The ironic background of cultural and mythical patterns in the 20th-century novel Saul Bellow: characters of the 50s and the 60s

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Abstract
Although Bellow's novels deal with huge suffering as a rule, very often a duplicitous ironic approach can be detected in the structure of his books and in the configuration of his main characters. The perspective of psychological torment and frailty in Herzog or Mr. Sammler's Planet is combined with the awareness of an ailing and unusually large body in Henderson the Rain King. This article explores the subtle ironic narrative background in two of his novels and highlights the use of cultural references and mythical allusions as key devices in the construction of characters for which the exercise of suffering is almost a vocation.
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Introduction

In this first section the discussion of Saul Bellow's view on characters is centred on his attempt to define the hero in the novel of his times looking both at the American crisis he experienced and at different writing perspectives illustrated by established writers. The ironic background of his novels, whether intense or subdued, is also brought up in order to trace a unique side of his books: the derisive exaggeration of hero propensities, which nourishes his characters' singular style, their individualized way of responding to crises.

A review of Bellow's writing, however fugitive, reveals striking similarities in the constitution of central characters. His concern with the modern hero, sometimes rightly identified as anti-hero by literary critics (e.g., Halldorson, 2007) was echoed by the Nobel Prize motivation as "the human understanding and subtle analysis of contemporary culture that are

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combined in his work" (Nobel Prize motivation, 1976). Throughout his career, investigating the character remained an undisguised feature of Bellow's novels which are, without exception, elaborate contemporary stages revealing the play of his eccentric heroes. In his Nobel address, he questions the way the world of letters treats individuality as dependent on historical and cultural conditions and disapproves of the acceptance of "*authoritatively* given" accounts of the human condition (Nobel Lecture, 1976). If these things are generally assumed, then the exit of the classical character follows naturally, as Allain-Robe Grillet suggested in his essay *On Several Obsolete Notions*.

Bellow, however, strongly discards such visions. He sees the modern American crisis of his time as a viable source of genuine creation, one that almost compels the writer to look for and *find* the characters. In his speech, he brings up examples of writers for whom heroes, characters, were central to defining the world they lived in as well as human nature in general. Names such as Conrad, Proust, Elizabeth Bowen and Malachi Martin (who compared the modern American to Michelangelo's *Captive* in his *unfinished struggle to emerge whole from a block of matter*) stand in opposition to the intellectualist manner of viewing characters as obsolete. Bellow also points to *the quiet zone* that the modern reader is looking for in art and culture and identifies the reason for which the traditional quest for values is still at the core of the quiet zone:

"*When complications increase, the desire for essentials increases, too. The unending cycle of crises that began with the First World War has formed a kind of person, one who has lived through terrible, strange things, and in whom there is an observable shrinkage of prejudices, a casting off of disappointing ideologies, an ability to live with many kinds of madness, an immense desire for certain durable human goods – truth, for instance, or freedom, or wisdom*" (Bellow, 1976).

A feeling of displacement in a society governed by rules and codes characterizes most of his main characters, but critics have agreed that in spite of their victim reactions, the heroic attitude they display in terrible situations is strong and genuine. Bellow does not deny his characters a certain type of heroism in a world which has increasingly become a prison. However, the heroes "no longer believe in their own tragedy" (Halldorson, 33) as would generally happen with modern heroes. Escape is often a solution, however ambiguous and open it remains in the end. Henderson runs from his comfortable home and rich environment and Herzog tries to

find refuge in other people and his world of ideas. In a later novel, Mr. Sammler navigates through the city with one eye, trying to ignore the jungle he crosses each time he ventures out of his house (*Mr Sammler's Planet*, 1970). Mental travelling characterizes the first really popular set of novels, such as *The Adventures of Augie March* and *Henderson the Rain King*, only to become a frequent pattern of writing in later novels (Bradburry, 1982: 49).

As far as the characters' personal history is concerned, the past plays an important role in it and often resurges in important moments, but is pushed behind as they try to reconcile themselves to the world in which they live. The ending of the novels suggests openings rather than dead ends, and the manner in which the stories are concluded reinforces the heroes' distancing themselves from a tragic destiny. As one of his biographers suggested, Bellow made this line of characters archetypal in modern literature (Atlas, 2012).

1. The ironic perspective and cultural symbols - means of understanding novel creation and character structures

Throughout this article, the analysis focuses on several key scenes in two of Bellow's novels in which the heroes' reactions to the events they have to confront are important in decoding the type of relationship they have with their society. The tension between the character's inner convictions and feelings and a world which looks increasingly like a trap is often suggested in narratives pulsing with irony. I believe the ironic perception is one of Bellow's recurrent manners of suggesting the modern hero's compromise with a society whose repeated response to crucial questions is the exile of sensitive human beings, as it is the case of *Henderson the Rain King* and *Herzog*, the heroes of which are explored in this article.

Generally speaking, the *distancing* function of irony prevails in literary criticism. Dramatic irony, or structural irony focuses "on the gap between the understanding of a work's audience and that of its characters" (Luebering, 2019, *Encyclopedia Britannica*). Verbal irony, "saying one thing and meaning another" (Burke, 1969: 67), expresses a tension between literal meaning and actual meaning. In Bellow's books both forms are used but verbal irony is somehow enlisted in the service of dramatic irony, which is

also responsible for the representation of context, of society as a whole in most of his novels. The context, the outside world, with its boundaries and pressures, seeks to suffocate characters and pushes them to go beyond their limits using forms of evasion which, even if artistically different in conception, have a lot in common. Henderson flees to Africa to find the answer to crucial questions and Herzog engages in a frantic mental search (Mr. Sammler for instance, looks to the past and relives it by comparing it to his haunting American experience).

Chaos is impregnated in the societies described in these novels and the characters' passage through the events of their lives looks convincing against the ironic background which creates a distance between them and their immediate context.

Recent authors have found that historically, cultural insecurity lies at the foundation of the concept of irony as it appears in the Platonic dialogues (e.g., Colebrook, 2004: 2). Rather than using this literary device in its initial meaning, I would like to pursue the idea that insecurity triggers an ironic perspective which reveals that the characters' comfort or security are threatened by the demands of an increasingly absurd society. It is as if irony helps to create a form of madness (for the characters *are* associated with mad, unreasonable behaviour) that is meant to counteract the madness in society, the madness contained in the social codes. This attitude can be seen at work in most of Bellow's novels, echoing his statement in the Nobel Prize lecture on people's "ability to live with many kinds of madness".

I find that the use of cultural references and mythical symbols contrasted with factual aspects is the literary mechanism through which irony is effectively expressed and the analysis follows this approach in both novels. This article, therefore, looks at the writer's various ways of *mythologizing* the central characters, either by ascribing them mythical features, as in *Henderson*, or by associating them with iconic cultural figures, as in *Herzog*. In both cases, the effect of dramatic irony is very powerful and the reader is thus encouraged to contemplate the distance between the heroes' genuine aspirations to live a life of significance and the response offered by their societies.

2. Mythical images in *Henderson the Rain King*

Henderson the Rain King appeared in 1959 and its successful hero is the first in a series of distorted characters whose intense wish is to find meaning in a deteriorating world. As the book reveals the character's almost monstruous perception of the society he lives in, the story abounds in passages in which the central hero, placed in the midst of extraordinary events during his travel to Africa, creates similarities with mythical characters. He compares events and heroes and brings together symbols and metaphors meant to disclose the considerable gap between his aspirations and the response of the world he lives in. The postwar society is far from providing him with a key to decipher the meaning of life. As Henderson's rich life in the America of the 50s becomes increasingly devoid of values, his decision to take a trip to Africa looks very much like an attempt to liberate himself from hypocrisy, flat conventions and ruined relationships. In what follows, the analysis of several contexts in the book is meant to highlight the ironic mechanism which seems to serve as a foundation for the entire story.

Temper and body are equally large in this character whose exaggerated behaviour may explain the sharp criticism of some literary circles (e.g., Prescott, 1959). I would like to relate Henderson's physical status to Bakhtin's remarks on the way Rabelais portrayed the human body in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. While commenting on the relationship between space and time, Bakhtin looks at the use of folklore and antiquity on the one side and the representation of Rabelaisian laughter in the image of the "clown, rogue and fool" on the other side (Bakhtin, 1981: 170). The philosopher also found it was important for Rabelais to "return to the body the idealized quality it had in ancient times" (171).

It seems to me that this association can throw light on the complex blend of clownish behaviour and the conjuring of mythical figures, a literary device often used in *Henderson the Rain King*; the result is an ironical perspective which helps the reader grasp the contradictions within the hero himself as well as the contrast, the conflict even, between his own view and the world he is part of but tries to escape from. Irony stems powerfully from Henderson's soldier-like appearance in several instances. He travels to Africa with his veteran helmet on, in his old soldier boots and apparel. Memories from the war include many events in which stature, his physical

power and energy are effective portraying traits. "I might cite the fact that I held up a mined bridge in Italy and kept it from collapsing until the engineers arrived. But this is in the line of military duty, and a better instance was provided by my behaviour in the hospital when I broke my leg. I spent all my time in the children's wards, entertaining and cheering the kids" (Bellow, 1966: 83). This combination of grandeur, resembling Atlas, and clownish attitude is a recurrent pattern in the book.

The cleavage between an imaginary majestic posture, invoking Ulysses, and prosaic reality is shown in a scene near Salerno, during the war; in the army, Henderson caught the crabs and four medics stripped him naked and shaved him at a crossroads, while trucks filled with troops were passing. "That beautiful sky, and the mad itch, and the razors; and the Mediterranean, which is the cradle of mankind; the towering softness of the water where Ulysses got lost, where, he, too, was naked as the sirens sang" (1966: 25). These war moments are intersected in temporal sequences with scenes from the African trip which often mirror the same type of attitude.

For instance, as Henderson prepares to rid the Arnewi village (the people that he and Romilayu, his guide, find on their way into the heart of Africa) of the frogs that had invaded the only water source of their settlement, he looks very much his soldierly self, with a touch of solemnity suggested by a tiny detail. In this fragment, the ironic posture of the character is built in stages; first, he approaches the cistern with the bomb he has created, as fighting the frogs has to take the shape of a real battle: "I held the bomb above my head like the torch of liberty in the New York harbour" (101); next, he goes near the cistern alone, with the feeling that he has to perform a life-saving operation: "In a crisis, a man must be prepared to stand alone, and actually standing alone is the kind of thing I'm good at". The image is given a final form by adding a touch of irony: "[…] with the bomb in my left hand and the lighter with the slender white wick in the other – this *patriarchal-looking wick* – I looked into the water" (101). In scenes like this, irony is very often suggested by the hero's clarity of consciousness and the readers feel they can catch a glimpse of the author looking carefully at his creation. The tension generated by the author-character distance enhances the ironic charge.

The same vein is further exploited in Henderson's reflections and regrets following his failure to help the Arnewi; patterns are created using comparisons that are usually built on the gap between the character's

difficult situation and the association with the grandeur of mythical heroes: "Thus we started off toward the Wariri while I was thinking about the burial of Oedipus at Colonus – but at least he brought people luck after he was dead. At that time I might almost have been willing to settle for this" (107). This is one of the many instances when the reader can perceive a double-fold attitude in the hero's evolution: genuine repent for his rash, hotheaded actions and the tinge of irony that somehow questions his honesty.

A sense of the grotesque characterizes many events in the book, and is made possible by the accumulation of precise details of the human body and of the animals it comes in close contact with. To go back to Bakhtin's remarks, "the anatomical structure of the human body is revealed in action" (1981: 173). Most things are approached by the main character as battles, usually with disastrous results, and irony is very often bitter. With the exception of the last fight, following the death of the Wariri king, Dahfu, scenes related to crises often have a clownish quality.

Apart from mythological characters, Biblical types and patterns come up at important moments in the story. Two examples include allusions to St John in the desert and Joseph's travel to Dotan. When Henderson and his guide first meet the Arnewi children who are crying, in a fit of repentance, the hero feels an urge to run into the desert and shake off his fierceness by living alone and feeding on locusts. Later, on their way to the Wariri tribe, their second and most important destination, they are suddenly in the presence of a mysterious figure clad in leather, whose strange appearance is highlighted by the timeless landscape, high mountains with crumbled peaks and prehistoric spines. Henderson's inner comment relates immediately to the man in the Bible who directed Joseph to Dotan to find his brothers, while perfectly aware of the fact that he was going to be thrown in the pit. In the novel's design there are frequent moments of consciousness similar to these, meant to point out the central character's desire to look closely at his self, to discover himself in all possible honesty.

3. An intellectual's labyrinth – Imagination and reality embedded in culture

At the time it came out, *Herzog* was Bellow's most appreciated novel by critics and the large public alike and it was reviewed as "the masterpiece that Bellow had long been expected to produce" (Hyland, 1992: 59). Its publication in 1964 came to reinforce a line of critical thought claiming that Bellow created the same type of hero placed in different contexts of the American society (Galloway, 1981).

The writer's approach in this novel does not differ from other books in the way he designs his characters, but *Herzog* digs deeper into the American intellectual's mind and questions the status of the hero from the perspective of a cultivated person's achievements. Cultural references and cross-references are used in a complicated novel arrangement that is a Bellow predisposition. Irony becomes obvious in the way success is viewed by characters representing the main trend in society and the central character, Moses Herzog. This may be one of the reasons for which critics have continued to read this book in a comical key, as it reveals a spirit that defies and denies the definition of success.

The novel introduces Herzog in his house in Massachusetts, a house which is far from the idea of worldly achievement, but in tune with his own mental disorder. The reader knows that his wife Madeleine left him for his best friend, Valentine Gersbach. Ruin and dirt are made evident in the abounding details: an overgrown but miraculous garden outside, a mattress without sheets, mouse droppings and slices of bread chewed by rats inside. The whole setting, creating a distancing dimension, keeps irony working. Inside his crumbling house Herzog is writing letters to lots of people, including dead people, his own, as well as famous personalities. A few pages later, during memories of conversations with Gersbach, his friend portrays him as "an important professor, invited to conferences, with an international correspondence" (Bellow, 1980: 67), which only adds to layers of ironic discourse from the man who decided to take his wife from him. In *Herzog*, the gap between what the hero really feels and the response he gets from close friends and relatives keeps the ironic flow alive throughout the book. This mechanism is reiterated in a number of situations, with different characters and at different stages in the character's mental torment. Herzog's mind, which is about to collapse, is nevertheless,

able to capture a clear picture of the situation in the same ironic key, as he portrays his betraying friend in his mind: "Dealing with Valentine was like dealing with a king. He had a thick grip. He might have held a sceptre. He *was* a king, an emotional king, and the depth of his heart was his kingdom" (67).

Situational irony includes conversations with philosophy professionals and educated people, during which sarcastic tones flash abundantly. Bellow controls masterfully the mix of culture and drab small talk in dialogues throughout the book as well as their interaction with the hero's own thoughts. Herzog's wife, Madeleine, who seems to be the source of the hero's varied reactions, was also "avid for scholarly conversation". Culture seemed more important for her than Church and there are many scenes in the novel when real life and dialogues about ideas and writers are brought into contrast by Herzog's inner comments. The visit of Shapiro, a friend working in the literary field, brings out the feeble shine of academic education in the characters' lives and their lack of genuine feeling. Madeleine was preparing for her doctoral degree in Slavonic languages and on a hot summer day, during a discussion in the garden, the names of Zadonski, Dostoevski, Herzen or Soloviëv are mentioned. "Madeleine and *the dignified visitor* were talking about the Russian Church […] (77). Herzog's evaluation of his acquaintance brings forth memories of Shapiro's father who used to sell rotten apples in a wagon: "There was more of the truth of life in those spotted, spoiled apples, and in old Shapiro, who smelled of the horse and the produce, than in all of these learned references" (76). Irony uses the eyes of the hero as the main vehicle of meaning and, as the conversation brings along a flow of related subjects, turns into mimicry and mockery: "They opened a new subject – the Revolution of 1848 […]. And what were his views on Bakunin, Kropotkin? Did he know Comfort's work? He did. Did he know Poggioli? Yes" (77). From concentrated discussion on Russian intellectuals, the scene narrows down to funny, trite details: "From Soloviëv, Mady naturally turned to Berdyaev, and while speaking of *Slavery and Freedom* – the concept of Sobornost – she opened the jar of pickled herring. Saliva spurted to Shapiro's lips" (79). The technique is meant to enhance Shapiro's affectation and academic façade, while adding to the reader's feeling of disgust towards the character. Scenes like this are relevant for the way in which Bellow chooses to interpret the discordance between elitist

aspirations and the lack of authenticity in the lives of many of his characters.

In a layout already familiar from the second half of *Henderson the Rain King*, *Herzog* uses the technique of writing letters to familiar as well as unfamiliar people. The letters are part of his frustration and are in many ways his special way of commenting on accepted truths in the world of ideas. In such letters, irony is subtly designed to question such truths and usually emerges from the contrast between the prestige of *existentialist* ideas and the use of commonplace, naive language, as well as the bluntness of the interrogation itself. A few words in a letter addressed to Heidegger are a good example: "Dear Doktor Professor Heidegger, I should like to know what you mean by the expression *the fall into the quotidian*. When did this fall occur? Where were we standing when it happened?" (55). Towards the end of the book, Nietzsche is invoked on the question of pain in the same familiar, jocular tone mixed with bleak implications: "*Dear Herr Nietzsche – my dear sir, May I ask a question from the floor? […] I know you value cheerfulness, […] I also know you think that deep pain is ennobling, pain which burns slow, like green wood, and there you have me with you somewhat. But for this higher education survival is necessary. You must outlive the pain*. Herzog, you must stop this quarrelsomeness and baiting of great men. *No, really, Herr Nietzsche, I have great admiration for you. Sympathy. You want to make us able to live with the void"* (327).

Herzog is writing to Nietzsche while he is at his derelict country house, trying to get to grips with himself, trying to decide whether he still enjoys reason and sense or has become completely mad. A transitory thought about one of his visits to his psychiatrist warns the reader about that. The novel displays many series of quick twists which are in themselves a source of humour. Irony surfaces again as Herzog receives a visit from his brother Willie who bails him out, after an accident in which he was involved. Their embrace opens a beautifully written scene, a rapid succession of short dialogues and inner comments, in which Herzog seeks to find security when confronted to his brother's practical and prosaic questions on the price of the house, taxes and interest, its heating, structure and water supply, surface or neighbours. This subtly conducted scene is another significant example of the hero's interaction with his immediate world in Bellow's view. The unsettling universe does not have to be distant or unknown. It is very often populated with friends and relatives, people

who are close to the character, but who, nevertheless, continue to torment him with their efficient and pragmatic attitude.

"[…] '*The water supply is excellent. The cesspool is well built. Could accommodate twenty people. You wouldn't need orange trees.' 'Meaning what?' 'It means that at Versailles Louis Quatorze planted oranges because the excrement of the court made the air foul'. 'How nice to have an education', said Will. 'To be pedantic, you mean,' said Herzog*" (337).

The contrast with the previous pages, full of grand interrogations, points to the hero's fragmented inner life and the disconnected levels of his social existence. Herzog's inadequacy is highlighted again by a cultural touch in a conversation that is meant to hide feelings rather than disclose them. Here, as in many other scenes in his novels, two worlds are facing each other. In the flow of conversation, the routine and pragmatic side of society appears in sharp contrast to the hero's wish for remaining what he is ("*must play the instrument I've got*").

The book's setting is basically an exasperated intellectual's world where ideas and familiar characters intersect naturally. Memories are as real as the present moments and conversations flow naturally in the hero's tormented mind. The world of great thinkers and their ideas becomes an interlocutor which, though unable to provide answers, offers Herzog a key to understanding himself and his own world, or at least to formulating the most important contradictions that lie at the core of his mental universe.

4. Conclusions

Critics have often claimed that several Bellow heroes are replicated with new intensity and in different settings with each novel. However, even if characters look like different versions of the same hero type, their various backgrounds bring new visions of "dangling men". The association of Bellow's characters with victims of Western culture seeking meaning in a world that looks very much like an urban jungle is already commonplace. Eugene Henderson and Moses Herzog are both engaged on a journey of self-discovery in a hostile world. *Herzog* seems more static as far as the physical journey is concerned, while *Henderson the Rain King* develops according to a more dynamic pattern. In essence, however, both novels exhibit a dramatic journey that Henderson puts into memorable words as *travel is mental travel*. Their extreme wish to escape the burdens society

places on them fuels a series of fabulous adventures and encounters that help to clarify the heroes' position on fundamental identity issues.

The central characters experience a spiritual void in the society that makes them exiles and this void is signaled by ironic readings of both society and the educated individual's inadequacy to it. Irony defines their passage in a world which is repressive by nature but is made more tolerant by the heroes' perception of it through culture and refinement. This attitude prompts Henderson to discern a mythical quality in his physical strength and actions and Herzog to disguise his madness as helplessness. But both characters make extensive use of their knowledge of the world of ideas, and as they advance toward what they feel is the source of their troubles, lots of ideas, mythical images, classical heroes emerge and help define the destinies that their author assigned them. Mental exploration is associated with cultural references and the result is often a critical view of the heroes' own personality.

No matter how confused, tormented, angry or inadequate Bellow's characters are, they cannot be denied a final honesty that is achieved mainly through the use of irony. At the same time, culture acts as a magnifying glass, augmenting personality traits in others and in the self. In *Henderson the Rain King* mythical allusions are meant to highlight the divide between the hero's inner torment and his aspirations, while in *Herzog*, academic discussions and ideas are instrumental to the character's understanding of a world of pretense and falsehood. Embedded in wonderful narrative settings, the characters' social and inner lives, evolving on different levels of existence, strive to reach a balance only to remain captive in one of Herzog's final thoughts, *my balance comes from instability*.

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