

Zeitschrift: Études de Lettres : revue de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Lausanne
Herausgeber: Université de Lausanne, Faculté des lettres
Band: 1 (1978)
Heft: 1

Artikel: Saul Bellow and individualism
Autor: Schroeter, James / Junod, Philippe
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-870930>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 07.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

SAUL BELLOW AND INDIVIDUALISM

When the Nobel Prize Committee of Stockholm selected Saul Bellow for its 1976 literary award, it was reported by the newspapers that he did not wish to make too much of the honor. As a literary democrat, he is aware that a mass jury made up of the millions who read or do not read his books casts an independent vote; and as an intellectual historian, he is aware that time, a crueler and more inexorable judge, will make the final decision. Yet the prize nonetheless marks publicly a certain historical accomplishment; and it provides an occasion on which one can raise questions about the state of American letters today, and the nature of Bellow's accomplishment.

Among the American writers who have been honored by the Nobel committee, the four who have withstood the test of time best include the poet T. S. Eliot and the dramatist Eugene O'Neill, both born in the 1880's, and two novelists, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, both born in the closing years of the 19th century. These are writers Bellow was familiar with as a college student in the 1930's, and two of them, Hemingway and Eliot, have conspicuously marked his work — Hemingway his earlier work, especially *The Adventures of Augie March* and *Henderson the Rain King*; Eliot, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. In this sense, Bellow can be said to incorporate an older tradition, but his relationship to it has been complex, ironic, perhaps because the tradition, since the time of Emerson, has demanded individualism and even revolt from its disciples rather than adherence or obedience.

Much the same ironic or uneasy relation to the tradition marks the other important writers of Bellow's generation — the writers

born at the time of the first World War, who grew up in the America of the 1920's and 1930's, who fought in some cases in the second World War, and who came to literary maturity in the years immediately following it. The names of a dozen or so contemporaries of Bellow come readily to mind: the novelists Bernard Malamud, J. D. Salinger, Norman Mailer, Ralph Ellison; the playwrights Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams; the poets Robert Lowell, Karl Shapiro and Delmore Schwartz. United as these writers have been by common experiences and values, however, they do not, in the strict sense of the word, form a "group". Bellow's literary and political relations with most of these authors seem never to have been unusually close, and certainly not decisive in the development of his art. Critics and pedagogues link names together, but the writers themselves continue to protest these couplings and to affirm their autonomy. Arthur Miller notably, and Bellow on certain occasions, have lent their names and energies to political and literary causes ; but unlike the Imagist poets of 1914, or the Southern Agrarian writers in 1930, the post-World War II American writers have not written literary manifestes; they have not tried to define their common aims; they have not thought of themselves as a group. Quite the contrary, their creative energies have been spent in enlarging, perfecting and diagnosing their own respective individualities, each in his own way; and this description, although it applies to all of the writers I have mentioned, is especially true of Bellow. If he stands out as in some way superior to his contemporaries, it has been by virtue of the superior complexity, irony and interest of his individualism.

The contradictory relationship of the American writer to his literary tradition may well be a reflection of the larger realities and contradictions of American life. For example, even a partisan American is forced to admit that there is a dreary sameness to large parts, perhaps to the whole, of the American scene. American cities, in some cases thousands of miles apart, look very much alike. It is also true that American tastes and the American life-style are too often dominated by mass tastes and mass opinions. But side by side with this dreary uniformity, which may result from something different than a desire for uniformity, the typical American, who considers himself an individualist, yearns for individual liberty, and considers himself entitled to it. These feelings have not always translated themselves into useful, beautiful or admirable social realities. The assassinations which disfigured American politics in the 1960's; the glaring inequality of wealth, and the physical rot at the core, which prevails

in the large city today; the unrestrained and increasingly wasteful expenditure of energy and natural resources which imperils the future — all of these ugly realities, and a great many others, are no doubt caused or aggravated by the yearning for individual liberty which I mention. For clearly, if one places a great enough emphasis on the value of unimpeded individual freedom, one is likely to be suspicious of and hostile to institutions, laws, traditions, authority or even the restraints imposed by democratic consensus and majority rule. Few societies have been willing to risk their future and to pay so high a cost in the present and past for a value as fragile, intangible and dubious as individualism. In that sense, at least, America is an individualistic society.

American individuality has expressed itself in others ways as well — the automatic washing machine, the open classroom, innovations and scientific accomplishments of all kinds, competitiveness and the striving for excellence. Bellow's complex attitudes towards individualism, both his critical rejection of certain aspects of it and his uncritical celebration of other aspects, may be a reflection of these contradictions in American life. But whether one chooses to regard Bellow's own individualism as the culture and temperament from which his work stems, as the method he has used in writing his novels, or as the real subject of his books, it is undeniably true that over a period of more than thirty years and the publication of eight major novels, he has defined and probed the meaning of individual consciousness and individual existence. This process is the thread which traces his development as a writer.

I

Bellow's first novel, *The Dangling Man* (1944), written during the second World War, takes as its hero an intellectual who, because there is a war and because he is waiting to be called, lives his life during a period of several months in a state of almost complete disengagement, freedom and alienation — without work, confined for the most part in a hotel room, without ordinary responsibilities and obligations, his hours filled with meaningless, self-imposed rituals. Oppressed by his freedom and imprisoned in its emptiness, he welcomes the army's call when it finally comes. His last entry in his diary is in part as follows: "I am no longer to be held accountable for

myself; I am grateful for that. I am in other hands, relieved of self-determination, freedom cancelled. Hurray for regular hours ! And for the supervision of the spirit ! Long live regimentation !”

The serious-comic rightness of these words depends on all that Bellow has specified before, including his picture of Joseph, the hero, as a liberal intellectual steeped in an Enlightenment and post-enlightenment culture. But the ironic richness also depends on what Bellow does not specify, including the American cultural and literary situation at the time the book appeared. The terms “counter-culture” and “Literary establishment” had not yet been invented, but what would now be called the “Literary establishment” was in the process of re-interpreting American literary history, and re-casting the images of America’s literary heroes. Poe, of course, but also Hawthorne and Melville, who was assigned a larger role than ever before, were “alienated” artists, heroes by virtue of the fact that they stood apart from their society; and even the democratic Walt Whitman and the millionaire entertainer Mark Twain, were being recast as models and examples of the “alienated” artist. The influential writer of that decade was, of course, the expatriate Ernest Hemingway, but in the pages of the *Partisan Review* the honorific “alienated” was applied equally to Joyce, Conrad, Eliot, Kafka, Proust, Malraux. “Long live regimentation” is a delightful thrust at the complacent arrogance of the *Partisan Review* intellectual, and at what was unexamined and unindividualized in his most precious intellectual assumptions. But the thrust could hardly have been easy for Bellow to formulate or express. Some of his closest literary friends in the 1940’s were drawn from the brilliant group of poets, critics and political theorists who edited or contributed to the magazine, and as early as 1941 Bellow’s own youthful writing had appeared in its pages. In probing and examining the weaknesses of Joseph, the “dangling man,” Bellow probed his own, and at the difficult point at which what was strength and what was weakness were most closely interwoven.

Like *La Porte étroite* by André Gide which is, in a sense, a refutation of the premises and conclusions of *L’Immoraliste*, Bellow’s second novel, *The Victim* (1947) rubs in a direction contrary to his first — through a different situation, an opposite kind of hero. Although an editor, Asa Leventhal is not an intellectual. Essentially, he is a moral man, and moral in a rather traditional way. He is hard-working, responsible, and scrupulously honest and fair. But he builds this otherwise rather ordinary morality on an extraordinary passion for defining objectively his obligations and responsibilities to

others, and their responsibilities to him. When the novel opens he is confronted by what appears to be an absurd claim made by a man he does not recognize who says that Leventhal had many years before done him an injury which, though slight, had ruined his life. In trying to prove to himself that these words are without any basis, Leventhal proves to himself that they may possibly have a basis; and in trying to acquit himself of his responsibility to this other man, who is an anti-Semite and Leventhal's enemy, he succeeds only in entangling their two lives more intimately together. At the end when Allbee, the anti-Semite, tries to end his own life, he very nearly, by accident or intention, ends the Jew's life; and when Leventhal, awakened from sleep by the smell of escaping gas, saves his own life, he accidentally saves Allbee's.

The lines of this fable are relatively hard and narrow, but a complex of fluid meanings, not easily described, washes in an interference pattern over the sharp edges, especially when the book is compared, as it ought to be, with Bellow's first. Leventhal tries to realize himself as a person and individual by rightness of conduct, and tries to found this rightness on correct judgements of people — his sister-in-law, his brother's mother-in-law, Allbee, etc. But to be clear-sighted, he must not cloud his vision with love, sympathy or false pity. His dilemma is that without love his "rightness" turns into something dangerously like egoism, while with love his objectivity is destroyed. Joseph, the hero of Bellow's first novel, fails as an individual because knowledge and intellect without responsibility is not a moral program. But Leventhal, the responsible man who tries to give justice and to get justice, fails because morality, no matter how great the attempt to give it objectivity, fails without love — and fails, for different reasons, with it.

Both of these novels probe from opposite directions at crucial instances of "failed individuality" (to use the phrase Bellow was to employ in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*). But Bellow's third novel, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) is not only a probe, it is also a celebration of individuality, "failed individualism" and individuality triumphant, and in the two sense of individuality — as a subject, and as a language and literary method.

Augie the hero is not an intellectual, but he loves books, adores ideas, and is hungry for abstract truth, indeed is repeatedly seduced by abstract truths of the most contradictory kinds. Neither is he moral. Like Huckleberry Finn, after whom Bellow has clearly patterned him, he lies, steals, abandons his responsibilities, and finds it

impossible to live according to fixed principles ; and if the reader loves him it is because he has, as Grandma Lausch says, "a good heart". Neither is Augie an individualist, certainly not in the accepted sense. Bellow's Chicago of the 1920's and 1930's, the world in which most of the events take place, is half like Dreiser's Chicago or Zola's Paris: a deterministic universe of competing forces which leave little room for dignified individual gestures. But even within this reduced space, Augie does not seem to be an individualist. On the contrary. His clever, ambitious older brother Simon or the iron-willed Grandma Lausch, the neighborhood "Machiavelli", are brilliant individualists. So are the almost endless succession of teachers, guardians, bosses and managers who, one after another, take over Augie's life or try to shape his ideas and feelings: William Einhorn, the first "superior" man Augie had ever met; Mrs. Renling, the snob and social-climber who tries to teach Augie manners and adopt him as her son ; the eccentric Thea Fenschel, who takes him as her lover; etc. Indeed, in the world of Augie March, filled with cranks, genuises, criminals, neighborhood "con" men, half-baked theorists, *everyone*, even Coblin who sells newspapers from door to door, is colorful, unforgettable and individualistic *except* for Augie March.

Paradoxically, the high point of this novel, although the book seems to have been conceived of as comic and optimistic rather than the reverse, comes at Augie's lowest point, after he has failed at love, which he had always thought to be his special "vocation". Concluding that he has failed in his "power of being", he introspectively takes stock, undertakes what he calls his "terrible investigation", of himself :

But then with everyone going around so capable and purposeful in his strong handsome case, can you let yourself limp in feeble and poor, some silly creature, laughing and harmless ? No, you have to plot in your heart to come out differently. External life, being so mighty, the instruments so huge and terrible, the performances so great and threatening, you produce a someone who can exist before it. You invent a man who can stand before the terrible appearances. This way he can't get justice and he can't give justice, but he can live. And this is what mere humanity always does. It's made up of these inventors or artists, millions and millions of them, each in his own way trying to recruit other people to play a supporting role, and sustain him in his make-believe. The great chiefs and leaders recruit the greatest number, and that's what their power

is. There's one image that gets out in front to lead the rest and can impose its claim to being genuine with more force than others, or one voice enlarged to thunder is heard above the others. Then a huge invention, which is the invention maybe of the world itself, and of nature, becomes the actual world — with cities, factories, public buildings, railroads, armies, dams, prisons, and movies — becomes the actuality. That's the struggle of humanity, to recruit others to your version of what's real. Then even the flowers and the moss on the stone become the moss and the flowers of a version.

I certainly looked like an ideal recruit. But the invented things never became real for me no matter how I urged myself to think they were.

It is impossible to find genuinely "key" passages in Bellow; his books are not written so simplistically. But this passage points up an important truth about Augie. He does not try to be a great chief or leader; he does recruit other people to play a supporting role; he does not have a version of reality which he invents or imposes. In that way he is different from everyone else in the novel, and in that way, at least, an individual.

The passage is located at a crucial point in the novel — immediately after Augie's failure in love, which in turn comes immediately after his only experience as a "leader" who "recruits" others to play a supporting role, and who imposes on them an invented version of "reality" — and, in the most literal possible senses of those terms: as a union leader, in fact, who is paid to "recruit" and organize chambermaids and other hotel employees, and to impose on them a "Marxist version of reality".

This phase does not last long. When Thea Fenschel, for whom labor unions and distinctions of class and money have no reality, tells Augie what he has always longed to believe, that his destiny is to love her, he immediately drops union-recruiting in favor of a supporting role in Thea's own strange version of reality — a combination of love-making and hunting giant iguanas by means of a fierce, untamed American bald eagle.

The whole vivid central section of this long novel is occupied by the Augie-Thea episode, which, unlike the rest of the book, is set in exotic, Spanish-speaking Mexico. A good many features of it strongly suggest Hemingway — not only the Spanish setting, and the idle, hard-drinking American expatriates who inhabit the town, but also

the relationship, insisted on by Thea and not by Augie, between love-making and hunting, between physical courage and physical love. It is difficult for the city-bred, non-Spanish-speaking Augie to meet Thea's exacting demands. Like the fierce, untamed American eagle, who turns out to be a coward, Augie fails the test. He cannot successfully play the games of this rich girl who, like Hemingway, buys her guns and sporting clothes at Abercrombie & Fitch, and can afford to be pure, equally contemptuous of blood, money and caste.

These two opposite versions of reality, Thea's Hemingwayesque and individualized version and the competing, mass Marxist version, were the two "inventions" which probably spoke in the loudest voice and were the hardest to resist in the America of the 1930's. But the point is that Augie does *not* resist them. Neither does he resist any of the dozens of other versions, including some far madder than these, which are offered to him. He says "yes" to them all.

In 1960, Harry Levin, a well-known American critic, published a study of Poe, Hawthorne and Melville called *The Power of Darkness*, the starting point of which is Melville's famous tribute to Hawthorne — that his power was the power to say "no" in a voice of thunder: "It is that blackness, commented Melville, that so fixes and fascinates me." Whether Bellow anticipated Levin's view of the classic nineteenth-century American writer as a "no-sayer" when he was working on *Augie March* as a "yes-sayer" in the late 'forties and early 'fifties, he was certainly conscious that the most famous inheritor of that literary tradition, Ernest Hemingway, was a "no-sayer", and he was certainly conscious, too (working as he was in the Paris of Sartre and Camus) of the change Camus had rung in on Hemingway and the pre-World War II literature which Hemingway dominated. The starting point of *L'Etranger* is a hero who in many ways is an exaggeration of the Hemingway hero — stoic, withdrawn, silent. Whether above or below the rest of humankind (Camus perhaps deliberately leaves the question ambiguous), Meursault remains silent, indifferent until very nearly the end of the novel, when, just before his death, in the famous scene in the prison cell, he rejects the priest and his consolations of the after-life in an angry revolt in which he becomes, for the first time, human and fully himself. Like Camus' Meursault, Bellow's Augie is a man for whom, in Augie's words, "the invented things never became real". But the point is that Bellow's hero is neither a Hemingway stoic nor an Existential rebel, and his emotions are not at all like the button-lipped anguish

of Hemingway's hero or the cleansing anger of Camus'. He says "yes" to everything, including life itself, with optimism and joy (although qualified in an important way by a darker strain), the exact mixture of which Bellow hits off in his concluding paragraph.

The scene is Dunkerque and the fields of Normandy immediately after World War II. His spark plugs repaired, Augie is once more on his way, ultimate destination unknown :

On a day like this I could use the comfort of it, when it was so raw. I was still chilled from the hike across the fields, but, thinking of Jacqueline and Mexico, I got to grinning again. That's the *animal ridens* in me, the laughing creature, forever rising up.

What's so laughable, that a Jacqueline, for instance, as hard used as that by rough forces, will still refuse to lead a disappointed life ? Or is the laugh at nature — including eternity — that it thinks it can win over us and the power of hope ? Nah, nah ! I think. It never will. But that probably is the joke, on one or the other, and laughing is an enigma that includes both. Look at me, going everywhere ! Why, I am a sort of Columbus of those near-at-hand and believe you can come to them in this immediate *terra incognita* that spreads out in every gaze. I may well be a flop at this line of endeavor. Columbus, too thought he was flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America.

Much of the freshness of *Augie March*, written during the button-down and grey-flannel years of the Eisenhower era, comes from the open "larky" character of its irrepressible hero, but its success as a novel depends on the way in which Bellow found a suitable structure and language to express this. The usual critical verdict is that *Augie March* has no structure, no plot, no form. Nothing could be further from the truth. The novel has multitudes of structures, plots and forms; they crowd torrentially in every chapter, combining and mixing exuberantly on a broad canvas — and a canvas which seems to have no limits, no necessary beginning and end, and which is fixed, insofar as it is fixed at all, only by the restless life of the hero-narrator.

The language of the novel also has something of these same qualities of exuberance and turbulent mixture.

This can be seen clearly in the concluding passage I have already quoted. The words, for instance, are drawn from both high and low

sources. The Latin "animal ridens" and "terra incognita", obviously, but also the latinate "enigma" for "puzzle" and "endeavour" for "work", are too high. They jostle strangely with the too-low Chicagoese "Nah, nah !" for "no". and the comic "flop" for "failure". In somewhat the same way, the sentence modalities are roughly mixed, shifting from interrogative, to declarative, to imperative; and so are the rhythms, which abruptly mix the too short with the too long and loose. "A disappointed life" sounds foreign, possibly tinged with Yiddish. Augie applies this phrase to Jacqueline, the Norman maid with varicose veins who, although French-speaking, is a cultural mixture. So at the opposite extreme was Columbus, who — led back from America in chains — also had a "disappointed life". Also a cultural mixture, Augie laughs as he thinks of Mexico — the scene of his life-disappointment. A key to the language of the paragraph, "disappointed life" is a minor Yiddish grace note in a passage which is the opposite of melancholic and which, set in Dunkerque and the fields of Normandy, fuses Augie's individual destiny with the mixed destiny of America.

Albert Guerard, a distinguished novelist and critic, was the first to call attention, in 1967, to the historic importance of Bellow's experimental language in *Augie March*. Arguing that the 1950's was a decade of "crisis" for the American novelist in which the "Hemingway language would no longer do", Guerard attempts to locate the source of the crisis in two conflicting needs: 1) the need for a "real" language — that is, tough, "improvisatory", "capable of street-corner syntax", "American", freed "from the slickness of the feminine stylists and from the dead pallor of the academic"; and 2) the need for a "literary" language — that is, a language reflecting an "educated mind", "intellectual wit", "poetic freshness", etc. Bellow's solution in *Augie March*, according to Guerard, can be seen in his "radical attempt to blend voices, and to achieve simultaneously all the appeals of poetic richness and colloquial looseness" in a narrative voice combining several styles in one.

Praising Bellow for his courage and originality, Guerard comments (with justice, in my opinion) that "Augie March is perhaps more interesting in conception than as a fictional character known in depth, and his language is less plausible than his adventures". Professor Guerard illustrates Bellow's "implausible mixture of the half-educated and the pretentiously literary", by quoting the following paragraph :

He was a mighty attractive and ideal man. There was a lanky American elegance about him, in the ease of his long legs and his cropped-on-the-sides head which from chin to top showed the male mouldings on the strong side of haggardness; his gray eyes on the cool side of frankness . . . and yet he looked relaxed. But the more ease and leisure he achieved the more distance and flashing there were; he talked about Thucydides or Marx and showed pictures of history-like visions. You got shivers on the back and thrills clear into the teeth. I was real proud to have such a friend.

"No theory of comic dissonance can justify such prose", says Guerard¹.

There is a justification, however, and an important one, which Guerard misses. Bellow is expressing in the passage the naive awe which Augie, who is Jewish, young and very unevenly educated, feels for the imposing Fraser, who is Anglo-Saxon, a University of Chicago history instructor, and a highly articulate Marxist theoretician. Nearly all of the words and phrases which Professor Guerard underlines as most objectionable — "mighty attractive", "lanky", "you got shivers on the back", "real proud" — are either drawn from or freely suggest the language of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Both Augie's words and his emotions recall Huck Finn's and the awe Huck feels under very different circumstances — when he first meets Arkansas aristocracy, for example, or when he sees his first circus, all tinsel and glitter. This isolated paragraph, furthermore, forms part of a larger strategy, perhaps evident in Bellow's title, *The Adventures of Augie March*, and in some of his most significant passages, including his opening and his closing paragraphs. Twain's opening sentence is: "You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer', but that ain't no matter." Bellow's opening is: "I am an American, Chicago born — Chicago that somber city — and go at things as I have taught myself, free style." Twain's closing sentence is: "But I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the

¹ Albert J. Guerard, "Saul Bellow and the Activists: on *The Adventures of Augie March*", *The Southern Review*, vol. 3 (Summer, 1967). Reprinted in *The Adventures of Augie March*, Fawcett edition, 1967, pp. v - xviii. See pp. xv - xvi.

rest." Bellow's close converts Twain's "territory" into the "terra incognita" which "spreads out in every gaze". Bellow's words are not the same as Twain's, of course, nor is the sense and meaning. It is the style and quality — the roughness, the startling freshness, immediacy, freedom and gaiety — which he wants to capture, incorporate, and also transform.

This strategy of "assimilation" is part of a wider strategy, and a daring one. At one point in the novel, for example, Augie, uncomfortably aware of the social gap between himself and Esther Fenschel, reflects about his own absence of snobbery, being, as he puts it, "democratic in temperament, available to everyone, and assuming about others what I assumed about myself". The words are not identical with Whitman's in *The Song of Myself* ("I celebrate myself and sing myself / And what I assume you shall assume"), but close enough so that Bellow's intention is evident. At another point, in a passage which concerns bravery and mutiny, Augie's imperious brother Simon, the owner of a coal yard, pistol whips a Polish coal shoveler, Guzynski, who has mutinously dumped his load of coal on the weighing scales. Augie refers to Guzynski as a failed "Steelkilt mutineer to buffalo all captains" (Melville, in the "Townho Story" in *Moby Dick*, draws a picture of a mutineer from Buffalo whose name is Steelkilt). The larger passage in which this is set deals with that part of Augie's life during which he is a prisoner-follower of the crazy "world-conquering" Simon, whose intense inner suffering and moody explosions of rage are paralleled to Ahab's; whose coal yard, in which Augie works without sharing in the purpose, is paralleled to the Pequod; and whose quest for "a million dollars" is paralleled to Ahab's quest for the White Whale. Augie, the passive observer and recorder, plays Ishmael to this Chicago-Jewish Ahab.

Augie is not only Huck Finn, Walt Whitman and Ishmael; he is also possibly Quentin Compson. Faulkner draws a famous parallel in *The Sound and the Fury* between the decline of the Old South and the decline of the Compson family. He marked the family's decline by two crucial events: the death of "Damuddy", the grandmother; and the committing of the idiot Benjy, the youngest of the three brothers, to the state mental institution. Bellow does not allude to or paraphrase the idiosyncratic Faulknerian sentence; but he does paraphrase or assimilate the structure of *The Sound and the Fury*, which guides the first hundred pages or so of *Augie March*. The decline of the March family, for example, parallels the decline and collapse of the West-side, Jewish, Chicago neighborhood; and the March family

decline is marked by the death of "Grandma Lausch" — or more accurately her stroke, which comes before her death; and the committing of the idiot George, the youngest of the three March brothers, to the Illinois mental institution or school.

Augie's paraphrase of Whitman comes close to parody, but Bellow's intention generally seems not at all to be parody of the masterpieces of the American literary tradition— possibly the reason he refrains from imitating either the Faulkner or the Hemingway sentence style. Still less is his intention to burlesque the seedy Chicago West-side and the poor immigrant Jews who live there. Although Bellow paints them comically and without any attempt to give them false dignity, his intention may not be far from dignified Virgilian piety — the reverent attempt, that is, to bring the Muses, American rather than Homeric ones, to his own native piece of ground.

Bellow's most obvious literary paraphrase, or at least the only one which the critics have noticed, is the comic *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. If for no other reason than because it made the American language available as a literary medium, that book rather than the tragic *Moby Dick* (which relies on the language of Shakespeare and of nineteenth-century melodrama) may well be the centerpiece in the American literary tradition. This is perhaps what Ernest Hemingway, who was himself highly conscious of the importance of language and style, meant when he said in *The Green Hills of Africa* that "all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*". But Twain's language, unlike Bellow's, is what might be called "realistic". It is regarded and even announced as such by Twain, who says it is a realistic written version of several varieties of spoken dialect heard in nineteenth-century rural Missouri. By contrast, the language of *Augie March* — that outrageous mixture of English, Latin, Yiddish, French, German and Russian words; the startling shifting, sometimes within a given sentence, from the vocabulary of the pool hall to the vocabularies of psychology, philosophy and anthropology — is not at all an attempt by Bellow to imitate the way that someone of a given time and place would talk, nor the way they would write. In that sense, Professor Guerard is certainly right when he says the language is "implausible". However when viewed not as an imitation of how someone might talk or write but as a dramatic short-hand for what might be in Augie's head and heart, and for what, in addition, might be in the melting-pot, ethnic culture of the Chicago of the 1920's and 1930's which produces him, this outrageous mixture is not

implausible at all. Admittedly an "invented thing" and not a transcription, it is however more plausible as a language than any one of the many literary models which Bellow freely draws on, paraphrases and transforms.

The larger function of Bellow's "invented" language may not, in any event, be so different from the larger function of Twain's "realistic" language. Like most nineteenth-century realists, Twain uses several distinct levels of language in *Huck Finn*, depending on who is speaking or writing. The speakers can be divided into two main groups, true and false. Thus, Emily Grangerford, who writes maudlin poems about death, is a false speaker and uses a false language. The rascally Duke, who dresses in Shakespearean costumes and rants and raves a wild mixture of lines from *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, is another false speaker who speaks a false language. So is his even worse companion, the King, who disguises himself as an English minister and pronounces a bogus funeral sermon in a faked English accent so that he can fleece the dead-man's widow and orphan out of all of their money and property. By contrast, Jim, the black runaway slave, who can speak only the despised dialect of the Missouri black, and his companion Huck, a runaway white boy who speaks in a semi-literate Pike County dialect, are simple and true, and their speech is true. Indeed, as Twain writes it, it is at times extraordinarily profound and beautiful. In this way, Twain managed to discredit the major kinds of language — sentimental-poetic, false Shakespearean, melodramatic, bogus English — which marred American literature during and before his time; and to rescue indigenous and ordinary American speech, which had never before been used except for comedy in the "high" literature, for dignified literary purposes. Using different means, Hemingway accomplished an almost equally important revolution in the 1920's. By saying "no" to the subordinate clause and the abstract adjective, and "yes" to the place name and the simple, declarative sentence, he outlawed the language of psychology and philosophy, rescuing the novel from the heavy weight of introspection under which it was about to founder; and he affirmed with his simple sentences and concrete words the primacy of feeling and sensory experience, at a time when the affirmation was badly needed.

Bellow, however, says "no" to the puristic "realism" of the Twain language, largely because he cannot accept the puristic separation of "true" and "false" speakers on which it is based. Everyone speaks truth and falsehood, and may even speak them at the same time.

He also says "no" to the purity of the Hemingway sentence, largely because he cannot accept the separation between the sensory and the intellectual life on which Hemingway's purity of language is based. Ideas and feelings in all of us are always mixed together. Instead, Bellow says "yes" to mixture and to impurity. Kayo Obermark, one of the dozens of brilliantly individualistic minor characters that people *Augie March*, warns Augie not to make too many demands on purity. "You can't find a pure desire, says Kayo, except the one that everything should be mixed. We run away from what can be conceived pure, and everyone acts out his disappointment in his own way, as if to prove that the mixed and impure will and must win." Like all of the truth-speakers in *Augie March*, Kayo is only half reliable. "Melancholy and brilliant", he lives unnecessarily in filth. But his words are prophetic, and they clarify the truth of Bellow's plot and his language. Augie does indeed "run away" from Thea, whose desires, uncomplicated by anything outside of themselves, are pure. Mixture (in Augie's thoughts, feelings and words, and in Bellow's) does indeed win out. But by a dignified impurity of language, Bellow accomplishes for the novel of the 1950's something of the same purifying revolution which Twain accomplished by purity in the 1880's and which Hemingway accomplished by a different kind of purity and simplicity in the 1920's; and by an admission that life is mostly what Augie calls "the invented thing", half truths posing as truths, Bellow opens the novel to most of life.

II

Bellow's life work, which now includes eight novels, can be divided into two phases. The first includes the three novels I have already discussed, and a fourth, *Seize the Day* (1956). Traditional in some ways, these novels are also innovative and experimental. Taking a man who seeks truth, in Joseph; a man who seeks justice, in Leventhal; and men who, in different ways, seek love in Augie and also in Tommy Wilhelm, the hero of *Seize the Day*, Bellow tries out the complexities of ideal forms of individual existence under less than ideal social circumstances. He also tries out various ideal forms of the novel — the personal diary in *Dangling Man*, the fable in *The Victim*, the epic in *Augie March*, the tightly-constructed novella in *Seize the Day*, testing their limits under the demands of shifting

modes of perception, and individual aspiration in collision with external fate and outward event.

At the same time that Bellow experiments with different ideal forms and characters, he also synthesizes, building each novel on what he had already accomplished in the earlier one. This is clear from certain continuities which can be traced in the characters, themes and forms. Joseph, Leventhal, Augie, Tommy — all progress in maturity and age at roughly the pace of their creator, Bellow. There is a common theme, as well: you are most an individual when you are least an individualist; you find out what is real or valuable when you allow yourself to say "yes" to what is false or cheap. And it is a theme which grows sharper and more paradoxical with each restatement. The novels also show a progress, an increasing mastery, in the technique or reportorial realism. Bellow insists on making a connection, as fluid as possible, between the inner consciousness of his characters and the external objective world — a certain kind of odor in the hallway, the sight of hairs sprouting powerfully from the scalp. Bellow's conception of the novel, in that sense, has its roots in the realism of Joseph Conrad, or, to go deeper, in the less reportorial realism of Henry James — the James who referred to the novelist as a "moral historian" rendering the truths of life by observing the truths of his own time and place. *Augie March* was a brave but perhaps too ambitious and complex attempt to realize this conception; *Seize the Day* was an almost perfect realization of it. As Alfred Kazin justly remarks, it is safe to say that none of Bellow's works "is so widely and genuinely admired as this short novel. It has quite a remarkable intensity of effect without every seeming to force one. It is a particularly good example of what can be done with what Henry James called 'that blessed form, the *novella*'. And not least, *Seize the Day* is probably the most successful rendering of the place, the time, the style of life, of Bellow's representative Jew."²

Henderson the Rain King (1959), Bellow's fifth and most experimental novel, marks a departure, and one that, as it is now clear, was to effect the three novels destined to follow it. Most obviously, Bellow departs in abandoning the base line which underlies the characters of his earlier novels. Joseph, Leventhal, Augie, Tommy — all are based on a set of vital statistics not drastically different from the vital statistics in Bellow's own biography: date of birth, residence(s),

² Alfred Kazin, "Introduction", *Seize the Day*, Fawcett edition, 1969.

religion, military service, height, weight, income, previous illness, identifying scars, etc. Although Bellow once said that Eugene Henderson was his most autobiographical hero, his vital statistics — neck size, birth date, reasons for growing a beard, etc. — are not at all like Bellow's vital statistics. They are like Ernest Hemingway's. To be more accurate, they are allusions to, exaggerations and transformations of the flood of facts about Hemingway appearing at that time in print, revealed by inquisitive reporters, revealed at times by Hemingway himself. Bellow also departs, perhaps in a more important way, by abandoning the baseline from which he drew his settings. *The Dangling Man*, the *Victim*, *Seize the Day*, and most of *Augie March* are set in New York or Chicago, and in those parts of these cities, sometimes in the very streets and buildings, which Bellow knew best. *Henderson the Rain King* is set in pre-civilized Africa — the Africa which anthropologists seek out for clues to the nature of man, and which Hemingway sought out in 1935 for clues to his own nature.

The book based on his African experience, *The Green Hills of Africa*, is Hemingway's most experimental novel. In the most literal sense, Hemingway puts himself, Ernest Hemingway, in the chief role. Hemingway's test of an extreme theory of realism, it was an attempt "to see" in Hemingway's words, whether he could write an "absolutely true" book, using as his materials only the shape "of a country and the pattern of a month's action", and whether such a book could "compete with a work of the imagination". Bellow attempts to do exactly the opposite in *Henderson*. He tries to see whether a work purely of imagination can compete with and outdo the realistic novel — his own realistic novels, but also Hemingway's, Conrad's, and the realistic tradition on which this is based. Partly, Bellow does this by a broad and sometimes wild invention and caprice; but he also does so by a disciplined allusion to and transformation of the zaniest of nineteenth-century American classics, Mark Twain's *The Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*.

Hank Morgan, the hero of Twain's book, as the result of a "knock on the head", finds himself translated from his native Connecticut (Henderson is also from Connecticut and is referred to as a "Yankee") to the 6th century England of King Arthur — a place Twain knew mainly from his fond reading of Sir Thomas Mallory. Very unlike Hemingway in Africa, Morgan does not try to absorb and assimilate his experience or at least that is not his main response to the disappointing, dirty, cruel, unjust and far from picturesque

England he encounters. Instead, Morgan tries with his American democratic prejudices and his Yankee technology to transform and conquer Arthur's England, and convert it into an ideal version of nineteenth-century America, complete with soap, advertising, newspapers, free schools, universal suffrage and a strict separation of church and state. Henderson, too, tries with his Yankee technology and democratic, liberal progressivism to transform pre-civilized Africa, an Africa which resembles Twain's England much more than Hemingway's Africa. Finding the Arnewi tribe, dispirited and under a "curse", their cattle dying from lack of water, he uses dynamite to blow out the cistern and the plague of frogs which blocks the water supply, receiving as his reward the title of "Rain King", and mastery over the Arnewi. One of two crucial and contrasting episodes in the book, it is drawn directly out of Twain's novel. It parallels Hank Morgan's use of gunpowder to release holy water from a blocked-up well, thus defeating his hated rival, Merlin the Magician, and receiving the title "Sir Boss" and mastery over Arthur's England as his reward. However, Bellow's second crucial episode, which takes place during Henderson's stay among the less gentle Wariri people, is not drawn from *The Connecticut Yankee* — nor, except in the sense of brilliant transformation, from *The Green Hills of Africa*, either. Concerning Henderson's submission to rather than domination of African primitivism, it narrates Henderson's initiation under the tutelage of the crazy-wise King Dahfu into what Dahfu calls "the discipline of spiritual nobility". On all fours, the gigantic Eugene Henderson, six feet four and clad in stained jockey shorts is taught, under the prodding of Dahfu, to roar like a lion.

A masterful comic invention, this episode is not only a burlesque of the lion-hunting Hemingway and his crazy discipline of spiritual "nobility", it is also a serious episode and a sincere tribute to Hemingway's genius, and it dramatizes in miniature the process represented by Bellow's writing the book. Like Henderson locked in the den with the female lioness, Bellow must, through inspiration and imagination, "become" Hemingway to write the book — exactly in the way, that is, and for the same reasons, that Henderson must "become" the lion, and for the same reasons that Augie March must become Ishmael, Whitman and Huck Finn to become himself. Faced with and forced into cohabitation with whatever is "other" than oneself, one must either transform oneself into it (as Hemingway tries to do with primitive Africa) or transform it into oneself (as Morgan tries to do with medieval England). A double process, it takes the form in

Henderson of transcendent imagination. "Imagination is a force of nature", says King Dahfu in a key passage. "Is this not enough to make a person full of ecstasy? Imagination, imagination, imagination! It converts to the actual. It sustains, it alters, it redeems!"

In one way at least, the novels which Bellow has written since *Henderson* — *Herzog* (1964), *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), and *Humboldt's Gift* (1975) — are not at all like *Henderson*. *Herzog*, for example, is not only a reaction from the anti-realism of *Henderson*, it is an extension and intensification of the realistic mode of *Seize the Day*. The "vital statistics" of Professor Herzog — his age, religion, marital problems, family background, etc. — are, one easily guesses, very much closer to the actual facts of Bellow's life at the time of writing the book than are the vital statistics of the much more disguised and "fictionalized" hero-narrators of the earlier works. Yet the break-through represented by the wildly imaginative *Henderson* has clearly and permanently marked all of the novels which came after, much in the way that Bellow's breakthrough in language in *Augie* has marked the language of all the books that followed.

Henderson concludes with one of Bellow's most magnificent and strangest passages — an orderly disorder, an inspired madness. "I was very moved when I wrote it", Bellow has said. That ecstasy, in *Henderson* and in Bellow, might be called the happy condition of madness. But Bellow has also been aware, and may have been aware when he wrote the passage, that madness is not always a happy condition. The novels of Bellow's second phase, the post-*Henderson* phase, are explorations, each in a different way, of the implications of that realization. Taking the now rather old-fashioned view that the novel is an instrument not only for the liberation of the reader's consciousness but for the enhancement of his view of reality as well, Bellow has explored, in his last three books, the limits of too much madness — in the domain of the private and emotional life, in *Herzog*; of the public life, in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*; and the world of art, in *Humboldt's Gift*.

Herzog is the story of an intellectual who, before the novel opens, has been goaded by certain outrages, public outrages and political lunacies but mainly personal and domestic ones, into anger and madness himself. He expresses this by writing letters which he never sends; and, at the comic climax of the book, by a hasty, looney attempt to kill his wife's lover. At the conclusion, at least provisionally cured of his desire to hit back, teach lessons and write letters, we see him cleansed of anger, once more in possession of himself.

The most intellectually ambitious of Bellow's novels, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* begins at the point at which *Herzog* ends — that is, with a hero who is eminently sane, free of distorting passions, rages and desires for murder, and through whose eyes (or, rather, eye — for Sammler has only one) Bellow can look clearly, or as clearly as his sight permits, at what has been the subject of all of his work, "failed individuality". Bellow does not explain individuality. He does not argue for or against it. "I do not argue", says Mr. Sammler. Dealing as Bellow has throughout his career with the forms and modes of individuality, he has never seriously raised questions, in his novels at least, of alternatives to it — for example, collectivism as a desirable social and political form, of authority or compulsion as a valid alternative to inner discipline; of "group consciousness" as an alternative to individual consciousness. Neither does he seriously pose those alternatives in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. It has never been a question, and is almost an axiom, in Bellow's work that individual freedom, as an ideal towards which both civilization and the individual aspire, is itself desirable. But Bellow does question that axiom in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, and in that way articulates and synthesizes what has been implicit in all of his novels.

There is always a danger in explaining the ideas of a novelist without taking into account the form in which he puts them. This is especially true of Bellow, who has always disliked the "thesis" novel or the novel used as a platform for an idea. It is most especially true of *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, which is usually misinterpreted as a thesis novel, and in which the form is ironic, and, in one respect at least, very different from any of the forms Bellow has used in the past.

Bellow's apprentice novel, *The Victim*, a model of formal clarity, has two epigraphs, one about victimization in an individual sense, one about it in a universal sense. The story, which has two simultaneous complications, works out some of the complex ways in which these two senses intersect. *Augie March*, as I have explained, breaks up this kind of tight order, and along with it the close dependence of character and voice on plot, in favor of a fluid and even chaotic interplay between the self and the world. This last method, much refined and perfected, is the method of *Seize the Day* and *Herzog*, and is in part the method of *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, pointed to by the two words of the title (the Slavic "Samm" or "self"), and planet. In fact, the form of *Mr. Sammler* closely resembles and is based on *Herzog*. Like *Herzog*, it is hewn from a dense three or four days of

chaotic reality in which the hero shuttles by bus, subway and private car in and out of New York City, distracted like Herzog by the chaos, movement, confusion, sight and sound. Counterpointed against this, as in *Herzog*, is the consciousness of the hero — in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Sammler's memories of his European past as correspondent in war-torn Israel, as starving Partisan in the Zamosht forests during World War II, as savant and man-of-letters in the pre-war worlds of Cracow and London: that is to say, a good part of the total experience of the twentieth century, against which the American present is set.

The peculiarity of the form is that Bellow imposes over this fluid realism a number of out-dated forms and techniques which he had never introduced before into his novels. For example, he sets into motion several old-fashioned plot lines, reminiscent of the kinds of sub-plots used by the nineteenth-century novelist — Dostoevski, for example. One of them is a hair-brained scheme of Shula, Sammler's half-crazy daughter, which involves twice-stealing and twice-hiding a valuable scientific manuscript about space travel. Still another sub-plot concerns the apprehension of a black pickpocket, also slightly crazy, who for days has been following Mr. Sammler and threatening him, and his near-murder by Eisen, Sammler's son-in-law, also slightly crazy. Another concerns the search for a hidden treasure, eventually found by Shula, stuffed in a hassock. There are six or seven sub-plots of this kind, introduced at random but developed simultaneously, and brought, as in a nineteenth-century novel, towards convergence and resolution. Against these half-comic plots, Bellow develops a serious complication — the illness of Dr. Gruner, Sammler's far from crazy nephew, who lies dying in a hospital bed of an aneurysm, and whose death, and the dignified death bed scene which goes with it at the close of the book, boxes in the story with a finality as opposite as possible from the openness of *Augie March*.

There is still another and more surprising form which Bellow borrows from the rag-bag of discarded forms and techniques — the Shavian "discussion". Arguing at the turn-of-the-century in defense of Ibsen, Shaw, who was a proponent of art as instruction rather than art as an end in itself, insisted that the difference between a good play and bad one, a "modern" and out-dated one, was what he called the "discussion" — the scene, that is, in which the dramatist, assembling together his characters, usually in the living room, pointed out that what the audience admired was instead what they ought to loathe, and that what they detested was what in fact they

should take their hats off to. Bellow, who has always strongly disagreed with the Shavian view of art, constructs such a "discussion" in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* — and does so in a way reminiscent of *Heartbreak House*, the theme of which is close to *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. Assembling his characters in Dr. Gruner's living room, Bellow stages a scene in which, during an exciting search for missing treasure, Mr. Sammler is asked to state his views of life.

Bellow introduces still another form from Shaw's *Heartbreak House* — a rather old-fashioned form of symbolism. For Mr. Sammler, in this scene at least, is Saul Bellow, Gruner Professor of the History of Social Thought at the University of Chicago. Mr. Sammler's benefactor, Dr. Elya Gruner, is Saul Bellow's benefactor, Mr. Max Gruner. Dr. Gruner's imitation Tudor mansion, which represents not his tastes but those of his now dead, snobbish German-Jewish wife, is the University of Chicago, imitation Tudor-Gothic and representing the money and tastes of the now dead Rosenwald and Wiebolt families who endowed it. The living room in which Sammler is about to speak is Bellow's classroom in Wiebolt Hall. And Sammler's audience, the children of Gruner and Sammler, are Bellow's students, and the children of America.

At first Sammler hesitates to speak. He does not believe in lectures; they are boring. However, when at last he decides to "speak his full mind", only half of what he says is in the form of a lecture. Much abbreviated, this is what he says :

Now as everyone knows, it has only been in the last two centuries that the majority of people in civilized countries have claimed the privilege of being individuals. Formerly they were slave, peasant, laborer, even artisan, but not person. It is clear that this revolution, a triumph for justice in many ways — slaves should be free, killing toil should end, the soul should have liberty — has also introduced new kinds of grief and misery, and so far, on the broadest scale, it has not been altogether a success. I will not even talk about the Communist countries where the modern revolution has been most thwarted. To us the results are monstrous. Let us think only about our own part of the world. We have fallen into much ugliness . . . Hearts that get no real wages, souls that find no nourishment. Falsehoods unlimited. Desire, unlimited. Possibility, unlimited.

While Sammler is speaking, two other events are taking place. In the attic overhead, Wallace, Dr. Gruner's son, searching for his

father's hidden money, accidentally uncouples the water-pipes, flooding the house and ruining some of the contents. Simultaneously, in the hospital room in New York, the valve controlling the flow into Dr. Gruner's brain malfunctions, admitting too much blood. Wallace's partial destruction of the house, his own house, is partly an allusion on Bellow's part to the events taking place in the late 'sixties when Bellow was writing the book — the destruction of American campuses by young people of "liberated conscious" seeking the wrong values in the wrong places at the wrong time. (For Wallace should not be looking for his father's money while the old man is dying; he should be at the bedside, he should be listening to what Dr. Gruner, who loves him and who is wise, has to say to him.) But as applied to Mr. Sammler's words, the over-supply of water and blood have a meaning, too. Sammler's lecture on individualism is wordy and digresses too much. Killing when they should be life-giving, the words carry a valuable truth, perhaps, but they need a proper conduit.

The second half of what Sammler has to say is the proper conduit. Taking the form of a paradoxical story instead of a boring lecture, Sammler's words sketch the history of King Rumkowski, an elderly Jew chosen by the Nazis as *Judenaltester*, and given the job of presiding over the extermination of the half-million Jews of Lodz. Partly crazy, Rumkowski "had his own private court. He printed money and postage stamps with his picture. He had pageants and plays organized in his honor". Although without real power and a source of amusement to the Nazis, he was a terror to the Jews of Lodz, their dictator and their king. Doomed like all the rest, he stepped voluntarily on the train for Auschwitz, Sammler explains, when the end finally came.

There are several surprising things about the story. Although the Holocaust was the single most important event in Sammler's life, he does not talk about it. Although it was the single most important historical event in the consciousness of twentieth-century Jews, including Bellow, Bellow has never talked about it in his books. There is a second surprising thing about the story. Sammler tells it to illustrate what he means by "failed individualism". He uses Rumkowski, the tool of Nazi repression, as his illustration of the "forms taken by the liberated conscious". Sammler's listeners do not understand, and they ask him to please explain. But he does not explain, and perhaps does not need to. The dark jewel within the box, the story — which is, of course, Bellow's story as well as Sammler's — is explained by the design of the entire book.

Mr. Sammler would be much too polite to say so, but the young people who ask him to explain, young people of "liberated conscious", rather resemble the half-crazy, theatrical Rumkowski. Sammler's own daughter, the far from brilliant Shula, while listening raptly to her beloved father, is dressed in an improvised sarong with a smudge mark on her forehead under the impression that she can in this way pass herself off as a high-born Hindu and attract the amorous attention of the brilliant Indian scientist, Dr. Lal. Like Rumkowski, poor Shula does not always know who or what she is. Born a Jew and raised a Catholic, she practises both religions simultaneously. The young people who are not listening to Sammler also resemble Rumkowski. The brilliant Wallace, for instance, inexpertly uncoupling the pipe, is also slightly crazy, and, like Rumkowski, does not recognize his own limitations. He tries simultaneously to be a mathematician, lawyer, and business man — and when the novel ends is flying his Cessna inexpertly over New Rochelle, snapping pictures of the house and nearly hitting it at the same time³. Indeed, in one way or another, all of the "liberated" young people of the novel — the sexually-liberated Angela, who uses her freedom to experiment with group sex; the kingly black pickpocket who freely roams the Riverside bus, inappropriately dressed in tailored London clothes; the Columbia student wearing a beard and blue jeans who shouts obscenities at Sammler — all resemble the half-crazy, theatrical Rumkowski.

But Rumkowski, who is an old rather than a young man and who is doomed to die like the other Jews of the Lodz ghetto, also resembles the non-crazy, non-theatrical Dr. Gruner, dying in his hospital room; and the aging Sammler, who has lived his life and counts himself among the ranks of those "who have been written off". Like Rumkowski, Dr. Gruner has also taken human life — many lives in fact. Perhaps from motives of kindness, he had been an abortionist. Not from kindness but to save his own life, Sammler had killed a German soldier in the frozen Zamosht forests. The murderer Rumkowski may have acted from similar motives, as Sammler speculates — out of kindness to the many he sent to their deaths, or simply out of the desire to save his own life. Neither a facile attack

³ The airplane seems to be a double literary allusion: it refers to Shaw's comic use of the airplane as a symbol of modernity; and it is also an ironic allusion on Bellow's part to his own ecstatic conclusion to *Henderson*, where the airplane is associated not only with liberation but with ecstasy and transcendence.

on the young nor the old generation, the Left nor the Right, the paradoxical story of Rumkowski cuts deeper.

When Sammler refers to Rumkowski as a "failed individual", he does so in two distinct senses of the word "individual". An individual is a human being with the human and moral characteristics of the rest of the species. An individual is also someone who is different from everyone else. But as Bellow clearly understood when he wrote *The Victim*, *Augie March*, *Seize the Day* and *Henderson*, being "different from everyone else" is only a relative thing. Augie March, who had felt himself to be a failed individual in a world crowded with brilliant individualists, was different from everyone else only in not being a brilliant individualist. The splendid Rumkowski, with his gilded coach and his postage stamps and power of life-and-death, is "king" only in the world of "rags and shit", death and powerlessness; and the seer, the one-eyed Sammler, is only, as he says, "king of the blind". To be an individual in the "absolute sense" — that is, an "original creation" — is perhaps an impossibility.

Like Rumkowski, only a servile copy of his Nazi masters, Sammler himself is not an "original creation". He is a copy, a disciple, of H. G. Wells, whose biography he is writing. A "journalist" and writer like Wells, Sammler had as a young man "in the lovely 'twenties and 'thirties" lived in Great Russel Street, London; moved in the Bloomsbury circles; and, like Wells, written for the liberal, intellectual publications. A proponent at that time of liberalism, universal free education, science and progress, Sammler had both espoused and repeated the same popular beliefs as Wells. Sammler never mentions T. S. Eliot, the Eliot who in the liberal, intellectual atmosphere of 1930's London described himself as a "royalist in politics, an anglicist in religion, and a classicist in literature", but Sammler resembles him in several ways. An Anglophile like Eliot and an expatriate in the London world, he is soft-spoken and gentle. Angela, his neice, makes fun of her uncle's furled umbrella, his good manners, his "Oxonian" airs. When the novel opens, Sammler has grown tired of the worn-out liberalism of Wells. He has grown tired of reading Freud, Spengler and Marx. In fact, his ideas have come to rather resemble Eliot's. He reads only Meister Eckhart and the Bible. Worn-out forms from the dead world of the lovely 'thirties, the forward-looking Wells and the backward-looking Eliot may not have been "original creations", either. But Sammler, a lonely "Survivor" in two senses of the word, is a copy, a "re-incarnation" of them both, and of the opposite views they represent.

The word "Sammler" means "collector" in German. On one level, it refers to the fact that Sammler "collects" and then discards H. G. Wells; that he "collects" T. S. Eliot. But the word is also Bellow's ironic description of the extraordinary technique he has used in writing the novel: his eclectic borrowing from the literary junkpile of worn-out forms — the Shavian "discussion", the multi-linear plot, the elaborate symbolism of rooms, houses, and bursting pipes. The word could also be used to describe the technique T. S. Eliot used in *The Waste Land*, his most original poem — a "collection" of words, images, personalities and forms rummaged from the junkheaps of Ancient, Oriental, Indian and Western literatures. The subject of Eliot's poem, the collapse of Western civilization, is the same as Shaw's in *Heartbreak House* (England is the "house" in Shaw's play), and Bellow's in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*; and the narrator of the poem, like Sammler, assumes or reincarnates different personalities. For example, he is Tiresius, a demobilized British soldier after the first World War, Ezekial, etc. At the very end, when he says "Shantih", he is a Hindu. Eliot, in other words, had borrowed the Hindu view that the personality is not unique and "individual" in the Western sense; it is used and re-used by separate historical personalities at widely separated historical periods, much in the way that Sammler, the Survivor, re-uses the personality, and ideas, of T. S. Eliot.

Speaking to Dr. Lal, a Hindu who seems however to have become re-incarnated in the form of H. G. Wells and who puts his faith in progress and space-travel rather than in re-incarnation, Mr. Sammler suggests that there may be only a limited number of forms available to the soul, only a finite number from which one might pick. He also suggests that the quality might be cheap and debased rather than rare or noble: perhaps "this personality of which the owner is so proud is from the Woolworth store, says Sammler, cheap tin and plastic from the five and dime of souls". Sammler does not apply this remark to Rumkowski and the other characters who resemble him, but his metaphor of "choice". Emersonian rather than Hindu, suggests that the value of the personality depends on *when* as well as what the shopper chooses. Sammler, at two different times, chose two different personalities. In the 1950's Bellow chose a Jewish Huck Finn. A generation later, he chose a Jewish T. S. Eliot.

James SCHROETER.