

# Middle Age Crisis in *Herzog*

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*Herzog*,<sup>1</sup> Saul Bellow's sixth novel, is classified as one of "his three open-form books" along with his third, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) and the fifth, *Henderson the Rain King* (1959).<sup>2</sup> In *Augie March*, shaking himself free from the claustrophobic inner world shown in the early two novels, *Dangling Man* (1941) and *The Victim* (1949), Bellow has introduced his new style in a good command of Whitmanesque catalogue. In *Henderson*, succeeding to *Augie March*, he has brought authorial creativity into full play in the lively style of rain-making group dancing wrought from imaginative fantasy which is originated in his own anthropological background.

Moses Elkanah Herzog is a university professor of 47 years, who was betrayed unexpectedly by his young wife and his former friend, moreover, they "had spread the rumour that his sanity had collapsed" (8). Their treason drove him mad. Professor Herzog in agony goes on scribbling mental letters, almost all of them never mailed, as if he poured out his distress from which his heart is about to burst. He struggles to tell his true feelings in letters; this is not only because he is upset to find himself out of communication, but because he has an urge to justify his now wretched state. Thoughts in the head themselves are mere delusions; words in the mind, once manifested on paper, have physical reality, hence truth; they become true after having confirmed again by the writer.

In my former paper I examined the meaning of the intellectual adventures by means of the unique creation—letter form, epistolary style—as a narrative technique. In so doing I expected to discover the process

by which Bellow tries to describe a man on the way to self-realization, reconfirmation of his values in his middle age.

In *Herzog* Bellow dares to create a middle age protagonist as old as himself, which makes me think that Bellow ventures to analyze what an intellectual is at the risk of his whole being. An intellectual is here dealt with as a human with Bellow's innate Jewish humor "to maintain a balance between the gross realities he perceives and the ideals that convict his soul."<sup>3</sup>

Robert Shulman indicated that by taking the risks of an open style, Bellow tries to render fully [his] commitment to metaphor and learning, to the individual and the free, probing intelligence of an 'I'. And Shulman concludes that Bellow tries "to render fully [his] sense that process is more important than conclusion—and that fixed conclusions may be desperately hard to find in an often baffling and inhospitable universe."<sup>4</sup>

In this article I will focus on the protagonist's crisis in his middle age, especially the authorial interpretation of middle age. In so doing I will discuss whether "fixed conclusions may be desperately hard to find," and I will also address the issue of what Bellow attempts to seek in counter-cultural America by using his literary double, Herzog.

Left out of communication, Herzog struggles to find it from the past so that he may confirm that he has been enjoying real relations with people around him. Now I will consider Herzog's relations with women. Relations between the sexes comprehend the issues of *Eros*; *Eros* stands against discretion, supposedly a synonym for middle age. It is fair to say that Herzog's crisis in his middle age has something to do with his understanding *Eros*: that is to say, Herzog is supposed to face against his *Eros* while keeping his discretion.

When looking at the female characters around Herzog, I think it is important to note the meanings behind their names. The three who are involved in a love triangle, Herzog, Madeleine and Valentine, all have

given names that may be considered as ordinary. The other women, however, shares names derived from flowers. It seems that Bellow makes use of flowery messages or flower imagery in his character creation.

This traveling professor does not have tenure, and moves from one university to another to support his family—Madeleine and their daughter June. He has a summerhouse in remote Ludeyville, the Birkshires, where the couple has a lot of trouble maintaining their run-down old house. One of their neighbors is the Gersbachs: Valentine and Phoebe and their son Ephraim. While Moses goes out to work, his city-bred young wife left in the country is obliged to turn to Valentine for help, who is the only male help at hand.

Here I would like to focus on authorial intention of these characters' naming. Our protagonist Moses does not have leadership of the group despite of his name's connotation, and instead his beautiful but neurotic wife Madeleine had left him for his former best friend Valentine. Madeleine is *Magdalene* 'Mary of Magdala'; the woman who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities. Christians were said not to have dared give the name to their daughters. The name was revived with medievalism of Romanticism in the early nineteenth century. It is very often used in counterculture that essentially rejects traditional names. The penitent saint's name probably attracts people who are against the established values.<sup>5</sup>

Valentine comes from the Latin name *Valentinus*, a derivative of *valens* healthy, strong; the English name suggests romantic and sleazy. His wife Phoebe whose name is partially identified with Artemis, goddess of the moon and of hunting, sister of the sun god Apollo, is left out of the triangle. The moon shines with the help of the sun; Valentine does not let his wife shine: he cannot play the role of the sun. In the novel, the author describes Phoebe as follows:

Phoebe, looking tired and pale, smoked her cigarette, faintly smiling, and hoping, probably, to be let alone. Among assertive, learned or eloquent people, she seemed to feel her dowdiness and insufficiency. Actually she was far from stupid. She had fine eyes, a bosom, and good legs. If only she didn't make herself look like the head nurse, letting her dimples lengthen into disciplinary creases. (80)

Saul Bellow, under the mask of narrator, involuntarily reveals his authorial intention about Phoebe: she is formed "to be let alone," that is, to be out of the triangle; Phoebe "the head nurse" is from the beginning distinguished from the crazy party concerned, though her sufferings of insanity are evident in her disciplinary creases which are supposed to be smiling dimples. It may be safe to say that the reader is excused from their sympathy for sane Phoebe. She can be independent from the other three, and she is by no means a loser. Indeed, "[A]dultery—that was too common to be taken seriously by either of them [Phoebe and Herzog]" (64). The author further describes: "She [Phoebe] might have pitied Herzog's stupid egg headedness, his clumsy way of putting his troubles into high-minded categories; or simply his suffering" (64). Phoebe is really discreet; it is natural that she should not be involved in the lover's game.

There appear three more women characters around Herzog: his ex-wife, Daisy; two lovers in New York, a Japanese woman, Sono and Ramona. I realize here that all of these names are somewhat associated with flower names. Daisy is cool and regular, and a conventional Jewish woman. Her strength is "stability, symmetry, order, containment" (133). These traits of hers, however, made her take "Moses' word for it that he was seriously occupied." Daisy performs a wife's duty to stand by this puzzling and often disagreeable Herzog "with heavy neutrality." When

Herzog was finishing *Romanticism and Christianity*, Daisy picked up and left him alone in Connecticut, because her father in Ohio was dying. Here again, Bellow shows an irony of naming; Daisy, the “day’s eye”<sup>6</sup> connotes peace, hope and innocence. In their newlywed days a country girl, Daisy certainly embodies the beautiful message from the flower daisy. Now Herzog realizes that he brought out the very worst in Daisy by his irregularity and turbulence of spirit.<sup>7</sup>

Sono is a Japanese woman, who had gone to live in Paris, studies design in New York. Once in a while she works in international relations for the Nippon-America Society. Between themselves they speak French. She had seen Madeleine once, and warned Herzog to watch out for Madeleine. And now Herzog thought, “You were right about Madeleine, Sono. I shouldn’t have married her. I should have married you” (175). Herzog thought Sono saw him through the eyes of Love, because guilt and sadness made him look Oriental.

Sono means garden/flower garden in Japanese. When Herzog visits Sono’s apartment, he can feel relaxed; Sono asked for no great sacrifices; she asked only that he should be with her from time to time. The Yiddish French they spoke was funny but innocent. Here in New York Sono offers Herzog the Garden of Eden.

Ramona was a student of Herzog’s evening course. She owned a flower shop by inheritance while getting her M.A. at Columbia in art history. It seemed to Herzog, who in principle opposed affairs with students, that Ramona was obviously made for them. Her interest in him quickly became serious, and he consequently began to worry about her, to brood. Herzog, however, shrewdly reckoned that her age (thirty-seven or thirty-eight years) meant that she was looking for a husband.

The name of Ramona is associated with flower salvia, whose English name is ramona. The whole flower is red. This is why its flower message is ardent love. Besides, salvia derive from Latin *salvus* connotes safe,

preserved, unharmed, healthy sound. Ramona in the novel, in fact, “was wearing a tight red dress” (213). The author explains about Ramona: “there was simply no other way to talk about her life, ..., except in terms of Magdalene Christianity” (193). Here I remember that Madeleine also comes from Magdalene. Ramona might take the place of Madeleine, for she repents of her past life and now she yearns for stability. Herzog sympathized with her, respected her, who had something genuine at heart.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless Herzog discerns that well-educated Ramona has a dangerous theorizing which can only lead to more high-minded mistakes.<sup>9</sup>

Flower imagery, as is shown in the women characters’ names, is extended to the protagonist as well. Herzog regards himself as “mocking flowers grown in the soil of fever and unacted violence” (169) in writing as usual an unmailed letter. In so doing, Herzog is seeking a meaning of the present in which Madeleine, Valentine and he are facing one another. He knows, “A letter gives one a chance to consider—think matters over, and reach a more balanced view” (107).

When Herzog went to the City Courthouse for the custody of his daughter June, he found a bouquet of violets on the broad stone stairway. He assumed it had fallen from the hand of a bride. Although the smell of the violets was associated with female tears, Herzog, now experienced middle ager, threw them into a trashcan casually. Nevertheless he hoped “they had not dropped from a disappointed hand” (231). Violet here connotes honesty, and modesty as in “modest violet.”

Scribbling unmailed letters is almost the same as keeping a diary.<sup>10</sup> In this sense Herzog does not need any replies; he wants to construct his shattered self in the eternal triangle; and further, he rejects to communication with others. Like other Bellowian protagonists Herzog returns to remain alone again toward the end of the novel. He has, however, a rain check: Ramona will expect him for their new life in New York. Bellow does not make his protagonist suffer a complete defeat in man-woman

relations. I recognize therefore that the author cannot detach himself fully from the protagonist, his literary double. This reminds me of Bellow's misogynistic expressions about women, especially unfaithful Madeleine.<sup>11</sup>

When you have a hard time with a woman, no insults from you would settle the matter. If Herzog keeps hatred in his mind, he cannot smoothly transfer his honest feelings into Ramona. Herzog should be careful if he no longer wants miscommunication with a woman. It is natural that the author should allow delay for the next action of his protagonist. As far as Herzog is concerned, "I am responsible, responsible to reason," (332) Ramona's style, "[t]ables, beds, parlours, money, laundry and automobile, culture and sex knit into one web," (193) turns into "the art of love" (192).

The immorality of Madeleine has brought Herzog a critical opportunity to reexamine the past, present and future of his own. Herzog had to unfold the triangle tangle among the party concerned for himself, because he is in middle age when a man should have attained some understanding of life. Herzog himself had had romances with women other than his wife. It is, therefore, not to clear his name but to get back his daughter from the two unfaithful married that he desperately flies to Chicago. His indignation reaches its peak when he observes through the bathroom window, Valentine [Uncle Val for June] bathing his own daughter playfully and kindly. Next moment Herzog's reason has been revived to recover his lost ground of a father. He decides that his daughter cannot learn from Valentine, who is one of "those two grotesque love-actors" (265). Herzog in addition judges that Gersbach is "not an individual but a fragment, a piece broken off from the mob" (265).

The love triangle has left Herzog in solitude. Middle age Herzog is tested on his discretion: whether he is a man of mature and sound judgment. He is pressed to reconsider relations around him, because it is

nearly impossible for one to transform oneself independent of relations with others. Saul Bellow attempts to specify Herzog's relations with women: that is, Herzog's *Eros*. *Eros* is opposite to discretion; Bellow is trying to approach the issue of middle age crisis from the opposite direction.

A human being as an individual wants to assert that he is distinguished from others, and at the same time, in his instinct, *Eros*, he has a desire to unite with the other. In case of Herzog the latter is not the ultimate end; this is one of the reasons why Herzog and Madeleine ends up in discord. Middle aged Herzog has to cope with a contradictory problem that he keeps his discretion (his self), while at the same time as experiencing *Eros* that transcends himself.

In middle age discretion and *Eros* are, in a way, synthesized into *Thanatos*. Death will perish our selves. In life, therefore, human beings contrive a transcendental existence, soul. There is a way to reach the transcendental soul: that is *Eros*. A human life becomes deepened in conscious of soul. If *Eros* goes all by itself, it will cause a scandalous affair. But if *Eros* sways the whole existence of a man in conflict between the self and the soul, then this will become his real experience.<sup>12</sup>

As for Herzog, he cannot step into a new romance with Ramona. Thinking back on his affairs with ex-wife and other women implies that he tries to reconsider his relations in society: that is, he wants to rebuild his shattered self by means of relations, where *Eros* appears and disappears in conflict between the self and the soul. One may reach the transcendental soul by *Eros*; the transcendental soul will lead one to a more profound life, which might be called an eternal life.

Herzog is now on the way to his real self-realization. In his middle age he is allowed a moratorium. The unexpected betrayal by his young wife has drawn him into misery and nuisance before he knows. This mishap, however, has inevitably led him to face the unsolved problem of



his own. Herzog has not reached the transcendence yet; he is still seeking a more profound life; he would have to synthesize his *Eros* and discretion into the transcendental soul. Moses Herzog is endowed with enough time to become a wise old man who has “large reserves of understanding and humanity” (101).

Published in the autumn of 1964, *Herzog* was overwhelmingly accepted by the public, occupying a place on “best seller” lists for many months.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile the work generally won critical acclaim, which was subsequent on the prize, the National Book Award for Fiction (Bellow’s second; the first was for *The Adventures of Augie March*). The mass volume of sales indicated that the public welcomed the novel enthusiastically.

At that time U.S.A. had experienced the sorrowful accident: John F. Kennedy was assassinated, gunned down during his stumping in Dallas, Texas. The fall of the Star President signified that something hopeful had collapsed in the days they called “Counterculture.” The young people in the sixties were repelling the existing culture, and they eagerly wanted to create their own. At the beginning of the decade Kennedy had launched into the presidency. His promising policies exerted a strong hold on the young generation.

The collapse of the great star, as it were, caused the general loss in direction. Social hope held out by Kennedy had been frustrated; the young had been turned adrift; the grown-up bewildered before the new confusion. Saul Bellow launched out his antihero, Moses Herzog into the chaotic world. Herzog, therefore, might be supposed to embody the confused American society in the sixties.

The broken-down couple, Herzog and Madeleine symbolizes communications gap, generation gap in countercultural America. Madeleine’s unfaithfulness, in a way, urged Herzog to precede his work of the future, of which the author explains as follows:

The revolutions of the twentieth century, the liberation of the masses by production, created private life but gave nothing to fill it with. This was where such as he came in. The progress of civilization—indeed, the survival of civilization—depended on the successes of Moses E. Herzog. And in treating him as she did, Madeleine injured a great project. This was, in the eyes of Moses E. Herzog, what was so grotesque and deplorable about the experience of Moses E. Herzog. (131-32)

Madeleine, whose name represents a countercultural antipathy against the existing values, regards that Herzog does not respect her intelligence if he does not join in her argument, whereas Valentine Gersbach always booms along in conversation to the detriment of sense.<sup>14</sup> She rejects “that line of platitudes about feelings” (122).

When it comes to her unhappy childhood incident, she cannot accept the broad-minded consolation from Herzog, but it seems to her a kind of indifference. Therefore, “Moses watched her as though he were submerged, through the vitreous distortion of deep water” (123). In their relations there had been “mental politics” (132). Madeleine knew more at twelve than Herzog did at forty: “The strength to do evil is sovereignty” (132).

If the author tries to embody immorality in Madeleine, it is not easy to say that Herzog is incarnated morality. In counterculture the resisting young people attacked the established social system, which comprehends contradictions inside. These conflicts are necessary for young America to attain full growth in order to become a promising world power in the future.

Saul Bellow perceives a kind of crisis in countercultural America, which is in the process of becoming a mature power. In analyzing crises, it seems that intellect becomes his means of salvation, and that he

ventures to “seek a compensation for the hopelessness or meanness of existence,” believing that “the important humanity of the novel must be the writer’s own.”<sup>15</sup>

In *Herzog* Saul Bellow attempts at an intellectual quest of self-realization with a tenacity of spirit. Herein we admit that Saul Bellow successfully synthesizes his innate Jewish tradition with his acquired intellectual standing in American society.

### Notes

- 1 Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (Penguin, 1964, rpt. 1969). All references given parenthetically are this edition.
- 2 Robert Shulman, “The Style of Bellow’s Comedy” in Irving Howe ed., *Herzog: Text and Criticism* (New York: Viking, 1976), p. 489. There is, however, an important difference among them: the first two books are written in the first person; the latest is largely in the third person.
- 3 Earl Rovit, “Jewish Humor and American Life” in *Herzog: Text and Criticism*, 510-19.
- 4 Shulman, 491.
- 5 Cf. George R. Stewart/Kimura Yasuo, *America Jinmei Jiten* [*The American Given Names*] (Hokuseido, 1979)
- 6 It is so called because it uncovers the yellow disc of its centre in the morning and closes its petals over it again toward the end of the day.
- 7 *Herzog*, 133.
- 8 *Herzog*, 193.
- 9 *Herzog*, 216.
- 10 Kathleen McCoy, “*Dangling Man* and *Herzog*: First Novel as *Ur-Text*” in *Saul Bellow Journal*, 13(2). McCoy points out that “*Herzog* begins his odyssey with the same desire for escape from the burden of selfhood and the oppression of alienation that Joseph feels just before the end of *Dangling Man*.” And she summarizes: “The difference is that *Herzog* emerges a deeper man for he has transcended his victimization by thrashing out ideas in his letters and by finally coming to a plateau of quiescent acquiescence where he tranquilly accepts whatever his destiny may be” (77).

- 11 Gloria Cronin points out Bellow's misogynistic phase in dealing with *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) and *More Die of Heartbreak* (1992) in "Misogyny" of her own criticism, *A Room Of His Own—in search of the feminine in the novels of Saul Bellow* (Syracuse University Press: 2001).
- 12 Hayao Kawai, *Chunen Kuraisisu* [Middle Age Crisis], (Asahi Shinbunsha, 2002), 95-127.
- 13 "Within a year the novel had had seventeenth printings in hard-cover form; it was released in paper-backs later in 1965." Eugenie Harris, *Saul Bellow's Herzog* (Monarch Press, 1966), 85.
- 14 *Herzog*, 78.
- 15 Saul Bellow, "The Sealed Treasure" (1960) in the recent collection of his essays, *It All Adds Up* (1994), 61.