as creatures and citizens.

Bellow's settings and characters are also strikingly parallel, as we've seen, and so too are the plots and Bellow's metaphysical ambitions. For just as Bellow clearly awaits what his imagination will bring him, so the most basic activity of his fiction, the real action of the story, is a matter of this very looking: the protagonist stares at the world, as though he too like Bellow awaited the striking image or metaphor or epiphany his imagination would bring. If we don't get many extended human relationships, we do get the infinite one

between man and matter. The protagonist looks at the physical world like a child staring at a corpse, trying to penetrate the mystery of its stillness, and if that mystery is charged with sexuality, appearing as a mechanical device in a dead world or as a symbol in a spiritual one, the mystery is all the greater.

The plot within which the protagonist does his staring parallels the imagery as well, especially in the confrontation with the world that forms just about all the novels. For it's remarkable, finally, that so many Bellow novels should build to a violent embrace between the protagonist and another male. Wilhelm and Sammler pray before dead men. Henderson holds the dying prince in his arms. Joseph dreams of the figure of death and Leventhal wrestles with an Allbee bent on death. Sammler must watch the pickpocket bludgeoned, and even Augie March near the end of his novel must fight for his life. Again and again, the form varying, Bellow imagines as the climax of his story this scene of violence and death and male embrace.

And yet the scene transcends even the theme of sensuality. Hostility, tenderness, regret, sexuality—the scene contains all these things. It's a fantasy, the root occasion of the work, expressing vicariously all sorts of emotions we forbid ourselves in conscious life. Each novel imbues the scene with a different conscious meaning, and yet the scene has its own meaning—the supreme lover is death. The father is dead or will die. The world dies—the world is death—the scene contains all of these meanings and yet transcends them, creating its own meaning in the experience offered, in the fact that by living the scene vicariously we express certain hidden feelings. As he kneels before the dying father, the son feels his own life affirmed and strengthened. Is it a scene of reconciliation or is it the fantasized death of an enemy? Or is it the fantasy of the only embrace American males permit themselves—in combat? Does it hark back to a childhood trauma? However we interpret this element, we've got to recognize its presence and the way it informs Bellow's fiction. Certainly it offers another explanation of the richness of Bellow's style and the power, lying far below the conscious ideas, of his fiction.