

Society, the Self, and Spirituality in *Herzog*

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In Saul Bellow's epistolary novel, *Herzog*, the eponymous protagonist is on a quest for spiritual fulfillment. The intellectual, writer, and professor Moses E. Herzog commences his journey in a demoralized state that was triggered by his wife Madeleine's rejection of him. Withdrawn, he communicates by writing, to both the living and the dead, letters he never sends.

An articulate, moral, and dynamic man, Herzog seeks to not only heal but to gain a vision that will enable him to find cohesion in his life and transcendent meaning. Hungering, by his own account, for "good sense, clarity, truth – even an atom of it," and to identify "the meaning of life," he believes, initially, that finding linguistic constructs that explain human experience or putting his thoughts into "high-minded categories" will fulfill these pursuits.¹ Paradoxically, rather than offer him the answers he seeks, these language-based approaches to obtaining meaning perpetuate Herzog's obfuscations: "he was thinking continually but nothing clear resulted" (147); he "was [...] a man who [...] lacked clear ideas" (118). They also leave him reflecting upon the limitations of language: "can thought wake you from the dream of existence? Not if it becomes a second realm of confusion, another more complicated dream, the dream of intellect, the delusion of total explanations" (206). Herzog gradually discovers that a linguistic approach for obtaining spiritual fulfillment is an ineffective course, because words alone cannot definitively identify for us who we are or what we need: "man has a nature, but what is it? Those who have confidently described it, Hobbes, Freud, et cetera, by telling us who we are 'intrinsically', are not our 'greatest benefactors'" (161). Language, ultimately, cannot capture the elusive being of man which is elevated beyond its reach, and so proves reductive and fragmented in this pursuit.

Herzog is well aware that the culture in which he resides is not structured to readily help people get in touch with their true selves, noting that "the multiplied power of numbers [...] made the self negligible" (248) and that "modern character is inconstant, divided, vacillating, lacking the stone like certitude of archaic man, also deprived of the firm ideas of the seventeenth century, clear, hard theorems" (134). Struggling himself to find a way to be whole, Herzog resorts to a number of linguistic strategies for achieving this end; however, these strategies paradoxically are fragmented and in turn reflect the fragmentation of his society, which modern technology has accelerated.

For instance, television reveals an endless array of fleeting, often disconnected images, giving its viewers little time to contemplate or assimilate what goes whirling by them. Reflective of the mercurial workings of television is Herzog's own style of approaching topics, which is to flit from one to another, causing Herzog to "abandon [...] theme(s) with characteristic abruptness" (161) rather than potentially bring his understanding of them to a level of greater depth or

breadth by staying with his thoughts long enough to do so. Resonating with the fleeting images of television and thoughts in Herzog's mind are myriads, in panoramic view, of disparate products for sale that have quick turnover life, and are linked with purchasable, ephemeral lifestyle choices made available to consumers through mass media means. These lifestyles, often justified with rhetorical discourse, tend to reduce more rarefied qualities to commodities, something Herzog criticizes in a letter he writes to a McSiggins regarding equating goodness with a thing, and one people feel is of little consequence: "[...] in Populist Philosophy, goodness has become a free commodity like air, or nearly free, like a subway ride. Best of everything for everybody – help yourself" (199).² Thus, the choices predominantly available in Herzog's society for offering satisfaction at the core level are essentially empty shells, leading Herzog to note that: "people can be free now but the freedom doesn't have any content. It's like a howling emptiness" (53).

As such, the atomistic linguistic constructs Herzog contemplates reflect his own fractured self as well as the mid-twentieth-century culture of which he is partially a product. This is a culture that pervasively reduces phenomena and people to their most material and literal aspects, thereby creating obstacles to spiritual fulfillment.³ Thus, as Herzog notes, "[his] generation thinks – and this is its thought of thoughts – that nothing faithful, vulnerable, fragile can be durable or have any true power" (353).

Herzog himself uses fragmentation as a defense against examining his own feelings by dispersing those feelings into generalizations rather than both looking at the impact they have on his life and how he contributes to situations that trigger them. For example, in a letter to General Eisenhower in which Herzog critiques the former United States President about his professional handling of the topic of "spiritual values" (200), he digresses with the thought that "[i]ntelligent people without influence feel a certain self-contempt" (200). This point holds particular relevance for Herzog, whose own sense of powerlessness has been brought about by Madeleine's rejection of him. For all his intelligence, he could not influence her to stay with him, and he unwittingly turns the resulting rage against himself. Yet rather than think in greater complexity about how the statement of his digression relates to his own life, Herzog characteristically dissociates himself from the generalization he makes.

Herzog is taking refuge in a big, historical perspective, something that he, ironically, warns in a letter to one Dr. Bhave – relative to dealing with the wealth distribution in India – not to hide behind: "You must start with injustices that are obvious to everybody, not with big historical perspectives" (38). Herzog externalizes the topic, makes statements such as "what this country needs is a good five-cent synthesis" (255) but does not examine his own need to synthesize information. Finally, referring to himself as "Moses" or "him" as if he were someone other than the narrator of his thoughts is another way that keeps Herzog fractured, removed from the immediacy of what he is experiencing.

Herzog's society both creates and validates those who embody its reductive, utilitarian ways, such as those whom Herzog refers to as "Reality Instructors" (157): people who "[...] want to teach you – to punish you with – the lessons of the Real" (157). Often skilled professionals, such

as Simkin, or the syllogistic and jaded lawyer, Sandor Himmelstein, they try with their “strange, minimal ideas of truth” (281) to frighten Herzog into facing what they perceive to be the essential elements of his existence by laying bare the most literal, degenerative level of his predicaments. For instance, knowing Herzog is in a vulnerable state after separating from Madeleine, Sandor further eradicates Herzog’s fragile sense of self by telling him he is old and gray and Madeleine is in her prime and might have someone on the side. Sandor is thus reducing the relationship Herzog has with Madeleine to its basest level: the level at which people’s worth depends on where they are situated in their biological life cycles. Aware that he subjects himself to these punitive realists, Herzog makes excuses for Sandor’s unnecessarily brutal approach, giving Sandor the benefit of the doubt that his intention is not to deliver more damage: “He must have been convinced he was cutting the dead weight of deception from Herzog’s soul” (107).

Herzog’s access, however, to that very soul – an access the indoctrinated Reality Instructors lack to their own – is what differentiates Herzog from them. Being a “specialist in spiritual self-awareness” (12), Herzog’s desire to live a life of elevated consciousness is one, in fact, inspired by his soul: the loving and humane locus of his true being, the source that will enable his recovery, and the place in which he encounters God. Herzog’s soul renders its owner one who experiences “much heavy love” (148) and for whom “grief [does] not pass quickly” (148). Although porous, so necessary for receptivity, “the soul requires intensity” (379) as it must be strong enough to handle the barrage of thoughts and feelings it registers without becoming overburdened by them to the point of closing up. Yet even if weighed down, the soul, putting its recipients in touch with the pain that can accompany consciousness, offers the experience of pleasurable feelings as well, such as the feeling of emancipation. It is an opulent container that keeps us human by keeping us feeling and experiencing who we are. It is what revitalizes people, keeping them aware, connected, sensitive, and sane. Yet it must constantly assert itself in a struggle against the dehumanizing forces of contemporary life that threaten to annihilate it. Paradoxically, the soul must seek nourishment from that same contemporary culture, as it is embodied by inhabitants of that milieu.

Aware of this reality, the spiritual awakening that Herzog undergoes – an awakening he inadvertently finds while in the process of trying to locate himself with words – leads him to desire to return to his culture renewed and ready to embrace the humanity which resides there. This desire represents the loftiest expression of Herzog’s soul, the godly desire to “love thy neighbor”: “Luckily for me, I did not have the means to get too far away from our common life. [...] I mean to share with other human beings as far as possible and not destroy my remaining years in the same way” (392). This calling is what accounts for Herzog’s telling his friend, Luke, while well along the way of his spiritual journey: “I really believe that brotherhood is what makes a man human” (333).

In contrast to Herzog, his brother, Shura, an exemplar of one who has achieved the American ideal of becoming financially successful and powerful in society, is severed from the emotional depths and connections to the past that concern his mystical brother. As an illustration of this

point, Shura tells Herzog, when the latter wept at their father's funeral, "Don't carry on like a goddamn immigrant" (342), a comment that prompts Herzog to reflect:

I embarrassed him with his golfing friends, the corporation president. [...] Here he was the good American. I still carry European pollution, am infected by the Old World with feelings of Love – Filial Emotion. Old stuporous dreams. (342)

Herzog's soulful feelings are rooted in the immigrant culture that pervaded his home life, feelings he does not perceive as defunct: "To [the environment of his youth] Moses' heart was attached with great power" (174).

The nuclear family in which Herzog grew up showed respect for the past and the power of the soul. His mother, for instance, did not reductively package up why she could never come to terms with her sister-in-law, Zipporah. As Herzog notes, "the antagonism [between them], as Mama felt it, was mystical – a matter of souls" (182): a thought conveying that souls, unlike corporation presidents, are not products of contemporary culture but given us by a power greater than our own, and therefore not malleable.

Herzog's respect for the mystical realm is akin to his mother's, as made apparent from his belief that man, by his very nature, is too mysterious and complex to become exhausted by empirical procedures that aim to excavate him: "a man is somehow more than his 'characteristics', all the emotions, strivings, tastes, and constructions which it pleases him to call 'My Life'" (325). His mystical and emotional propensities have been influenced as well by the religious upbringing he has had: an upbringing in the orthodox Jewish tradition, one numerous times reiterating to Herzog and his siblings his family's personally and collectively painful history, one that is ancient:

[...] we had a great schooling in grief. I still know these cries of the soul. They lie in the breast, and in the throat. The mouth wants to open wide and let them out. But all these are antiquities – yes, Jewish antiquities originating in the Bible, in a Biblical sense of personal history and destiny. (184)

If Herzog's spiritual orientation has been instilled in him by his religious upbringing, and dovetails with his soulfully effusive and sensitive nature, it is enhanced as well by his intellectual consciousness, which propels him to both examine what various thinkers and philosophers have to say about the nature of mankind, and discover, in the process, how both they and he himself can hold unrealistic expectations of language.

Exploring, polemically, texts of various philosophical thinkers, Herzog crystallizes and articulates his belief that as human beings, which are mystical beings, there is much that is indecipherable about our natures. In fact, discerning our deepest being would not even imbue us with what we need in order to find fulfillment. What would accomplish that feat would be celebrating our spiritual selves by lovingly embracing humanity in the context of daily life: an

act that transforms what is mundane into that which is meaningful. This belief is one Herzog finds validated by the works of, among other thinkers, Michel de Montaigne and Blaise Pascal, which relay that “[t]he strength of a man’s virtue or spiritual capacity [is] measured by his ordinary life” (133).

Ordinary existence, Herzog observes, is something that the philosopher Martin Heidegger perceives as a denigration of the loftier state within which man once dwelled. It is a perception that Herzog, who himself had been elitist, adding to his malaise, now takes issue with:

Very tired of the modern form of historicism which sees in this civilization the defeat of the best hopes of Western religion and thought, what Heidegger calls the second Fall of Man into the quotidian or ordinary. No philosopher knows what the ordinary is, has not fallen into it deeply enough. (133)

According to Herzog, Heidegger uses language defensively, to barricade the in-depth experiencing of contemporary human existence by labeling that existence a fallen one. Heidegger’s reference to man as being in his “second Fall [...] into the quotidian or ordinary” (133) is a categorization that has the effect of truncating any further exploration of it, just as Herzog’s linguistic categorizations have the effect of curtailing his own growth. Thus, for example, to avoid exploring the feeling of “potato love” (327) he is feeling towards Luke, he thinks: “To advert to his temperament, call things by their proper name, restored his control” (327).

Challenging Heidegger’s phenomenological semantics, Herzog does not interpret man’s “Fall” (133) to mean that we have become morally lowered by living in a manner that is commonplace. To Herzog, having “fallen into [the ordinary]” (133) translates into a type of lapsing – forfeiting a dominant, authoritative position for one in which we can know daily life beyond its stereotypes. This is a realm in which new growth can be accrued, and something “no philosopher” (133), protected and separated by the language constructs inherent to his or her occupation, has “fallen into [...] deeply enough” (133) to experience and thus understand from a holistic perspective.

Rather than finalizing ordinary life, Herzog’s approach to it opens it up as uncharted terrain. His portrayal of his own relatives, “the would-be forgotten” (167), as well as the descriptions he relays of the milieu of his childhood, reveal his ability to perceive what is extraordinary in that which is ordinary. For instance, Napoleon Street, the block where Herzog lived during his youth, was decadent and squalid: “rotten, toy-like, crazy and filthy” (174). There, however, he had found “a wider range of human feelings than he had ever again been able to find” (174). It is the unseen, inner workings of one’s existence rather than the strata of one’s life which supply that life with essential meaning. Herzog thinks, in retrospection, “What was wrong with Napoleon Street? [...] All he ever wanted was there” (174). Although his family was comprised of so-called ordinary people, Herzog’s poignant descriptions of them reveal the value that they held for him, a value born of love: “Moses loved them all, notwithstanding” (401).

In addition to Heidegger's devaluing of human life, Herzog reads the philosopher as reducing the phenomenon of death to something that can be objectively confronted. This reduction becomes revealed in a scene in which Luke tells Herzog of some exercises he read about designed to help one face his or her death. Herzog proceeds to criticize the notion implicit to Heidegger's premise that God's mysteries – life and death – can be caught, as if static, for our comprehension: "A man may say 'From now on I'm going to speak the truth.' But the truth hears him and runs away and hides before he's even done speaking" (331). Heidegger's glorification of death is merely a projection of man's own dark vision: it is "our own murdering imagination [that] turns out to be the great power, our human imagination which starts by accusing God of murder" (354).

Herzog's burgeoning spiritual vision is one in which he critiques theorists and thinkers whose writings convey reductive and fragmented notions that, in varying ways, mirror those characterizing contemporary culture, often making its inhabitants hostile or, if backfiring as they did with Herzog, seized by malaise. This vision has been initiated by both Herzog's proliferating access to his soul, and the opportunity his textual readings create for him to articulate how and why he wants to live in ways that are enlarging and enlightening. Herzog then, having internalized what he needed, moves to closing the texts and opening himself to the world around him, which in his self-absorption he had previously blocked out: "As he stretched out, he took a long breath, and then he lay, looking at the mesh of the screen, pulled loose by vines, and listening to the steady scratching of Mrs. Tuttle's broom" (415–416). At the culmination of *Herzog*, ready to reunite as a renewed man with the world, "Herzog felt a deep, dizzy eagerness to begin" (392).

What Herzog comes to embrace is that loving one's brethren and celebrating life amongst them is an expression of God's will for mankind and where we will be able to find fulfillment: "The silence sustained him, and the brilliant weather, the feeling that he was easily contained by everything about him *Within the hollowness of God*" (396). This plan is one that promotes wholeness and transcendence: an antidote to contemporary life which can rather than encourage us to love and expand, become hostile and reduced. It is a premise that will allow Herzog to both heal himself and help heal the world to which he will return.

As Herzog believes that human beings can best flourish by learning through affirmative channels, he is critical, too, of Kierkegaard's propagation of suffering as a way to achieve an understanding of truth: "Kierkegaard meant that truth has lost its force with us and horrible pain and evil must teach it to us again" (385). Kierkegaard glorifies suffering much as Heidegger glorifies dread, which likewise has dangerous repercussions: "the advocacy and praise of suffering take us in the wrong direction and those of us who remain loyal to civilization must not go for it" (386). Being an expert in using language constructs to create a feigned reality, Herzog recognizes the seductive nature of Kierkegaard's language. In his discussion of Kierkegaard he notes that nihilistic philosophers use words as a sophisticated way to make destruction sound exciting enough to embrace: "We love apocalypses too much, and crisis ethics and florid extremism with its thrilling language" (386–387).

Yet, as Herzog makes clear, philosophers such as Heidegger are not the only thinkers who use language for manipulative purposes. He also takes issue with “the Wastelanders” (97) in how they manipulate words: they use the choicest ones to try to recreate people into becoming more valuable beings. Living merely in the lexical realm, they believe that “the deterioration of language and its debasement was tantamount to dehumanization [in the industrialized class of Europe], which led straight to cultural fascism” (97).

Finally, Herzog condemns Nietzsche’s vision of aesthetic nihilism. Although he sympathizes with Nietzsche for wanting mankind to “live with the void” (389) by acknowledging its existence, Herzog recognizes that no one can survive in a vacuum. These “immoralists” (389) that face up to life’s meaninglessness are themselves dependent on the very cultural comforts that they vehemently attack: “They ride the bus. They are only the most bus-sick travelers” (389). Nietzsche’s guidelines for living truthfully are, ironically, as problematic as the spurious living of which he is critical.

Herzog inadvertently is talking about the limitations of language. Given that language functions subjectively, any statement can be revealed to be true or false and any notion can rest on its laurels of a self-contained logic. But neither point of view, or of other views, necessarily means that an ultimate truth has been obtained. What gives one a sense that a truth has been uncovered, Herzog realizes, often comes, ironically, from that which is ineffable: “Go through what is comprehensible and you conclude that only the incomprehensible gives any light” (325).

That which is life-affirming, Herzog learns, comes from the piece of God within us, and being of God is larger than our capacity to fully comprehend and translate into language. To attempt to understand man in a complete vein would be to whittle him down to less than what he is. Nihilism, as presented in *Herzog*, is testimony to the dangers of ceaseless categorizing: something Herzog himself engaged in doing, exacerbating his spiritual vacuity.

Herzog does not interpret his belief in man’s munificence to be “a false hope that makes a man feel the illusion of worth” (254). To him, “good is no phony” (254). This goodness is an outgrowth of the self (and the self, inversely, flourishes under the auspices of ‘goodness’ born of love) and has atavistic roots. This point becomes apparent when Moses reflects one day upon his image in the mirror. He thinks, “The primitive self-attachment of the human creature, that sweet instinct for the self, [is] so deep, so old it may have a cellular origin” (197).

Yet to revere the self by sacrificing it as a way of saving it from the world’s corruption is to exaggerate its importance – taking it out of the cosmic context in which it resides – and overestimate its function: a perspective as destructive as that of negating the self. This idea becomes apparent in light of the behavior of the narcissistic Nachman, Herzog’s childhood crony, and his wife, Laura. Nachman glorifies the self to the point at which he perceives the world as being its absolute enemy rather than a participant in a symbiotic relationship with it. As a consequence of this polarized view, “gaunt” (163) Nachman and his “thin” (165) wife choose to live in abject poverty, wanting, as does Kafka’s hunger artist, no sustenance from the fruits of the world’s labor, and trying instead to derive their nourishment from reading “Van Gogh’s letters aloud to each other – Rilke’s poems” (163). The more realistic perception Herzog holds of

man in relation to his soul accounts for his telling Nachman, whose aesthetic vision, ironically, will prevent him from living a rich, prismatic life: “it isn’t as bad as you make out [...] Most people are unpoetical, and you consider this a betrayal” (166). Herzog’s perspective will enable him to bring redeeming qualities to his environment and work within rather than above it.

Although America is filled with narcissists and nihilists whose orientations are confirmed by the tenets of formidable thinkers, there are also thinkers and theorists that Herzog approves of who celebrate the spiritual vision of embracing humanity and its individuals. One such thinker is the American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, from whose work Herzog quotes when the class orator of his high school: “The main enterprise of the world, for splendor . . . is the upbuilding of a man. The private life of one man shall be a more illustrious monarchy . . . than any kingdom in history” (198). As with Emerson, the Russian writer Vasily Rozanov exalts the life of the individual, as borne out by what Herzog writes to him in response to his notions about the value of individual lives: “A stupendous truth you say, heard from none of the prophets, is that private life is above everything. More universal than religion. Truth is higher than the sun. The soul is passion” (391). Still another thinker whose views affirm the beauty of mankind is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Although Herzog calls him a “degenerate” (161), he adds, “But I do not see what we can answer when he says ‘*Je sens mon cœur et je connais les hommes*’” (161).⁴

No longer seeking pithy meaning in linguistic constructs and categories, Herzog has found meaning in the spiritual realm of existence. Finding meaning, Herzog realizes, comes from finding his place in God’s plan, which inherently supplies that meaning:

A man doesn’t need happiness for himself [...] provided there is something great, something into which his being, and all beings, can go. He does not need meaning as long as such intensity has scope. Because then it is self-evident; it is meaning. (353)

Meaning exists; it needn’t be created with words. Herzog learns it cannot be directly spoken: it can only be spoken about. He understands that expecting language to capture and convey definitive truth is an endeavor that cannot come to fruition. The evidence of this realization is demonstrated in a story Herzog tells his daughter that satirizes the absurd attempt to know in absolute terms the difference between things: “There’s this association that people belong to. They’re the most of every type. There’s the hairiest bald man, and the baldest hairy man” (360). What Herzog belongs to now is the association between humanity and his self and the spiritual vision which gave both back to him.

Notes

1. Bellow 1976, 39, 229, 76. All subsequent in-text citations will be from this reference.
2. Adorno 2001, 100. Adorno refers to this type of condition as *culture industry* which is to turn everything “into public relations, the manufacturing of ‘good will.’”

3. The type of culture is representative of the culture industry, where capitalist mass production commodifies and replicates people's identities so that their less perceptible aspects are neglected (see Adorno 2001; also Horkheimer and Adorno 1972).
4. "I feel my heart and I know mankind."

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