UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

WOMEN AND COMEDY IN THE NOVELS OF SAUL BELLOW

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the role of women in the novels of Saul Bellow. It attacks the critical orthodoxy which dismisses the women as inadequately characterized stereotypes, and attempts to provide a fresh viewpoint from which the women are considered as comic types.

Five such types are posited and discussed: the Bitch, the High Priestess of Sex, the Slut, the Saint, and the Matriarch. In each, Bellow explores some aspect of a complex image of feminity. The women fall into two groups: those who have a sexual relationship with the hero, and those who have a maternal one. In the first group, the image of woman as a sexual being is split into three types, distinguished by suppression, selfconsciousness, and innocence of sexuality. The second group contains two contrasted images of motherhood: devotion and instruction.

The women define both the moral universe of the novels and the spectrum of comic response. The central concern of Bellow's novels is the definition and celebration of the 'exactly human'. Comedy, as satire and celebration, both attacks the characters who attempt to be 'more than human' and delights in the characters who are 'exactly human'. The women are thus associated with different types of comedy, according to how far and in what way they differ from the natural human norm.

In his treatment of the Bitch, Bellow uses satire to deflate and expose the self-dramatizing power-seeking character. The Priestess is less harmful, more ridiculous, and her exaggerated, self-conscious sexuality is burlesqued, while the Slut's unselfconscious innocence and spontaneous vitality give rose to the comedy of celebration. The Saint is not treated comically, but provides a moral norm, a yardstick against which the comic characters are measured. Finally, in the figure of the Matriarch, Bellow meets the challenge of a nihilistic view of life. She perceives reality as harsh and brutal, but is in turn perceived as grotesquely abnormal by Bellow and this invalidates her vision.

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INTRODUCTION

> The whole of Bellow's work is singularly lacking in real or vivid female characters; where women are introduced, they [are] peculiarly unconvincing.
> (Leslie Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, p.338).[1]

There is an impressive body of critical commentary on the role of women in Bellow's fiction. The vast majority of this, however, denies that the women have any importance in his novels, and is aimed at demonstrating that they are nonentities, inadequately characterized, or totally passive. Critics see the novels as dominated by men and male concerns, as focusing on the solitary hero to the exclusion of all else:

> The Bellow [hero] ... is man disowned by his father, unrecognized by his son, man without woman ...
> (Leslie Fiedler, 'Saul Bellow', in Saul Bellow and the Critics, ed. Malin, p.9)

> Bellow characterizes women less adequately than he does fathers and sons.
> (I. Malin, Saul Bellow's Fiction, p.71)

> There is not a single woman in all of Saul Bellow's work, whose search for identity is viewed compassionately, while every vice of his male introspectives is given some genuine imperative.
> (Charles Newman, The Art of Sylvia Plath, p.44)

> Bellow is a man's novelist. His female characters tend to be done with far smaller resource ....
> (Denis Donoghue, 'Dangling Man', in Saul Bellow, ed. Rovit, p.25)

This focus on male consciousness seems to the critics to push the women out of the limelight, either, as Donoghue and Newman suggest, because Bellow is not interested in women, and pays less attention to their characterization than to that of his male protagonists, or, as Malin suggests below, because the Bellow hero regards women as passive and inferior, and is so self-concerned that he has little time for them:

[1] References will be given within the text, in abbreviated form. Later references will be given in the shortest intelligible form following the MRHA style convention. Full publication details may be found in the bibliography.

> Bellow's heroes regard women in general as inferior, non-spiritual creatures ... Bellow seems to side with his heroes. Like them, he pays little attention to women as complex creatures. The women live in a world of fathers and sons ... the heroes pursue their identity, their masculinity in relation to other males ... Dangling Man demonstrates the role of women in all of Bellow's fiction ... Although Iva is married to Joseph, we see little of her, even in his thoughts ... she is missing ... she doesn't exist.
>
> (Irving Malin, Saul Bellow's Fiction, pp. 83 and 71)

Malin sees Bellow's lack of interest in the complexities of the feminine character reflected on a level of narrative realism, in the hero's introspection, his sketchy portrayal similarly reflected in the hero's conception of women as simple, passive creatures.

Other critics base their complaints on the fact that women are viewed exclusively through male eyes in Bellow's novels:

> We are never allowed a subjective view of the woman's experience. Women are characters in the movie that flashes through the protagonist's head. Bellow does not attempt to penetrate their skulls; they have no monologues. The only self they reveal is that which the protagonist perceives.
>
> (Victoria Sullivan 'The Battle of the Sexes in Three Bellow Novels', in Saul Bellow, ed. Rovit p.112)

This, the critics claim, leads to a stereotyped, cliché, or simplistic view of women:

> His women tend to be nympholeptic projections, fantasies based on girls one never had ....
>
> (Leslie Fiedler, 'Saul Bellow', p.7)

> Les femmes n'existent pas en elles-mêmes; elles n'existent que comme partenaires sexuelles potentielles - au présent, au passé, ou dans l'imaginaire ... Au dela de la description du comportement intersexuel dans la societé d'acquisition, Bellow n'échappe pas aux stéréotypes sexistes. La femme n'existe que par rapport à l'homme et le seul respect auquel elle a droit est un respect par procuration - celui que lui garantit sa parenté, son appartenance au père, a l'amant, au mari - bref à la race de l'homme, l'ami au masculin.
>
> (Pierre Domergues, L'Alienation dans le roman americain contemporain, pp. 416-418)

> Dès qu'on pense aux femmes de Herzog on s'aperçoit que ce roman est inégal. Si on doit juger le livre sur ses faiblesses

> il faut le condamner, car il est évident que ses femmes sortent tout droit des clichés du roman et du théâtre. Vous avez d'une part la mégère castatrice, et de l'autre la praline délicieuse.
> (Francois Bondy, in Saul Bellow, ed. Dommergues, p.64)

> Ramona, given in great detail, is a piece of cardboard, while Father Herzog, a brief sketch, is authentically 'there'. Bellow's prose can deal with women only when they are magisterial figures in the landscape of the past, and then they are nearly men. If a woman is thirty-five and about to become the hero's mistress, the chances are that she will reveal herself the product of scissors-and-paste ... These women are merely to give the hero something more to suffer, they merely add to the noise and fret of his life. And, strictly speaking, anyone could do this for him.
> (Donoghue, pp.25-26)

In view of this chorus of unanimity, which has hardened critical opinion into orthodoxy, I consider that it is time for a complete reappraisal of Bellow's treatment of women. My reasons for this are twofold; the first being related to the charge that Bellow's women are passive or neutral, the second to the claim that they are stereotyped.

Firstly, then, I think that Bellow's concept of and attitude to women is something that has developed throughout his fiction, not remained static. Conversely, much criticism of Bellow's treatment of women seems to have crystallized very early on, around the dismissive views expressed by Fiedler and Malin. Later critics have merely reiterated these opinions, which were inspired by early novels. Whereas I agree that the early women (Iva in Dangling Man, Mary in The Victim, Mama in Augie March) are passively neutral, and that the men in Bellow's novels are more fully characterized than the women, I would argue that the women in the later novels, though still subordinate to the hero, are far from being passive, but have a force, energy and vitality of their own. With the publication of Humboldt's Gift, where the portraits of Demmie, Renata, Denise, and even Naomi, are extremely vivid and detailed, and where the parts played by these four women define the structure of the novel, the time has definitely come to challenge the received verdict on Bellow's portrayal of women.

Looking back over Bellow's fiction from the vantage point of his latest work, it becomes possible to see a distinct pattern

in his treatment of women. In this perspective it becomes clear that most of his women are by no means inadequately portrayed, but fall into distinct groups, in each of which Bellow explores and shows a perceptive understanding of some facet of woman's personality. Further, those women previously dismissed as passive can be seen as forming a distinct category among other such categories. Their passivity is their distinctive feature, and therefore becomes a positive characteristic, rather than the result of a failure to dramatize.

I will return to this question of groups in my description of the organisation of the thesis. Meanwhile, I would like to approach the subject from another angle, by considering the question of type.

Critics complain that Bellow's women are viewed too exclusively through male eyes, and that this leads to a simplistic classification of women into types. I would suggest that this angle on Bellow's treatment of women has not been particularly productive. If we consider Bellow's women from a feminist (Sullivan) or sociological (Fiedler, Dommergues) standpoint, the fact that they are presented through a male consciousness is all-important. If, however, we regard Bellow's women as comic women, our attitude to his approach changes immediately. The fact that his women are types is no longer the final point that can be made about them, but merely a necessary precondition of the comic approach.

We do not normally regard as comic a character with whom we identify completely or who exemplifies the qualities of balance and normality. Comedy demands a certain amount of distancing and an exaggeration of some aspects of the personality at the expense of others. Both these requirements are met in Bellow's presentation of the female character through male eyes. For Bellow, the male viewpoint is the comic viewpoint, providing exactly the distance, distortion, and exaggeration necessary for comedy.

This is not to say that women are devalued in Bellow, or that the hero's view of women is denigratory. On the contrary, the hero's consciousness is a consciousness that delights in women. If some degree of distortion and exaggeration is necessarily involved in the comic presentation, there is also a good deal of pleasure

in that exaggeration. Further, schematization does not necessarily involve simplification. F.M. Cornford tells us that comic character is, of necessity, built on type:

> Aristotle holds that comedy ... represents universal types or abstracts of human character
> (F.M. Cornford, The Origins of Attic Comedy, p.203)

He goes on to distinguish three stages in the transmutation of 'abstracts of human character' into literary creation:

> We pass from the stockmask of ritual to the gallery of professional types whose special traits in the literary stage of drama are, of course, filled in from observation of ordinary life.
> (p.203)

Similarly, Bellow is never content to rest in the type, but builds on and individualizes it. Cornford is careful to point out that success in the creation of comic character is due to the way the author uses the type:

> The difference between a great comedian and a small one is not that the former puts real individual characters on the stage, the latter mere types. It is that the lesser man puts together a bundle of qualities which never coalesce into a personality from within. But that personality remains what Aristotle calls 'universal'. It is a permanent possibility of human nature, independent of its accidental trappings of time and country.
> (pp. 203-204)

If this is so, we should be concerned with the way Bellow has used the type, whether he has created a personality from within this basic model, and whether the particular features thus created coalesce to form a coherent and unified literary character, not with the criticism, irrelevant since he is a comic writer, that he uses types at all.

We can develop this further if we consider the question of what, in general, is meant by comic character and how Bellow interprets and modifies this concept. The following quotation

from The Victim is a useful point of departure:

> I'll tell you. It's bad to be less than human and it's bad to be more than human ... Good acting is what is exactly human. And if you say I am a tough critic, you mean I have a high opinion of what is human ... More than human, can you have any use for life? Less than human you don't either.
> (Saul Bellow, The Victim, p.112-113)

This remark made by Schlossberg could serve as a summary of Bellow's view of man. His view of human nature is not pessimistic or reductive, nor does he see mankind as exalted and perfect. His characters are flawed characters. However, they are never completely debased and worthless, nor are they fatally flawed heroes. The ideal of being 'exactly human' corresponds with the picture of the 'contingent imperfect earthbound creature' drawn by Nathan A. Scott, whose function is 'to awaken in us a lively recognition of what our true status is'. The comic man asks us:

> ... not to be afraid to acknowledge that we are only human and that our residence is not in the heavens ... What the comic man cannot abide is the man who will not consent simply to be a man, who cannot tolerate the thought of himself as an incomplete and conditioned creature of a particular time and space:
> (N.A. Scott Jr., 'The Bias of Comedy, and the Narrow Escape into Faith', p.19)

Similarly, W. Lynch in Christ and Apollo states that

> The one offence that comedy cannot endure is that a man should forget he is a man.
> (W. Lynch, Christ and Apollo, p.97)

These quotations in fact, define two kinds of comic character: the 'contingent imperfect earthbound creature' and 'the man who cannot tolerate the thought of himself as an incomplete and conditioned creature'. Both are, in essence, flawed, but the one accepts his imperfect human nature and rejoices in it, thus corresponding to Bellow's man who is 'exactly human', while the other denies his humanity and tries to make himself, in Bellow's words, 'more than human'.

Comedy is used in two ways: to attack and expose the flawed character who tries to be 'more-than-human', in which case we laugh at him, and to extol the flawed character who is 'exactly human', in which case we laugh with, rather than at, him. These types of humour can be called 'satire' and 'celebration' respectively.

Satire involves, as suggested above, a god's eye view. We are always aware of more about the character than he is himself and his limited view is placed, to his disadvantage, in a larger context. Celebration involves a delight in, and consequently greater identification with, the character concerned. We regard his faults indulgently, like our own.

Further, the faults these two types of character exhibit are of qualitatively different kinds. Bergson characterizes the first type as having a machine-like fixation with certain ideas 'preventing the wideawake adaptability and the living pliableness of a human being' ('Laughter', in Comedy, ed. W. Sypher, p.67), and Scott enlarges on this:

> Comedy is a contradiction in the realm of the human individual to created orders of existence ... which arises out of an over-specialization of some instinct or faculty of the self. And it is this predilection of the self to identify too completely with some special interest or project ... it is this by which the self is blinded to the integral character of its humanity. (p.30)

The character who tries to make himself more than human, thus becomes less than human, distorting his humanity and becoming one-sided, unbalanced, unnatural.

Satire here works in two ways, both of which involve a certain amount of distancing, and a conflict between our point of view and that of the satirized character. Firstly, we find his mental inflexibility comic. He sees his particular obsession or 'idée fixe' as a perfect system, but we perceive it as a limiting obsession. In a more complex character, however, certain incongruities creep in and undermine the perfect surface he tries to present. Humour,

based in each case on the character's ignorance of himself, consists both in laughter at mechanical repetition or obsession, and in a subversive delight in anything that undermines or destroys a character's perfect system, or, in Bellow's terms, 'ideal construction'.

The character presented in a sympathetic way, however, has quite different faults or shortcomings. He tends to be disorganised, chaotic, blundering. Although he is not presented as perfect, he nonetheless represents an imaginative, inventive approach to life. He is defined by Susanne Langer as 'the image of human vitality holding its own in the world amid the surprises of unplanned coincidence ... the personified 'élan vital' (S. Langer, 'The Comic Rhythm', in Feeling and Form, p.331).

Such a character, she tells us, exemplifies 'the pure sense of life' (p.327). He accepts life for what it is, on its own terms, and does not try to hide behind a mask, or cling to a theory or system of reality. He has, on the contrary, great energy and a zest for life, which characteristically plunge him into difficult situations and involve him in mistakes, mishaps, and chaotic blundering. We greet these with open delight because they stem from an outgoing energy, an excess of vitality. Life for the comic character is chancy and risky. It is also, therefore, full of potential. The satirized character, on the other hand, tries to eliminate chance from his life, by reducing life to a predictable pattern or abstraction, something he can manage.

However, there is to some extent a sense in which we also delight in the satirized character. In attempting to account for this I will return to Bellow's distinction between the 'more than human' and 'less than human'. If the attempt to be 'more than human' results in the 'overspecialization of some instinct or faculty of the self', then it is clear that characterization is founded on exaggeration and distortion; that the character is at once excessively more than human and distorted from true humanity. Our reaction to this is complex. I think we feel some delight in the exaggeration, matched by some degree of repulsion at the distortion. The 'overspecialization' involves energy, and we delight in this, because energy is a form of vitality. However, although

the exaggeration of one aspect of the personality is in some sense an intensification of life, a kind of super-humanity, it necessarily entails the neglect of other aspects, the distortion of the integral nature of his humanity. We therefore feel that he is in some way freakish, unnatural, un-lifelike, and this distances or even repels us. Distortion is always a function of exaggeration, and therefore our response is never simple; at the extremes of comedy, gross exaggeration produces gross distortion and we get that mixture of horror and pleasure, attraction and repulsion that we call the grotesque.

Further, I would argue that the presence of pleasure in our response depends on the nature of the instinct or faculty which is exaggerated, or, more precisely, on the nature of the energy the character possesses. If all comic characters have a certain driving energy, it seems to me that there is a radical distinction to be made between the kind of energy which is outgoing, expansive, excessive, and the kind of energy which is directed, concentrated, channelled. Such comic characters as talkers, con-men, braggarts, seem to me to possess the former; the latter is exemplified in such comic vices as meanness, guile and malice. The first group of characters seem, by virtue of their wildness and vitality, to represent a heightening of life, the second group to have a narrowness and lack of generosity that is inimical to life.

If, as Langer suggests, the comic sense is consonant with 'the pure sense of life' then we will take more pleasure in those characters who display an outgoing, vital energy than in those in whom the sense of life appears shrunken or shrivelled.

It thus appears that there is an element of celebration even in the satirized character and that, while he is distinct from the celebrated character (who never pretends to be anything other than himself), there is a continuum rather than a divide between the two categories, with benediction and castigation as the extreme points, and such categories as burlesque, caricature, and the comic grotesque as the intermediate stages.

Further, the very thing that makes a character into a type, that which makes him like others, his particular obsession or 'idée fixe', can also be the source of a certain magnificence,

and even originality.

In his treatment of women, Bellow shows a sensitive awareness of the tension between conformity to and transcendence of type, and the ways in which comedy can exalt and magnify, as well as deflate and criticize.

The comic female characters in Bellow's fiction fall into two main groups: those who have a sexual relationship with the hero, and those who have a maternal one. The first group includes wives, ex-wives, and mistresses, the second, besides the hero's mother, includes women who 'adopt' the hero, and women to whom the hero looks for support or security.

Within the first group, I have isolated and analysed three types which I have called The Bitch, The Slut and The High Priestess of Sex. The Bitch is usually an ex-wife, and is characterized principally by her sharp tongue and her attempt to dominate the hero. The Priestess, always a mistress, is characterized by her sensuality, but also by her theorizing. She makes a ritual, theory, or religion of sex, and attempts to trap the hero into marriage. The Slut, either mistress or wife, is distinctive for her untidiness, which is at once physical and mental. She lives in a state of great confusion, in disorderly and squalid surroundings, amid a great welter of ideas and emotions.

Within the second group, I have defined two types: The Saint, and The Matriarch. Under the Saint, I have assembled and tried to account for Bellow's passive female characters, to find in them a positive meaning, rather than a mere absence of characterization. The Saint is sometimes the hero's real mother, sometimes a woman to whom he looks for warmth or support. She is distinguished by her gentleness and submissiveness. The Matriarch, on the other hand, an older woman who 'adopts' the hero, is notable for her attempt to mould the hero; to instruct him in the hard facts of life.

In every case it is precisely those features which define the character, her characteristic faults or quirks, which give rise to the comedy and which are attacked or celebrated by it. Within the first group, Bellow has seen the image of woman as

a sexual being refracted or split into three types. Each is distinguished by her attitude to her sexuality and to her power over the hero. The Bitch tries to suppress her sexuality and to replace it by power and domination. The Priestess is conscious of her sexuality and uses it as a means of gaining power over the hero; the Slut is totally unselfconscious and is unaware of the power of her own sexuality. This schematization is obviously a function of a male perspective on women, it is also essentially the result of a comic perspective. In the first two types there is an 'overspecialization of some instinct or faculty of the self', whereas the Slut corresponds to Scott's 'contingent, imperfect, earthbound creature'.

The nature of Bellow's comic treatment varies according to how far the character seems to deviate from the norms of life, or how much the sense of life seems to be suppressed in her. He uses satire to mock and undermine the Bitch's desire for power, but the Priestess's less harmful, more ridiculous excesses are treated with burlesque. Finally, his treatment of the Slut gives rise to the comedy of celebration, an open delight in her vitality and zest for living.

Similarly, his treatment of the maternal figures is a polarization of two images of motherhood. The Saint groups together all the images of motherhood involving self-sacrifice, humility, tenderness, the Matriarch all those connected with upbringing, instruction, chastisement.

They are also at different poles of the comic vision. The Saint is, in fact, not treated comically at all, but forms a kind of moral norm or centre to the novels. Such a norm is, however, necessary for comedy; it helps to define the author's values and to structure the novel. The Matriarch, on the other hand, goes beyond the bounds of comedy in a different direction: she is almost too abnormal to be regarded as comic, and is treated as grotesque.

Although Bellow's approach is schematic, it is not simplistic; each character should be viewed not as an attempt to stereotype woman but as a facet of a complex image of feminity.

I have been guided in my method of analysis by Bellow's method of characterization. As the women are presented through

the hero, our knowledge of them is gained from the hero's reminiscences or reflections about them. The women are thus presented in large blocks of description; character is given in essence, rather than gradually revealed through behaviour. This both arises from and contributes to the comic approach. There is a tendency to schematize and typify, and, because it is so compressed, the characterization is very vivid. In simpler characters, the hero's reflections may be confined to one description, in more complex characters, successive blocks of description add new facets and aspects to our conception of the character, sometimes altering our first impressions substantially.

In my criticism, therefore, I have selected 'blocks' of description for analysis, showing how these are qualified or changed by succeeding descriptions where appropriate.

In general, I have tried to explore Bellow's concept of femininity and his skill in characterization in relation to his comedy, and to relate both of these to the values of his novels. I have attempted to show how each character is both a coherent and unified literary creation and a fully alive and individual comic creation, to situate her with reference to the structure and values of comedy in general and Bellow's novels in particular, and finally to show how these are related.

Chapter I

THE BITCH

> a strange person ... to be so proud, but not well-wiped ... such a mixed mind of pure diamond and Woolworth glass.
> (Saul Bellow, Herzog, p.306)

I

Margaret in Seize The Day, Madeleine in Herzog, and Denise in Humboldt's Gift are all ex-wives whose primary object appears to be to dominate the hero or to cause him suffering. In each case this need for power springs from an inflated idea of her own importance: a conception of herself as distinctive and different. All three women come under attack in the novels, though the nature of this attack undergoes a distinct development, from Tommy's angry and resentful complaints about Margaret to Citrine's more detached ridicule of Denise: the bitterness felt by the hero at the Bitch's scornful treatment of him becomes increasingly tempered by amusement at her self-conscious conceit. This humorous attack is a form of satire, and before discussing the characters in this section in detail, it seems appropriate to consider the nature of the satirized character[1] in general and to outline the features and boundaries of such a character.

In Anatomy of Criticism, Frye finds that one character typical of comedy is the 'blocking character' or 'humour', the character dominated by what Pope calls a 'ruling passion' (Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p.168). He suggests that one of the main targets of satire is 'the setting up of ideas and generalizations and theories and dogmas over against the life they are supposed to explain (p.230).

This is analogous to Scott's definition of the satirized character as one 'whose eccentricity arises out of some wilfully maintained imbalance of character' (p.32).

1 I am using the term here to refer to a certain type of character in comedy. The difference in vision between satire and comedy, and the consequent change in the characters typical of each will be touched on in the conclusion with reference to Mr Sammler's Planet.

He finds that 'when men decide they are pure mind, or pure will or pure sensibility, it is natural for the comic imagination to take on a critical and even polemical aspect' (p.27).

Both Frye and Scott find that a fundamental feature of the satirized character is a consuming desire for purity or neatness, a distaste for the messiness and muddle of everyday life. The quotations suggest that this character may come in two different guises: those in the grip of a theory or idea, and those dominated from within by some emotion or passion. The former type will be such characters as cranks, theorists, idealists, the latter such comic types as snobs, misers, hypocrites, braggarts. Both types have the obsessional, one-sided quality, that Frye, with Bergson, finds is the main source of the comedy:

> The principle of the humour is the principle that unincremental repetition ... is funny. Repetition overdone or not going anywhere belongs to comedy for comedy is partly a reflex.
>
> (p.168)

Another source of comedy is also pinpointed by Frye:

> Philosophies of life abstract from life and an abstraction implies the leaving out of inconvenient data
>
> (p.229)

The satirist's function then is to 'bring up these inconvenient data' (p.229). In the case of the first type, the theorist or crank, this will involve a contradiction between theory and reality, self and world. In the case of the second type, the character whose humanity is subordinated to one aspect of his personality, the contradiction will be between self-image and real self, for the attempt to be superhuman will involve either lack of self-knowledge or hypocrisy. Frye finds that 'the humorous blocking characters of comedy are nearly always Imposters though it is more frequently a lack of self-knowledge than simple hypocrisy that characterizes them' (p.172). Cornford substantiates this:

> the Ridiculous derives its essence from the failure of some vice or defect to obey the Delphic precept 'Know thyself'. Three principal types are those who overvalue themselves in respect of external fortune, bodily advantage or mental virtues, and think themselves richer, handsomer or wiser than they are. Such

> persons ... when their conceit is not backed by power, so as to make them formidable and hateful, are merely ridiculous.
> (p.209)

Such a character will be both self-conscious and self-satisfied: 'sick of self-love'. Bergson finds that 'a character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself' (p.71). This ignorance, or the disparity between self-image and real self, may be highlighted through authorial comment or revealed through the irony of self-betrayal.

Cornford's comment raises the question of the boundaries of the satirized character. He suggests that a character whose energies are directed towards harming others exceeds the bounds of comedy and merits stiffer treatment than mere ridicule. Torrance endorses this view, finding that when a character's violation of the norms of human behaviour 'transgresses the moral code ... derision is reinforced by stiff penal servitude'. (Robert Torrance, The Comic Hero, p.4).

The ridiculous character is not malicious, or if malicious he must be seen to be impotent. If malice is backed by power he will be hateful not comic. Auden finds that 'when we really hate someone, we cannot find him comic' (W.H. Auden, 'Notes on the Comic', in The Dyer's Hand, p.372) and Frye defines an 'attack without humour' as 'one of the boundaries of satire' (p.224).

Satire ceases to be funny and becomes invective either because the subject matter is in itself 'too oppressively real' or because the writer is himself too personally involved with his subject. In either case, as Gurevitch suggests, this results from a lack of detachment:

> Satire ... is anger that has been alchemized into comedy ... the kind of bile that eats up levity and destroys detachment has been erroneously equated with satire.
> (Morton Gurevitch, Comedy, The Irrational Vision, p.45)

Hatred or anger implies a measure of identification with its subject, and satire will always involve the detachment necessary for analysis.

The other boundary of satire will involve a loss of detachment in a different direction: a tendency to sympathize with, or an affection for, the character concerned. Between the point where hatred or anger destroys detachment and the point where affection begins to creep in and undermine it, a whole range of responses,

and thus a whole range of characters, is possible.

II

Margaret, Tommy Wilhelm's wife in Seize The Day, is an early prototype of the Bitch. She is not, however, a comic creation, being depicted more in anger than with humour. A short consideration of her qualities, and of Bellow's treatment of her may, nevertheless, highlight what is essentially comic in his presentation of Madeleine and Denise, and provide a starting point from which we may trace the growing complexity and humanity of his vision.

Margaret is a much simpler creation than either Madeleine or Denise, consisting of only one recurring characteristic: her repeated demands for money. Tommy complains to his father:

> Whenever she can hit me, she hits, and she seems to live for that alone. And she demands more, and more, and still more. Two years ago she wanted to go back to college and get another degree. It increased my burden, but I thought it would be wiser in the end if she got a proper job through it. But she still takes as much from me as before ... The lawyers draw up an agreement...and she says okay on Monday and wants more money on Tuesday.
>
> (Saul Bellow, Seize The Day, pp.52-3)

All Margaret's actions are reducible to the simple desire to make Tommy pay, both literally and metaphorically. Her demands for money are a way of exerting power over Tommy. Irving Malin finds that Margaret is 'a woman who demands not only to be equal but to be superior... The only way she can assume her new role is by hurting [Tommy]' (Saul Bellow's Fiction, p.80).

Madeleine and Denise have a similar conception of their own superiority, and this is similarly manifested in a desire for power. They also share another trait with Margaret, a startling inconsistency: a capacity to change their minds without warning: Margaret 'would regularly agree to divorce [Tommy] and then think things over and set new and more difficult conditions' (p.34). In Margaret's case, this lack of predictability is not comic, it is merely another example of her attempt to prove her superiority over Tommy. In the case of Madeleine and Denise, however,

inconsistency is comic inconsistency and the irony of self-betrayal reveals the comic flaws in their self-presentation.

Margaret has the one-sided, exaggerated, obsessional quality which distinguishes the satirized character, but she is not self-conscious or self-dramatizing and there is no suggestion that she is anything other than she appears to be. There is thus no facade for comedy to undermine, and she does not appear comic.

Further, Tommy is not sufficiently detached from Margaret to be able to regard her in a comic light. To return to points made earlier in this chapter, he is too bound up with Margaret, and feels her cruelty too deeply to be capable of regarding her as a comic object: he is, in other words, still in her power. He is totally mystified by Margaret's actions, and this lack of comprehension is the source of her power over him and thus of his inability to regard her in a satiric light. In the first of the passages quoted he has a strange passivity, an almost masochistic acquiescence in his own suffering. Citrine and Herzog share this trait to some extent, but they are both aware of it, and able to exploit it to comic effect. They are also much more independent of, and therefore detached from, Madeleine and Denise. The action of Herzog charts Herzog's coming to terms with, and eventual release from, Madeleine's hold over him: the comedy hovers between pain and ridicule. Citrine no longer feels that Denise has any power over him, and is therefore able to view her attempts to establish her superiority as wholly ridiculous; the sense of injury which is so powerfully present in Tommy's complaints about Margaret and which haunts Herzog's mockery of Madeleine has completely disappeared from Citrine's characterization of Denise. Similarly, Tommy's pained bewilderment as to Margaret's motives is succeeded by Herzog's ability to make satiric capital out of his lack of comprehension of Madeleine and has a residue in the mock-puzzlement of Citrine's attitude to Denise.

III

Herzog's ex-wife, Madeleine, Margaret's successor, is the most complex character in this group, an actress playing a succession of parts. The ease with which she switches roles, however, and

her inability to sustain them, consistently let her down. Sarah Blacher Cohen finds that 'lacking any fixed psychic identity, she is above all the quirky dilettante' (Sarah Blacher Cohen, Saul Bellow's Enigmatic Laughter, p.160). Despite this apparent changeability, she is, like Margaret, ruled by one obsession, the need to assert her superiority, and all her roles are related to this motivating fixation.

The action of the novel opens shortly after Herzog's divorce from Madeleine, and traces the progress of his recovery from this painful event. The first time Madeleine appears in the novel is in Herzog's memory: he is reliving the crisis in their marriage, where Madeleine tells him they must part. This first impression is very important, and sets the tone for the rest of the portrait. It takes us right to the source of Herzog's suffering, the crisis in his relationship with Madeleine, and establishes a basis for the subsequent development of Madeleine's character:

> Madeleine hated her father violently, but it was not irrelevant that the old man was a famous impresario - sometimes called the American Stanislavsky. She had prepared the event with a certain theatrical genius of her own. She wore black stockings, high heels, a lavender dress with Indian brocade from Central America. She had on her opal earrings, her bracelets, and she was perfumed; her hair was combed with a new, clean part and her large eyelids shone with a bluish cosmetic. Her eyes were blue but the depth of the colour was curiously affected by the variable tinge of the whites. Her nose, which descended in a straight elegant line from her brows, worked slightly when she was peculiarly stirred. To Herzog even this tic was precious. There was a flavour of subjugation in his love for Madeleine. Since she was domineering, and since he loved her, he had to accept the flavour that was given. In this confrontation in the untidy parlour, two kinds of egotism were present, and Herzog from his sofa in New York now contemplated them - hers in triumph (she had prepared a great moment, she was about to do what she longed most to do, strike a blow) and his egotism in abeyance, all converted into passivity. What he was about to suffer, he deserved; he had sinned long and hard; he had earned it. This was it.
>
> In the window on glass shelves there stood an ornamental collection of small glass bottles, Venetian and Swedish. They came with the house. The sun now caught them. They were pierced with the light. Herzog saw the waves, the threads of colour, the spectral intersecting bars, and especially a great blot of flaming white on the centre of the wall above Madeleine. She was saying, 'We can't live together

> any more.'
>
> Her speech continued for several minutes. Her sentences were well formed. This speech had been rehearsed and it seemed also that he had been waiting for the performance to begin.
>
> Theirs was not a marriage that could last. Madeleine had never loved him. She was telling him that, 'It's painful to have to say I never loved you. I never will love you, either,' she said. 'So there's no point in going on.'
>
> Herzog said, 'I do love you, Madeleine.'
>
> Step by step, Madeleine rose in distinction, in brilliance, in insight. Her colour grew very rich, and her brows, and that Byzantine nose of hers, rose, moved; her blue eyes gained by the flush that kept deepening, rising from her chest and her throat. She was in an ecstasy of consciousness. It occurred to Herzog that she had beaten him so badly, her pride was so fully satisfied, that there was an overflow of strength into her intelligence. He realized that he was witnessing one of the very greatest moments of her life.
>
> 'You should hold on to that feeling,' she said. 'I believe it's true. You do love me. But I think you also understand what a humiliation it is to me to admit defeat in this marriage. I've put all I had into it. I'm crushed by this.'
>
> Crushed? She had never looked more glorious. There was an element of theatre in those looks, but much more of passion.
>
> (Herzog, pp.14-15)

There are four levels of awareness in this scene: that of the reader, that of the Herzog who is analysing and interpreting the scene, that of the Herzog who is involved in the scene, and that of Madeleine. We are watching Herzog watching himself watch Madeleine. Each vantage point reveals something more about Madeleine. (Of course the scene reveals a good deal about Herzog as well, but that is of interest here only in so far as it throws light on Madeleine's character and actions.) Madeleine's appearance, actions, and language as presented directly and dramatically all harmonize and cohere to tell us what kind of effect she means to create; Herzog's reaction to her creates a tension, a counter-balance to the force of Madeleine's presence, and makes us see her in a new light; Herzog looking back on the incident analyses and interprets Madeleine's state of mind; and we, as readers, infer (and Bellow as author implies) a good deal more from both the scene itself and the way Herzog describes it. These superimposed points of view are of the essence of satire. Bergson states that an individual is comic 'when he is invisible to himself, while

remaining visible to all the world' ('Laughter', in Comedy, ed. Sypher, p.71). Each of the points of view exterior to Madeleine's own reveals a further discrepancy between her conception of herself and her actual self. The comedy arises from the perception of these discrepancies and consists in a subversive pleasure in the inconsistencies that undermine the impression that she is trying to create.

On the surface, Madeleine presents herself as open, direct, painfully honest. Sincerity and rationality are the main elements of this persona: she is, it appears, attempting to bring feelings out into the open and to discuss them in a reasonable and analytic way. This has been characteristic of Madeleine's relationship with Herzog from the beginning: 'Until the very last day, the tone of Herzog's relations with Madeleine was quite serious - that is ideas, personalities, issues, were respected and discussed', and there is some indication that this facade has also been successfully presented to others. 'Serious' and 'truthful' are the adjectives most often used of her by other people. Aunt Zelda, for example, calls her 'terrific, a serious person' (p.44), and Geraldine Portnoy writes: 'She is so vivacious, intelligent and such a character, and has been so warm and frank with me. It is extremely exciting to talk with her - she gives the sense of a significant encounter - with life' (pp.105-6).

Herzog's interpretation of Madeleine is, however, strikingly different. He suggests that she is not genuine: that she is playing a role:

> Madeleine hated her father violently, but it was not irrelevant that the old man was a famous impresario - sometimes called the American Stanislavsky. She had prepared the event with a certain theatrical genius of her own.

Beneath the facade of concern and reasonableness he suggests there is a deep desire to wound:

> She had prepared a great moment, she was about to do what she most longed to do, strike a blow

The whole scene has been carefully prepared with a power-motive: Madeleine is aiming to crush him, and finds pleasure, even 'passion', in doing so. Performance is power, in a sense, for Madeleine's premeditation means that she is in possession of greater knowledge than Herzog, and therefore in control of events; he is at her mercy.

Now this second perspective on Madeleine, while undermining the first, does not yet do so comically. Herzog's attitude is not cool or detached enough for irony, his analysis of Madeleine, while penetratingly accurate, is not subtly presented: it is sarcastic rather than ironic. There is too much pain involved in his recognition of her motives, the tone is too bitter, and the observations too cutting for comedy: there is an excessive quality about his language, with its superlatives and rhetorical questions, that belongs to invective rather than satire. This lack of objectivity on Herzog's part has led some critics to believe that Madeleine's malice is a figment of Herzog's imagination: 'The women in Herzog are creations of Herzog's masochistic imagination, not real at all.' (John Clayton, Saul Bellow: In Defence of Man, p.221). However, having put the case for a 'real' Madeleine, Clayton cannot then understand why 'if Bellow wants us to see Herzog as changing, as opening himself up to what is instead of to his version ... he does not give us a fresh look at Mady' (p.221). If Bellow had wanted to create a 'real' Madeleine, who differed from the Madeleine of Herzog's imagination, then he would certainly have done so. However, we are not dependent solely on Herzog's interpretation of Madeleine, as we are on Tommy's portrayal of Margaret: details of Madeleine's dress, mannerisms, speech, as presented directly and dramatically, all cohere to substantiate Herzog's interpretion. This irony of self-betrayal constitutes yet another perspective on Madeleine.

Madeleine's appearance confirms Herzog's accusations of theatricality and calculation. She is dressed exotically, strikingly, in 'black stockings, high heels, a lavender dress with Indian brocade from central America', and she has taken a bath, and combed her hair to prepare herself for the scene: the impact she is about to make has been carefully planned. She also betrays herself through

her language: inauthenticity breathes through her very words:

> You should hold onto that feeling. I believe it's true. You do love me. But I think you also understand what a humiliation it is to me to admit defeat in this marriage. I've put all I had into it. I'm crushed by this.

Several things are wrong with this. She is much too articulate. It is inconceivable that anyone who can actually say 'I'm crushed by this' is, in fact, crushed. The language she uses is too glib, it comes too easily. It is also too simplistic, being composed of clichés she has learned 'from the movies': it has a weighty, self-important, self-dramatizing quality. It is, finally, despite the emotive words and high drama, strangely clinical, she sounds oddly detached, as if she is weighing up and balancing points of view. It is hard to believe she is speaking of an emotional matter. The language at once over-dramatizes emotion and reveals its basic divorce from any emotion whatsoever.

It is interesting that both Aunt Zelda and Geraldine Portnoy, 'drawn into the drama of Madeleine's life', start to speak in exactly the same register of language:

> 'Moses' said Zelda, 'I want to make sure of one thing.
> 'What' -
> 'Our relationship'. He was no longer looking at her darkened painted lids but into her eyes, bright and brown. Her nostrils tensed softly. She showed him her sympathetic face. 'We are still friends' she said ... 'I am your friend. And I'm a truthful person'
>
> (pp.46-7)

Madeleine too is forever talking about 'the truth': 'she could not bear lying' (p.43).

However, if Madeleine is totally without the feelings she claims to have, she does feel some emotion very strongly, as the following passage indicates:

> Step by step, Madeleine rose in distinction, in brilliance, in insight. Her colour grew very rich, and her brows and that Byzantine nose of hers, rose, moved, her blue eyes gained by the flush that kept deepening, rising from her chest and throat. She was in an ecstasy of consciousness.

Theatrics are here generating their own emotion. She is happy because she is about 'to strike a blow', but she is also excited by her own performance: the two things are intimately bound up with each other. Theatrics and power feed on each other; the fact that she has beaten Herzog puts more 'strength' and 'insight' into her performance.

There is also a hint of sexual excitement in Madeleine's intensity. It is to be noted that whenever she succeeds in triumphing over Herzog, the same symptoms occur: the working of the face, the brilliance of the eyes, the richness of her colour. This is intensified by the element of seductiveness in her appearance: she has prepared herself as if for an evening out or a dinner party.

Irving Malin suggests that Madeleine 'distrusts sex, she desires power. She is able to use the one for the other in her relationships with [Herzog] and Valentine'. (Saul Bellow 's Fiction, p.149).

This triumph of Madeleine's ego over Herzog's is made evident in the fourth perspective we have on Madeleine: the reactions of the Herzog who is present at the time. The tensions between the two are another source of comedy in the scene:

> In the window, on glass shelves, there stood an ornamental collection of small glass bottles, Venetian, and Swedish. They came with the house. The sun now caught them. They were pierced with light. Herzog saw the waves, the threads of colour, the spectral intersecting bars, and especially a great blot of flaming white on the centre of the wall above Madeleine. She was saying, 'We can't live together any more.'

Madeleine is caught up in her own private drama. Herzog does not even listen: his attention wanders off, away from Madeleine. Placed directly after 'This was it', the sudden irrelevance of this passage is comically anticlimactic. (It is not completely without relevance, however: the image of glass is often used in connection with Madeleine, and its hardness, brittleness, sharpness, and dazzling or flashing qualities are emphasized. Here the dazzling colours act as a metaphor for Madeleine's brilliance and the 'great blot of flaming white' is like a spotlight, emphasizing her theatricality.)

One constant source of comedy in the relationship is the fact that Herzog is such a bad audience. Madeleine may be trying to destroy Herzog, but she does need him to be present, – the way hatred needs an object. Time and time again, she demands his mute witnessing presence without his participation, reducing him to a nonentity, the way an audience is made to lose all sense of personal identity when watching a play. Herzog's lack of attention is another source of deflation of Madeleine's inflated self-image, and, as foil or butt, he provides a naive view of Madeleine, which contrasts with the cynical view provided by the later Herzog. Both the cynical and the innocent views are forms of irony, but whereas the former works by explicit comment, the latter works by implicit contrast. Herzog's naive and spontaneous reactions highlight Madeleine's calculation and hypocrisy. There is a suggestion in the passage that Herzog is not completely passive, but needs or invites suffering: 'two types of egotism were present - hers in triumph ... and his egotism in abeyance, all converted to passivity. What he was about to suffer, he deserved.' Herzog is courting violence, there is a strong element of masochism in his suffering. The early Herzog is unaware of this tendency in himself, the later Herzog becomes increasingly aware of it as the novel progresses, and this final perspective on the relationship eventually becomes the means of assessing Madeleine's role in Herzog's life, and in the novel as a whole. It is a point that we shall return to when discussing Madeleine's function in the novel.

The next time we meet Madeleine, she is playing a completely different role, that of the intellectual or bluestocking. Again, however, she betrays her inauthenticity, and the new role masks the same need to prove her superiority:

> Before Soloviev she had talked of no one but Joseph de Maistre. And before de Maistre - Herzog made up the list - the French Revolution, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Schliemann's excavations at Troy, extrasensory perception, then Tarot cards, then Christian Science, before that Mirabeau, or was it mystery novels (Josephine Tey) or science fiction (Isaac Asimov)? The intensity was always high.
>
> (p.79)

We note that each interest is pursued to the exclusion of all others: they do not coexist (as they would in Humboldt's mind for instance). This suggests a lack of balance, a dangerous disproportion. In Scott's phrase, she neglects 'other avenues through which the self ought also to gain expression' (p.30).

It is also noticeable that all her interests are in some way escapist. She immerses herself in the past (the French Revolution, Schliemann's excavations), identifies with some romantic historical figure (Eleanor of Aquitaine), indulges in fantasy (science fiction, mystery novels), or becomes involved with magic and superstition (Tarot cards, extrasensory perception), and this undermines our belief in the seriousness of her interests.

However, the comedy springs mainly from the fact that these interests do not last very long, and that she is unable to distinguish between them, devoting as much intellectual intensity to Josephine Tey as to Soloviev. They are rather motifs for the display of intellectual brilliance than serious interests, just as the break-up scene was designed expressly to display her emotional honesty and sensitivity.

Intellectualism is like 'sincerity', then, a mask, but it also has affinities with 'sincerity', in that it becomes for Madeleine a 'total' way of looking at the world and of presenting herself. It also resembles 'sincerity' in other ways, notably in the relationship between theatrics, sex, and power.

Intellectualism is another form of self-dramatization. Her 'interests' are merely the excuse for performance - as we have seen, a means of dominating Herzog. That this is a replacement for sex is powerfully suggested in the following passage:

> His sharp black shoes glistened; and he had fat feet, with bulging insteps. On the grass, mowed by himself, Moses sat in torn wash pants. Stirred by Madeleine, Shapiro was particularly lively, almost shrieking when he laughed, and his laughter becoming more frequent, wilder, uncaused. His manner at the same time grew more formal, measured, judicious. He spoke in long sentences, Proustian he may have thought - actually Germanic, and filled with incredible bombast. 'On balance, I should not venture to assay the merit of the tendency without more mature consideration,' he was saying. Pour Shapiro! What a brute he was! That snarling, wild laugh of his, and the white froth forming on his lips as he attacked everyone. Madeleine was greatly stirred by

him too, and on her high manners. They found each other exceedingly stimulating.

She came from the house with the bottles and glasses on the tray - cheese, liver paste, crackers, ice, herring. She had on blue trousers and a yellow Chinese blouse, the coolie hat I bought her on Fifth Avenue. She said she was subject to sunstroke. Stepping quickly, she advanced from the shadow of the house into the sparkling grass, the cat leaping from her path, the bottles and glasses clinking. She hastened because she didn't want to miss any of the conversation. As she bent to set things out on the lawn table, Shapiro couldn't keep his eyes from the shape of her behind in the tight cotton-knit fabric ...

Madeleine and the dignified visitor were talking about the Russian Church, Tikhoh Zadonsky, Dostoevski and Herzen. Shapiro made a great production of learned references, correctly pronouncing all foreign words whether in French, German, Serbian, Italian, Hungarian, Turkish or Danish, snapping them out and laughing - that hearty, sucking, snarling, undirected laugh, teeth moist, head worked back onto his shoulders. Ha! The thorns crackled. ('Like the crackling of thorns under a pot is the laughter of fools.') The cicadas in great numbers were singing. That year, they came out of the ground.

Under such stimulation, Mady's face did strange things. The tip of her nose moved, and her brows, which needed no help from cosmetics, rose with nervous eagnerness, repeatedly, as if she were trying to clear her eyesight. Dr Edvig said this was a diagnostic trait of paranoia. Beneath the huge trees, surrounded by the Berkshire slopes, with not another house in sight to spoil the view, the grass was fresh and dense, the slender, fine grass of June. The red-eyed cicadas, squat forms vividly coloured, were wet after moulting, sopping, immobile; but drying, they crept, hopped, tumbled, flew, and in the high trees kept up a continuous chain of song, shrilling.

Culture - ideas - had taken the place of the Church in Mady's heart (a strange organ that must be!) Herzog sat thinking his own thoughts on the grass in Ludeyville, his wash pants torn, feet bare, but his face that of an educated Jewish gentleman with fine lips, dark eyes. He watched his wife, on whom he doted (with a troubled, angry heart, another oddity among hearts) as she revealed the wealth of her mind to Shapiro.

'My Russian is not what it could be,' said Shapiro.

'But how much you know about my subject,' Madeleine said. She was very happy. The blood glowed in her face, and her blue eyes were warm and brilliant.

They opened a new subject - the Revolution of 1848. Shapiro had sweated through his starched collar. Only a dollar-crazed Croatian steelworker would have bought such a striped shirt. And what were his views of Bakunin, Kropotkin? Did he know Comfort's work? He did. Did he know Poggioli? Yes. He didn't feel that Poggioli had done full justice to certain important figures - Rozanov, for instance. Though Rozanov was cracked on certain questions, like the Jewish ritual bath, still he was a great figure, and his erotic mysticism was highly original - highly. Leave it to those Russians. What hadn't they done for Western Civilization, all the while repudiating

> the West and ridiculing it! Madeleine, Herzog thought, became almost dangerously excited. He could tell, when her voice grew reedy, when her throat sounded positively like a clarinet, that she was bursting with ideas and feelings.
>
> (pp.76-7)

It is immediately apparent that Madeleine and Shapiro are sexually attracted, but express this in the form of an academic discussion. They are flirting with learned references. There is a fine comic incongruity between the dry mental discussion and the obviously physical undertones:

> his laughter becoming more frequent, wilder, uncaused. His manner at the same time grew more formal, measured, judicious. He spoke in long sentences, Proustian, he may have thought, - actually Germanic, and filled with incredible bombast.

Bellow is at pains to emphasize the crudeness of Shapiro's physicality, his animal-like qualities: 'that hearty, sucking, snarling, undirected laugh, teeth moist, head worked back onto his shoulders.' This is in contrast to his pompous, pretentious manner, his showing off, 'correctly pronouncing all foreign words whether in French, German, Serbian, Italian, Hungarian, Turkish, or Danish'. Madeleine is also stimulated: 'The blood glowed in her face and her blue eyes were warm and brilliant'.

Bellow's combination of indirect speech with precise mimicry of language has a built-in ironic tone:

> And what were his views of Bakunin, Kropotkin? Did he know Comfort's work? He did. Did he know Poggioli? Yes. He didn't feel that Poggioli had done full justice to certain important figures - Rozanov for instance. Though Rozanov was cracked on certain questions like the Jewish ritual bath, still he was a great figure, and his erotic mysticism was highly original - highly.

They are showing off, name-dropping intellectually instead of socially. The language is pompous and long-winded; the subject matter is merely intellectual gossip posing as ideas. Just as Madeleine's speech to Herzog on marriage was a caricature of emotional drama without the emotion, this is a caricature of intellectualism

without the ideas. For ideas and feeling they have substituted pedantry and reference.

This new role of intellectual again totally excludes Herzog. Madeleine is specifically aiming to invade his own territory, and to beat him on it. Again there is a comic incongruity between the fervent discussion and Herzog's dreamy absentmindedness:

> Herzog sat thinking his own thoughts on the grass in Ludeyville, his wash pants torn, his feet bare

However, Madeleine, though wanting to exclude him from her drama, badly needs him as an audience:

> She wanted him to be reminded if he had forgotten, how high a value other people set on her' (p.80)

This comment goes some way to explaining both Madeleine's desire for power, and her use of performance as a means of gaining it. Herzog's absentmindedness is, to her, a denial of her existence. Her performance as intellectual is thus a retaliation as well as an attack, an attempt to impress as well as to dominate. Her seductive appearance in the first scene is similarly motivated, it is not enough for her to beat him, she needs him to be aware of how much he has lost.

A suggestion made in relation to Shapiro is taken up and developed in relation to Madeleine's third role, that of Catholic convert. Herzog thinks:

> There was more of the truth of life in those spotted spoiled apples and in old Shapiro who smelled of the horse and produce than in all of these learned references (p.76)

Bellow suggests that Shapiro's cerebration is arid and life-denying. He contrasts Shapiro's empty words and exclusively mental activity with old Shapiro's honest earthiness and physicality.

Bellow similarly implies that Madeleine is in some way denying her humanity by pursuing one interest to the exclusion of all others. Her interest in Catholicism is, like her intellectual interests, both passionate and shortlived. Herzog tells us that Catholicism finally went the way of zithers and tarot cards, bread-baking, and Russian civilization (p.125). In the following

scene Bellow suggests that such a 'ruling passion' is unnatural and inhuman:

> The fixtures were old-fashioned in this place. These had been luxury apartments in the 1890s. The broad-mouthed faucets ran a shattering stream of cold water. She dropped her pajama top so that she was bare to the waist, and washed herself with a cloth, purifying herself with angry vigour, her blue-eyed face growing red, her breasts pink. Silent, barefooted, wearing his trench coat as a robe, Herzog came in and sat on the edge of the tub, watching.
>
> The tiles were a faded cherry colour, and the toothbrush rack, the fixtures, were ornate, old nickel. The water stormed from the faucet, and Herzog watched as Madeleine transformed herself into an older woman. She had a job at Fordham, and the first requirement, to her mind, was to look sober and mature, long in the Church. His open curiosity, the fact that he familiarly shared the bathroom with her, his nakedness under the trench coat, his pallid morning face in this setting of disgraced Victorian luxury - it all vexed her. She did not look at him while making her preparations. Over her brassiere and slip she put a high-necked sweater, and to protect the shoulders of the sweater she wore a plastic cape. It kept the make-up from crumbling on the wool. Now she began to apply her cosmetics - the bottles and powders filled the shelves above the toilet. Whatever she did, it was with unhesitating speed and efficiency, headlong, but with the confidence of an expert. Engravers, pastry cooks, acrobats on the trapeze worked in this manner. He thought she was too reckless at it - going too fast, about to have a spill, but that never happened. First she spread a layer of cream on her cheeks, rubbing it into her straight nose, her childish chin and soft throat. It was grey, pearly bluish stuff. That was the base. She fanned it with a towel. Over this she laid the make-up. She worked with cotton swabs, under the hairline, about the eyes, up the cheeks and on the throat. Despite the soft rings of feminine flesh, there was already something discernibly dictatorial about that extended throat. She would not let Herzog caress her face downward - it was bad for the muscles. Seated, watching, on the edge of the luxurious tub, he put on his pants, tucked in his shirt. She took no notice of him; she was trying in some way to be rid of him as her daytime life began.
>
> She put on a pale powder with her puff, still at the same tilting speed as if desperate. Then she turned swiftly to examine the work - right profile, left profile - bracing at the mirror, holding her hands as if to support her bust but not actually touching it. She was satisfied with the powder. She put touches of Vaseline on her lids. She dyed the lashes with a tiny coil. Moses participated in all this, intensely, silently. Still without pauses or hesitations, she put a touch of black in the outer corner of each eye, and re-drew the line of her brows to make it level and earnest. Then she picked up a pair of large tailor's shears and put

> them to her bangs. She seemed to have no need to measure; her image was fixed in her will. She cut as if discharging a gun, and Herzog felt an impulse of alarm, short-circuited. Her decisiveness fascinated him, and in such fascination he discovered his own childishness. He, an able-bodied person seated on the edge of the pompous old tub, the enamel wreathed with hairlike twistings like cooked rhubarb, absorbed in this transformation of Madeleine's face. She primed her lips with waxy stuff, then painted them a drab red, adding more years to her age. This waxen mouth just about did it.
> (p.116)

Step by step, the normal human outlines of her face are covered. Bellow makes a perceptive contrast between the living human contours of 'her childish chin and soft throat' and the deadly 'grey pearly bluish stuff' that she spreads on her face. The detail of the 'waxen mouth' suggests a death mask. She is making up, Bellow suggests, like an actress making up before a play. She is transforming herself into a 'sober', 'mature', religious convert, 'a woman of forty, some white, hysterical genuflecting hypochondriac of the church aisles' (p.118).

Madeleine is also making herself into an asexual object: 'She put on a long heavy tweed skirt which hid her legs ... Her face was smooth and middle-aged'. We have seen before how clothes and costume are important to Madeleine the actress. Here she is trying to dress the part; she is at the same time suppressing her sexuality. The two images, the theatrical image and the death-like image blend into one: the obsession with self-image is a denial of real humanity.

Once again in this scene Herzog is the unwanted and yet necessary spectator: 'She was trying in some way to be rid of him as her daytime life began'. The scene is vividly and perceptively brought to life. The focus moves backwards and forwards between Madeleine's nervous excitement, all movement, and Herzog, silent and motionless, between Madeleine's absorption in her own transformation and Herzog's passive contemplation, between Madeleine's setting - 'the disgraced Victorian luxury', the opulent decadence of the bathroom, a reminder of the life she wishes to deny - and her vigorous attempts to purify herself.

This scene brings together several elements that have been

noticeable in Madeleine's various roles and acts both as image of her self-destructive obsession with appearance and icon of her relationship with Herzog - a relationship which is crucial to the action of the novel.

The book charts the progress of Herzog's recovery from the shattering effects of his divorce; thus Madeleine's role is all-important. Herzog himself describes that role; she seems to have filled a special need 'she brought ideology into my life. Something to do with catastrophe' (p.341), and again, more specifically:

> People of powerful imagination, given to dreaming deeply and to raising up marvellous and self-sufficient fictions, turn to suffering sometimes to cut into their bliss, as people pinch themselves to feel awake. I know that my suffering ... has often been like that, a more extended form of life, a striving for true wakefulness and an antidote to illusion. (p.324)

This goes some way to explaining the features we noted earlier as characterizing Herzog's relationship with Madeleine: his dreamy absent-mindedness, and his almost deliberate invitation of attack: their systole-diastole relation of domination and servility. Herzog, living in a world of intellectual abstraction, is suddenly plunged into reality by a personal and emotional catastrophe. The book traces his wild journey between the extremes of romantic abstraction on the one hand and the 'mire of ... dissolution, next door to the void' the meaningless, brutal and chaotic reality proposed both by the evidence he sees around him, and the insistent voices of the reality instructors the 'naysayers, the touters of the existential void' (M. Gilbert Porter, Whence the Power, p.146). Herzog's intellectual crisis is provoked by an emotional one, and Madeleine's role seems to parallel that of the reality instructors on an emotional level: where they make 'constructs' of ideas, she makes a construct of personality, and their intellectual nihilism is echoed in her negation of feeling and affection. Nevertheless, it is an emotional solution that Herzog finally achieves: an 'affirmation of the heart', a mean between the extremes of romantic idealism and the reality of 'nasty facts'.

IV

Herzog's gradual realization of the part played by Madeleine

in his life is part of his progress to self-knowledge. He is thus able to view her more analytically than Tommy can Margaret, with a heightening of comic effect. Herzog is still too close to Madeleine, however, to regard her as a comic object; the satire is too personal, too painful, and the bitterness mars the comedy. In Humboldt's Gift, however, the hero Citrine is completely free of Denise's influence and can regard her as wholly ridiculous.

Denise in Humboldt's Gift resembles Madeleine both in her inauthenticity, and, more notably, in her need to dominate others. She is not, however, specifically 'theatrical' as Madeleine is, but she has an ideal self-image which she attempts to impose on others.

We are given a detailed and comprehensive introduction to Denise. The description of her on pp.42-5 systematically presents her appearance, background, language, ideas, habits, and relationships. Many of these elements are in fact condensed in the very first paragraph of this section, which is marvellously suggestive. It is in effect a thumbnail sketch, containing hints of her major characteristics, which are to be developed in subsequent episodes.

> Vulgar company was not my own expression. What I was in fact hearing was the voice of my ex-wife. It was Denise who used terms like 'common clay' and 'vulgar company'. The fate of my poor Mercedes would have given her very deep satisfaction. This was something like war, and she had an intensely martial personality. Denise hated Renata, my lady friend. She correctly identified Renata with this automobile. And she loathed George Swiebel. George, however, took a complex view of Denise. He said that she was a great beauty but not altogether human. Certainly Denise's huge radial amethyst eyes in combination with a low-lined forehead and sharp sibylline teeth supported this interpretation. She is exquisite, and terribly fierce. Down-to-earth George is not without myths of his own, especially where women are concerned. He has Jungian views, which he expresses coarsely. He has fine feelings which frustrate him because they fiddle his heart, and he overreacts grossly. Anyway, Denise would have laughed with happiness at the sight of this ruined car. And I? You would have thought that being divorced I had escaped the marital 'I-told-you-so'. But here I was, supplying it myself.
>
> (Saul Bellow, Humboldt's Gift, p.42)

It is worth noting, to begin with, that our first impression

of Denise is of a disembodied voice ringing in Citrine's ears. This in itself tells us much about her. Firstly, she is predictable. Citrine can tell in advance what her reactions would be, what kind of tone, and even the precise language she would use in a given situation. This immediately places her as a comic 'type', a character who is comic because of the mechanical repetition of habits, rather than a comic individual, a character who is comic because of unpredictability and quirky individuality.

She is presented in the first instance as a caricature of a nagging wife. Citrine hints at this when he says: 'What I was in fact hearing was the voice of my ex-wife', and reinforces this later when he adds:

> You would have thought that being divorced I had escaped the marital I-told-you-so. But here I was supplying it myself.

With this he classes Denise not only as a predictable character, but as a stereotype. She is comic not only because she herself acts consistently, but also because she is consistent with a pre-existing category which could in this case be called 'the American wife'. That she shares characteristics with this group immediately 'places' her as a satirized character. Stephen Leacock refers to this type of stock character:

> ... vagaries and oddities of dress, gait, manner and accent can be standardized as 'funny' and thus retain their first shock and contrast on the principles of repetition and conservatism ...
>
> (Stephen Leacock, Humour and Humanity, p.117)

It is clear from the first that Denise's domineering is founded on a belief that she "knows better" than Citrine and can improve him through her influence and instruction. By treating her as a stereotype, Bellow suggests that she is neither as distinctive nor as edifying as she herself believes.

Denise's tyranny is, however, related to another facet of her character, her snobbery, which is founded on the same self-conception.

> Vulgar company was not my own expression ... it was Denise who used words like 'common clay' and 'vulgar company'.

Denise is here satirized for an excess of gentility. She rejects anyone who fails to meet her exacting standards of refinement ('vulgar' company) and distinction ('common' clay). However, her language is inconsistent with these standards. It does not itself exhibit that degree of elegance or originality which she demands of others. She talks in cliché and ready-made phrases, and her speech is composed mainly of insults. This point is developed later in the novel, and becomes the main method by which Citrine undermines Denise's smug self-conception, but its germ is already apparent in this brief introduction.

A third element evident in Denise's character is a fierce intensity of feeling and reaction. We are told that she had 'an intensely martial personality', that she 'hated Renata' and 'loathed George Swiebel', and that 'the tale of my poor Mercedes would have given her very deep satisfaction'. It is suggested, however, that this forcefulness is comically excessive, and even, in a sense superficial. This is implicit in the contrast between Denise and George Swiebel: 'She loathed George Swiebel. George, however, took a complex view of Denise.' Her reactions may be violent but they are, Citrine suggests, too simple. Her emotions are over-dramatized but lack real profundity.

Denise's appearance confirms the impression we have received of her character. The images Citrine uses in connection with Denise suggest at once beauty and a certain hardness or inhumanity. Her beauty, interestingly, combines the elements of gentility and fierceness. Citrine refers to her 'amethyst' eyes and 'sharp sybil-line teeth'. The sharp teeth are amusingly animal-like, and contrast incongruously with the refinement of her 'exquisite' appearance. Similarly, the 'amethyst' eyes, while suggesting brilliance, have connotations of hardness and stoniness. There is thus, it is implied, an inner core of insensibility, and even crudity, beneath the elegance and vividness of her appearance.

Denise is criticized, then for three main faults - her domineering, her snobbery, and her excessive intensity. All these three

spring from a conception of herself as distinctive and important, as 'more than human', and are the results of the activity of that self-image in three domains, her relationship with herself, with her husband, and with others. Her vehemence is a form of self-dramatization, her scolding results from the idea that, as she herself is distinctive, she can exert an edifying influence on others, and similarly her snobbery develops from the notion that the people with whom she mixes must be as exceptional as herself.

The comedy, as in Madeleine's case, plays across the gap between an idealized self-conception and the imperfect reality of actual words and gestures. Again the satire works both by authorial comment and through the irony of self-betrayal, but the comedy owes more to the 'principle of repetition' in Denise's case than in Madeleine's. Madeleine remained mysterious to Herzog, he saw her as unfathomable, or even aberrant, but Denise's motives are so transparent to Citrine that he views her as wholly predictable. There is, too, a good deal of pleasure in the sheer exaggeration of the portrait, the ironic comedy of deflation is matched by the exultant comedy of display.

The first aspect we noted in Denise's character, her domineering nature, reveals itself in her constant criticism of Citrine. Her complaints about Citrine's lifestyle and his relationship with Renata reveal how much she resents the fact that he is no longer under her influence:

> 'And you, the passenger, said Denise, 'getting to be as bald as a barber pole, even if you comb your side-hair over to hide it, and grinning. She'll give you something to grin about, that fat broad.' From insult Denise went into prophecy. 'Your mental life is going to dry out. You're sacrificing it to your erotic needs (if that's the term for what you have). After sex, what can you two talk about ...? Well, you wrote a few books, you wrote a famous play, and even that was half ghosted. You associated with people like Von Humboldt Fleischer. You took it into your head that you were some kind of artist. We know better, don't we. And what you really want is to get rid of everybody, to tune out and be a law unto yourself. Just you and your misunderstood heart, Charlie. You couldn't bear a serious relationship, that's why you got rid of me and the children. Now you've got this tramp with the fat figure who wears no bra and shows her big nipples to the world. You've got ignorant kikes and hoodlums around you. You're crazy with your own brand of pride and snobbery. There's nobody good enough

for you ... I could have helped you. Now it's too late!' (p.45)

She systematically attacks every area of his life, pointing out successively his physical and sexual degeneration, the falling apart of his family life, his marriage, his relationships with his friends, and his creative life. He is nothing, she implies, without her. However it is ironic that far from providing the elevating and inspiring influence that she claims to have over him, she is merely degrading him.

The passage is remarkable for its tone of contempt. It is a particularly poisonous attack on Citrine's self-respect. This attack is directed at two targets: Citrine's sex-life and his intellectual and creative life. Denise sees the two as completely separate, considering the one as degrading the other: 'Your mental life is going to dry out. You're sacrificing it to your erotic needs.' Her remarks about his physical deterioration ('getting to be as bald as a barber pole, even if you comb your side-hair over to hide it') have a strange combination of intimacy and repulsion. Similarly, she seems to find his sex life peculiarly repellent: the image of the barber's shop has connotations of sordidity, the term 'erotic needs' seems to imply some aberration or abnormality, and with 'if that's the term for what you have' she connects sex and disease. She seems to regard him as a specimen or freak, a particularly warped example of humanity. In each case the special or intimate knowledge a wife has of her husband is robbed of its warmth and becomes the source of disgust.

There is a similar undermining of self-respect in the creative or intellectual sphere. Denise insinuates that Citrine's fame was not due to his own originality, but to a reflected glory from his association with famous people, that he is incapable of original creation, but has copied or relied on others to do the work. She dismisses him as some kind of parasite, a growth on society.

Just as her claim to be an uplifting influence on Citrine is undermined by her degrading comments, her speech reveals a further fundamental discrepancy between the image she attempts to convey and her real self. Her obsession with refinement is consistently undermined by her language, which is crude and reductive. Almost every sentence in the paragraph has the same structure

(you-verb-object). The rhythm is repetitive, insistent and forceful, the shortness of the sentences and the uniformity of their structure make it driving and accusatory. The vocabulary is simplistic, and often deliberately crude. In every case her ideas are couched in the most basic language possible and this, coupled with her use of invective, while presumably showing her contempt of 'vulgar' company, reflects unfavourably on herself.

The motive for this venomous attack is questionable. It is certainly not sexual jealousy, as she does not appear to feel any desire for him. It is rather a kind of impotence or frustrated materialism. Her cry at the end of the speech, 'I could have helped you', is really a wail of rejection: she feels herself excluded from his life, and that exclusion is a denial of her importance. She therefore has to decry and denigrate his achievements, for his success is a measure of her impotence. Our sense of her powerlessness explains why we appreciate Denise, despite her viciousness.

Citrine's attitude to Denise in this passage is very different from both Tommy's injured complaints about Margaret, and Herzog's bitter and painfully sarcastic comments on Madeleine. Citrine's comments are cool, witty, and analytic ('from insult Denise went to prophecy'). He is distanced enough from Denise to be able to see her in a ridiculous light, and even to enjoy her. His comments provide an element of appreciation, an amused relish in the very audacity of her insults, which is totally lacking from the portraits of Margaret and Madeleine.

Citrine is, in fact, so far detached from Denise, that he is able to view her as a representative type. The nature of the comedy in these three portraits in fact varies significantly according to how far the hero sees his situation and relationship as unique and individual. Tommy sees Margaret as a personal enemy, he feels a unique injustice and indignation. Herzog can see Madeleine as a personal destiny, he recognises the tendency in himself to attract and be attracted by such suffering and by the end of the novel he can recognize the role she has played in his life. Citrine, however, can see his situation at one remove, as a stereotype of American marriage:

> She may think she's offering me the blessings of an American marriage. Real Americans are supposed to suffer with their wives and wives with their husbands. Like Mr and Mrs Abraham Lincoln. Its the classic U.S. grief, and a child of immigrants like me ought to be grateful. For a Jew it's a step up.
>
> (p.45)

Here he perceives Denise as a victim of social and national clichés, and the comedy of the individual slides into the comedy of the representative. The whole diagnosis is ironic, but it is directed against America's self-image quite as much as against Denise. It is also a kind of mock-bewilderment, a deliberate confusion as to Denise's motives. Herzog's real naivety has been transformed here into mock innocence; the satire is more playful.

There is a partial explanation for Denise's behaviour implicit in the following passage:

> For Denise continually spoke to me about myself. She would say, 'I just can't believe the way you are. The man who's had all those wonderful insights, the author of all these books, respected by scholars and intellectuals all over the world. I sometimes have to ask myself, "Is that my husband? The man I know?" You've lectured at the great Eastern universities and had grants and fellowships and honours. De Gaulle made you a knight of the Legion of Honour and Kennedy invited us to the White House. You had a successful play on Broadway. Now what the hell do you think you're doing? Chicago! You hang around with your old Chicago school chums, with freaks. It's a kind of mental suicide, death wish. You'll have nothing to do with really interesting people, with architects or psychiatrists or university professors. I tried to make a life for you when you insisted on moving back here. I put myself out. You wouldn't have London or Paris or New York, you had to come back to this - this deadly, ugly, vulgar, dangerous place. Because at heart you're a kid from the slums. Your heart belongs to the old West Side gutters. I wore myself out being a hostess ...'
>
> (p.43)

Citrine says, not without irony, 'Denise continually spoke to me about myself'. However, she is really talking about herself. The words that are stressed are, significantly, 'I' and 'my', and her implication throughout is that his degeneration follows on from their separation, that his success was due to her influence,

> I tried to make a life for you when you insisted on moving

> back here. I put myself out ... I wore myself out being a hostess ...

Similarly, under the pretence of worrying about the decline in his mental and creative powers, she is really worried about the decline in their social status. She gives herself away by the fact that she measures his intelligence and creativity in terms of worldly success. Her one reference to the contents of his books, or to his actual thinking, 'the man who's had all those wonderful insights' is very telling. It is as if she has appropriated the phrase 'wonderful insight' from a book review or newspaper article and is using it verbatim without considering its meaning. The use of 'all those' in conjunction with 'wonderful insights' makes the praise valueless.

However the points she mainly emphasizes concerning his intellectual and creative life are the respect and honour it has gained for them: 'you've lectured at the great Eastern Universities and had grants and fellowships and honours ...' and the social status it has given them: 'Kennedy invited us to the White House'. The great merit of his play for her is that it was shown on Broadway, and it is significant that her idea of 'really interesting people' are all people with elevated social standing. In one sense, Denise is confessing an inadequacy in herself: her lack of understanding of Citrine. Her attack on him is much less ferocious, it is more of a complaint. The world of artistic creation is totally alien to her; she translates it into terms she does understand - external pointers to success. Citrine's total lack of social ambition makes him incomprehensible to her. She cannot go beyond herself to attempt to understand him, and this reveals a fundamentally limited intelligence. She is in a sense, as well as Citrine, a victim of their marriage, transported by it into a sphere she cannot understand. Citrine's creativity puts him beyond her grasp, much as Herzog's absent-mindedness alienated him from Madeleine, and our perception of the sense of frustration underlying the need for domination constitutes the beginning of a feeling of sympathy for the character.

In Denise's character there is a degree of crudity which consorts oddly with her veneer of excessive gentility and sensibility - a crudity of language, a crude ambition for success, money, and

social status, a crude self-interest. Citrine explains this in relation to her background:

> My old mother's words for Denise would have been 'Edel, gebildet, gelassen', for Denise was an upper-class person. She grew up in Highland Park. She went to Vassar College. Her father, a federal judge, also came from the West Side Chicago gutters. His father had been a precinct captain under Morris Eller in the stormy days of Big Bill Thompson. Denise's mother had taken the judge when he was a mere boy, only the son of a crooked politician, and straightened him out and cured him of his vulgarity. Denise had expected to do as much with me. But oddly enough her paternal inheritance was stronger than the maternal. On days when she was curt and tough, in her high tense voice you heard that old precinct captain and bagman, her grandfather. Because of this background, perhaps, she hated George fiercely.
>
> (p.43)

The two sides of her family correspond exactly to the two sides of her character. The fact that she attempts to ignore or to dissemble her 'paternal inheritance' and that it frequently bursts out of hiding is the source of comedy in her character.

There is also a suggestion, apparent here in the tone in which Citrine talks of 'the stormy days of Big Bill Thompson' and 'that old precinct captain and bagman', and developed much more fully in relation to George Swiebel, that there is in fact a fundamental indelicacy inherent in Denise's excessive refinement, that to place such emphasis on gentility and good breeding betrays a lack of real sensibility. It is implied that by her insistence on refinement she shows herself to be blind to other qualities, notably those of vigour and vitality.

The relationship between George and Denise is significant. He seems to be placed in deliberate opposition to her, and much is to be inferred from the contrast between their characters.

We have glimpsed already how Denise and George are compared to Denise's detriment. This comparison is all the more pointed because Denise has dismissed George as 'vulgar company' or 'common clay'. In fact, George, it is suggested, is the exact opposite of Denise:

He has fine feelings which frustrate him because they fiddle

his heart, and he over-reacts grossly.

(p.43)

He has a natural fineness of feeling, which embarrasses him, however, and, mistaking it for weakness, he assumes a gruff exterior. Denise, by implication, is the opposite: her coarseness is dissimulated under a hypocritical assumption of refinement. She is doubly shown up in relation to George, for, while pretending to be discerning, she fails to discover the real quality of George's character and only sees the surface.

This suggestion is elaborated and developed later in the same section. Denise is criticized for having excessive sensitivity without real sensibility. George, on the other hand, though comically exaggerated, is identified with vigour, vitality, and warmth.

> George feels he can speak for Nature. Nature, instinct, heart, guide him. He is biocentric. To see him rub his large muscles, his Roman Ben Hur chest and arms with olive oil is a lesson in piety towards the organism.
>
> (p.45)

George is identified with the physical and instinctual, 'he holds his own body in numinous esteem. He is a priest to the inside of his nose, his eyeballs, his feet', whereas Denise is always identified with exclusively mental activity. Citrine speaks of her as an 'intelligent woman', but hers is an intelligence that is sharply divorced from the emotional, the imaginative, or the physical. Her remarks to Citrine always turn on the subject of his mental life, she seems to see creativity as a purely rational and logical process, and Citrine comments:

> It tired Denise to support me emotionally. She didn't take much stock in these emotions of mine
>
> (p.115)

We have seen how she sees the mental and the physical as completely separate, considering the one as debasing the other, and indeed, she seems to find anything physical peculiarly repulsive, expressing a fine distaste when she talks of it. This exclusively mental

emphasis is, it is suggested, barren and unproductive, whereas George is 'vital and generous' despite his gruffness and vulgarity. George himself suggests that Denise's intelligence is fundamentally unimaginative and limited:

> You're not getting enough air with that woman. You look as if you're suffocating. Your tissues aren't getting any oxygen. She'll give you cancer.
>
> (p.45)

This lack of imagination is evident in the third facet of Denise's character, her intensity.

> Denise kept rehearsal notes for him. She wrote with terrible concentration, as if she were the smartest pupil in the class and the rest of the fifth grade were in pursuit. When she came to ask a question she held the script to her chest and spoke to me in a condition of operatic crisis. Her voice seemed to make her own hair bristle and to dilate her astonishing eyes. She said, 'Verviger wants to know how you'd like him to pronounce this word' - she printed it out for me, FINITE. 'He says he can do it fine-it, or fine-ite. He doesn't take my word for it - fine-ite!'
>
> (p.58)

Her pedantry betrays an excessively rational mind, an arid and undiscriminating mental preoccupation with detail. It is, of course, absurd that she should be so dramatic about what is essentially a trivial problem; she is unable to distinguish the important from the unimportant, and this too reveals a literal and unimaginative intelligence.

There is also a strong element of self-dramatization in Denise's intensity. Even in pursuit of trivia she has to feel important. This is comically evident in her appearance. It is not the hardness or sharpness of her character which is emphasized here, but its electricity. It is interesting that it is her own voice that makes her hair bristle and dilates her eyes: she is, in a sense, her own audience.

It seems that these two elements, self-dramatization, and lack of imagination, are intimately connected, and that together they form the basis of what is comic in Denise's character. She

has made, in a sense, an 'ideal construction' of her own character which she tries to enact. Paradoxically, it is this attempt to be 'more than human' that blinds her to 'the integral character of her humanity. She lacks the imagination necessary to accept and rejoice in herself as 'exactly human'. Madeleine, Denise, and to some extent Margaret all share the tendency to identify themselves too completely with some special interest or project which Scott defines as the basis of the satirized character. They share this tendency with Bellow's male 'Reality Instructors' or 'Machiavellians', but whereas Bellow's male characters are dominated by some idea, theory or doctrine external to themselves, the Bitch is obsessed with an image of self which she attempts to validate in others' eyes: she is 'sick of self-love'. This need for self-validation means that she is both self-conscious and power seeking, and it is these two elements that are attacked by the comedy. The nature of the attack depends, as we have seen, on the balance of these two elements: if the desire for power poses a threat or is harmful, the criticism will be bitter rather than comic, vindictive rather than detached. If it is not perceived as harmful the attack will be much less ferocious, the excesses will be displayed as well as deflated, an an element of pleasure, even of teasing affection, will creep into the comedy. We leave Denise at this point, to move on to the High Priestess and the comedy of burlesque, where affection for extravagance and oddity almost completely takes over from criticism, and where the excessive rationality of the Bitch is replaced by a self-consciousness about the body.

Chapter II

THE HIGH PRIESTESS OF SEX

> She carried a great statement to males, the powerful message of gender. In this day and age people felt obliged to temper all such powerful messages with comedy, and she provided that too ... an element of parody, self-mockery, a satire on the - thing - itself.
>
> Both low comic and high serious. Goddess and majorette.
> (Saul Bellow, Mr Sammler's Planet, pp.57-8 and 132)

I

Ramona in Herzog and Renata in Humboldt's Gift have obvious similarities. Both are divorced women in their late thirties, both are scheming to trap the hero into marriage. Sarah Blacher Cohen categorizes both as 'ridiculous sex-objects' (Comic Relief, ed. Cohen, p.9), and Allen Cuttman finds that 'Citrine's girlfriend, busty Renata, is reminiscent of Herzog's Ramona' (Comic Relief, p.150). Both these comments suggest that the quality the two women share is an exaggerated or overdone sexuality. However, while this is certainly the most striking feature in both portraits, Bellow's presentation of Renata is, in some ways, a reversal of his characterization of Ramona. I would like to explore this distinction further in relation to Bellow's use of the burlesque in his treatment of Ramona and Renata.

The burlesque is treated in critical works devoted to the genre primarily as parody or ludicrous imitation of style. I would like to consider the burlesque as a form of characterization, and adapt the following definitions to that end.

Richmond Bond defines the burlesque as

> the use or imitation of serious matter or manner made amusing by the creation of an incongruity between style and subject.
> (Richmond P. Bond, English Burlesque Poetry, p.3)

John D. Jump elaborates on this, distinguishing two distinct forms of burlesque:

> a relatively trifling subject ludicrously elevated by style of presentation, and a relatively important subject ludicrously degraded by style of presentation.
>
> (John D. Jump, Burlesque, p.1)

These he calls respectively high and low burlesque, or parody and travesty.

Although stylistic burlesque is very often directed at a particular author or genre, and burlesque of character lacks this element of mimicry, the basic incongruity between style and subject, together with the distinction between ludicrous elevation and ludicrous degrading, may serve as the basis for a definition of the burlesque character.

The burlesque character represents a norm that is overdone in some way. There is always some discrepancy between qualities possessed naturally, and 'style' or self-presentation. As Jump suggests, this may be due to an excessive importance given to certain values, or an excessive trivialization of those values.

Bellow uses the burlesque to explore attitudes to sexuality. If, in the Bitch, sexuality is suppressed, and in the Slut it is natural and unselfconscious, in the High Priestess natural sexuality is consciously exaggerated and overdone. Because it has a fundamental incongruity, sexuality can be burlesqued in two ways. The implications of Auden's remark, 'sexual desire is a comic contradiction' (The Dyer's Hand, p.375), are explored by Potts in the following comment:

> It is the wide gap between the impulses that precede and accompany human mating, and the codes of manners and sentiment between men and women: the clash between the ideal and the real, sentiment and behaviour, in almost all civilisations and almost all people, that makes comic writers choose sex for one of their major themes and also makes comedy the best attitude to sex. For comedy denies neither the romance and the delicacy that have in some way become second nature in civilised men and women, nor the primitive enticement, conquest and yielding that we share with animals.
>
> (L.J. Potts, Comedy, p.50)

Bellow's burlesque characters do, however, deny one or the other, and this is the source of the comedy. Ramona focuses solely

on 'codes of manners and sentiment', ludicrously elevating sex, while Renata ludicrously debases it, ignoring both its 'romance' and 'delicacy'. Neither the elevation nor the degrading is a result, however, of an attempt to ignore or suppress sexuality: both stem rather from an extravagance or excess. This extravagance is a function of the character's self-consciousness: as implied in the opening quotations, the burlesque character is parodying himself through an over-consciousness of the body.

One of the functions of comedy, according to Scott, is to remind us that we are not 'disembodied essences' (p.21). The burlesque character, then, although self-conscious, does not try to escape his humanity: his extravagance is also a celebration of the flesh.

Burlesque is thus related both to satire and to celebration. One boundary of satire is, as we have seen, a degree of affection for the character concerned, and where this occurs satire may slide into the burlesque. The qualities that awaken our affection are those of extravagance, wildness, vitality. The burlesque character is excessive, but fundamentally goodnatured: and is totally without that element of meanness or malice which may be found in the satirized character. The burlesque always has an element of gusto. However, the burlesque character is not yet the celebrated character, for his excess means that he is unbalanced, obsessional in some way: he has lost the golden mean that is central to comedy.

Further, the two types of burlesque character outlined above will exhibit different types of fault, both of which are inimical to comedy. The character who inflates a trival matter is guilty of pomposity; the character who debases an important subject is guilty of a certain grossness or coarseness. Both have a lack of imagination, an inability to go beyond themselves: the first type is self-important, the second has a kind of low selfishness. Comedy will tend to be more severe on the first type, as inflation involves pretension and this is a vice particularly detested by the comic imagination. The second type of character, however, really fails to value life: his vision is reductive and materialist. Scott states that:

> the comic Katharsis does ... essentially involve such a restoration of our confidence in the realm of finitude as enables us to see the daily occasions of our earth-bound career as being not irrelevant inconveniences but as possible roads into what is ultimately significant in life.
>
> (p.32)

It is this leap of the imagination that the low burlesque character is unable to make.

Finally, burlesque has obvious affinities with caricature, in that it involves exaggeration of certain features at the expense of others. Caricature is, however, not so much a vision as a tool which may be employed in the service of satire, the absurd, or the grotesque, as well as the burlesque.

II

Ramona, in Herzog, seems at first sight to be a composite character playing a number of different roles. We observe her in the role of 'tough Spanish broad' - the sexual professional- then as intellectual and theorist, and finally as the sympathetic and understanding confidante. However, we are constantly reminded of a fourth facet of her character: the reality which underlies and informs all three roles, and gives them coherence and intelligibility. The Ramona behind the roles is the ageing woman desperately in search of a husband. The roles, ostensibly so different, are therefore linked: each is a distinct attempt to trap or ensnare Herzog. Each, in addition, partakes of that self-conscious extravagance which is the hallmark of the high burlesque: in each case Ramona overdoes her role. Bellow consistently undermines the facade she presents by reminding us of the reality it masks. The comedy springs from this double perspective, but never lacks a touch of that pathos which is absent from the satirical spotlight turned on Madeleine or Denise and which softens or mitigates the ridicule that Ramona earns herself.

> She came from Buenos Aires. Her background was international - Spanish, French, Russian, Polish and Jewish. She had gone to school in Switzerland and still spoke with a slight accent, full of charm. She was short but had a full, substantial figure, a good round seat, firm breasts (all these things

> mattered to Herzog; he might think himself a moralist but the shape of a woman's breasts matter greatly). Ramona was unsure of her chin but had confidence in her lovely throat, and so she held her head fairly high. She walked with quick efficiency, rapping her heels in energetic Castilian style. Herzog was intoxicated by this clatter. She entered a room provocatively, swaggering slightly, one hand touching her thigh, as though she carried a knife in her garter belt. It seemed to be the fashion in Madrid, and it delighted Ramona to come on playfully in the role of a tough Spanish broad - una navaja en la liga; she taught him the expression. He thought often of that imaginary knife when he watched her in her underthings, which were extravagant and black, a strapless contrivance called the Merry Widow that drew in the waist and trailed red ribbons below. Her thighs were short, but deep and white. The skin darkened where it was compressed by the elastic garment. And silky tags hung down, and garter buckles. Her eyes were brown, sensitive and shrewd, erotic and calculating. She knew what she was up to. The warm colour, the downy arms, the fine bust and excellent white teeth and slightly bowed legs - they all worked. Moses, suffering, suffered in style. His luck never entirely deserted him. Perhaps he was luckier than he knew. Ramona tried to tell him so. 'That bitch did you a favour,' she said. 'You'll be far better off.'
>
> (p.22)

This passage, which serves as our introduction to Ramona, focuses on external details of appearance, dress, mannerisms and background. Together these make a harmonious and coherent whole. Our impression of Ramona is built up of three main elements which can be defined as exoticism (the international background, the foreign accent, the Castilian mannerisms, and Spanish phrases), extravagance (the heel rapping, the swaggering, the black underclothes), and toughness (the knife, the 'tough Spanish broad' role). Each aspect is linked to the others and they are all interdependent. Her extravagance heightens her exoticism (she raps her heels in Castilian style, and her swaggering is modelled on the current fashion in Madrid), the suggestion of violence in her character is linked with her foreignness ('a tough Spanish broad'), and Herzog himself links her toughness and extravagance ('he often thought of that imaginary knife when he watched her in her underclothes which were extravagant and black.') In conjunction, these three elements constitute Ramona's sexuality: the exoticism, extravagance and toughness are precisely those elements which attract or entice ('a slight accent, full

of charm', '... she entered a room provocatively, swaggering slightly', '... Herzog was intoxicated by this clatter'). This elaborate, exotic, slightly sadistic sensuality suggests, of course, that Ramona is a sexual professional; it is implied that she calculates her effects very carefully: 'she knew what she was up to'.

It is interesting to compare her sexuality with Renata's from this point of view. In the passage where we first meet Renata she is described only in terms of her physical appearance. She is 'beautiful', 'voluptuous', and 'busty'. There is no implication that she is, or could be, anything other than her appearance suggests. Ramona, however, is characterized in two ways: the first, as we have seen, in terms of dress and mannerisms, the second in terms of her physique:

> She was short, but had a full, substantial figure, a good round seat, firm breasts ... Her thighs were short but deep and white ... Her eyes were brown, sensitive and shrewd, erotic and calculating ... The warm odour, the downy arms, the fine bust and excellent white teeth, and slightly bowed legs ...

This description of Ramona contrasts sharply with our first perspective on her. The language used to characterize her here is much simpler, more basic. The adjectives suggest sensuality, but also a warmth and generosity, a natural, human quality, which is absent from the portrait of the 'tough Spanish broad'. The dichotomy between these two interwoven descriptions - between dress and naked body, between mannerisms and physical appearance - reinforces the suggestion that Ramona's rather elaborate sexuality is a mask. There is a strong sense that she is somehow distorting her humanity, caricaturing herself; there is an element, almost, of self-parody, in the contrast between her natural sexuality and the fantastic extravaganza she presents to Herzog. However, Ramona is not as sharply criticized as Madeleine and Denise are. We feel sympathy for her because what is revealed beneath the mask is something genuine, something human. We sense throughout the description that Ramona is trying too hard. This element of excess carried to absurdity makes her comic; it also makes her pathetic. This touch of pathos is clearly discernible in the following

comment:

> Ramona was unsure of her chin, but had confidence in her lovely throat, and so she held her head fairly high.

This of course reveals an amusing self-consciousness, but also a painful lack of self-confidence which counter-balances the humour. The same elements are evident in her attempt to convince Herzog of his good fortune in meeting her: ' "That bitch did you a favour", she said. "You'll be far better off." '. Again, there is a self-consciousness apparent in her attempt to advertise herself, and in the aggressive language she uses, but equally a lack of self-reliance, a desire for reassurance implicit in her over-emphatic need to convince Herzog of her sexual virtues.

Our appreciation of Ramona as comically excessive is thus tempered by our apprehension of elements in her character which transcend the 'type' - a realization of an inner humanity beneath the bravado and show.

This dual reaction to Ramona is very complex. The details which make her comic at one and the same time earn our sympathy for her. There are two kinds of comedy at work in her characterization: caricature, the comedy of absurd extravagance, and an undercutting irony comically at odds with the facade she presents to the world. Our reaction to both is mixed: there is an element of affection in the caricature, for the very extravagance that makes her ridiculous also brings her to life and the irony reveals no calculating, cold, or malicious intent, but an insecure and needy individual. The very details that should distance us actually bring her closer.

The same mixture of ridicule and sympathy is apparent in the following extract, where we witness Ramona in a new role as intellectual and theorist:

> Ramona said, 'Perhaps some lovely woman scared you on the train, and you turned back to your Ramona.'
> 'Oh ...' said Herzog.
> Her theme was her power to make him happy. Thinking of Ramona with her intoxicating eyes and robust breasts, her short but gentle legs, her Carmen airs, thievishly seductive,

> her skills in the sack (defeating invisible rivals), he felt she did not exaggerate. The facts supported her claim.
> 'Well, were you running away?' she said.
> 'Why should I? You're a marvellous woman, Ramona.'
> 'In that case you're being very odd, Moses.'
> 'Well, I suppose I am one of the odder beasts."
> 'But I know better than to be proud and demanding. Life has taught me to be humble.'
> Moses shut his eyes and raised his brows. Here we go.
> 'Perhaps you feel a natural superiority because of your eduation.'
> 'Education! But I don't know anything ...'
> 'Your accomplishments. You're in Who's Who. I'm only a merchant - a petit-bourgeois type.'
> 'You don't really believe this, Ramona.'
> 'Then why do you keep aloof, and make me chase you? I realise you want to play the field. After great disappointments, I've done it myself, for ego-reinforcement.'
> 'A high-minded intellectual ninny, square ....'
> 'Who?'
> 'Myself, I mean.'
> She went on. 'But as one recovers self-confidence, one learns the simple strength of simple desires.'
> Please Ramona, Moses wanted to say - you're lovely, fragrant, sexual, good to touch - everything. But these lectures! For the love of God, Ramona, shut it up. But she went on. Herzog looked up at the ceiling. The spiders had the mouldings under intensive cultivation, like the banks of the Rhine. Instead of grapes, encapsulated bugs hung in clusters.
>
> (pp.157-8)

In this passage we are aware of a tension between Ramona and Herzog which may be defined, curiously enough, as an insistence on the physical on Herzog's part and an insistence on the mental on Ramona's part. Ramona consistently talks in generalizations and abstractions; her language contains a high proportion of abstract nouns ('life', 'superiority', 'education', 'accomplishments', 'ego-reinforcement', 'disappointments', 'self-confidence', 'strength', 'desires'). Herzog's language, on the other hand, focuses on the physical and sensual ('eyes', 'breasts', 'legs', 'skill in the sack', 'lovely', 'fragrant', 'good to touch'). It is, of course, amusing to contrast her high-flown intellectualizing with Herzog's constant debunking of her pretensions, but the scene is rendered doubly ironic by the fact that we have previously witnessed Ramona is the role of sensual superwoman.

There is a further comic incongruity in the substance of her speech: she is telling Herzog to trust his instincts more

and to give in to his emotions, she is advocating a return to simplicity: while the whole tendency of her speech is to rationalize the instinctual, to intellectualize emotion, and to complicate the simple.

An analysis of her language reveals an amusing confusion of two different registers. Her speech contains, firstly, too many loose generalizations and empty emotive words ('life', 'simple strength', 'simple desires'), and, secondly, a high proportion of jargon ('ego-reinforcement', 'natural superiority', 'petit-bourgeois'). The tendency of the first kind of language is towards woolliness and sentimentality; that of the second towards pseudo-scientific rationalization. In both cases she is setting herself up as an authority on life, but in the one case her wisdom is offered as cliché and truism, in the other as sub-scientific analysis. This combination of emotionalism and popular psychology does violence to both: we accept neither the emotion, nor the rationalization of it.

However, Ramona is not as confident as she seems on the surface. She is painfully aware that by adopting the masculine role of chase and pursuit, she is, in a sense, losing dignity:

> Well, were you running away? ... Why do you keep aloof and make me chase you.

Again, we note the need to advertise herself, to make all explicit: there is the same insecurity behind the facade of the intellectual and theorist as behind that of the femme fatale.

> Perhaps some lovely woman scared you on the train, and you turned back to your Ramona.

There is another sense in which the two roles are related: both are overdone, ludicrously inflated; in both, something is being taken too seriously. As we have seen, there is a self-conscious, calculating element in Ramona's sexuality. In fact, the elements we distinguished as constituting that sexuality: exoticism, extravagance, a touch of sadism, have one thing in common: they are related to fantasy rather than to reality. Each indicates in some way

a divorce or escape from the ordinary or normal. Her sexuality, or her presentation of her sexuality, is thus related to the mental rather than the instinctual, to dream rather than reality. It seems, in fact, to be an attempt to actualize fantasy, the physical manifestation of a theory, and this is why it strikes us as absurd, and excessive. Indeed, Ramona has a whole ideology of sex to back up her exuberant practical demonstrations:

> Ramona never hesitated to express herself fully, and there was something unreserved, positively operatic about some of her speeches. Opera. Heraldry. She said her feelings for him had depth and maturity and that she had an enormous desire to help him. She told Herzog that he was a better man than he knew - a deep man, beautiful (he could not help wincing when she said this), but sad, unable to take what his heart really desired, a man tempted by God, longing for grace, but escaping headlong from his salvation, often close at hand. This Herzog, this man of many blessings, for some reason had endured a frigid, middlebrow, castrating female in his bed, given her his name and made her the instrument of creation, and Madeleine had treated him with contempt and cruelty as if to punish him for lowering and cheapening himself, for lying himself into love with her and betraying the promise of his soul. What he really must do, she went on, in this same operatic style - unashamed to be so fluent; he marvelled at this - was to pay his debt for the great gifts he had received, his intelligence, his charm, his education, and free himself to pursue the meaning of life, not by disintegration, where he would never find it, but humbly and yet proudly continuing his learned studies. She, Ramona, wanted to add riches to his life and give him what he pursued in the wrong places. This she could do by the art of love, she said - the art of love which was one of the sublime achievements of the spirit. It was love she meant by riches. What he had to learn from her - while there was time; while he was still virile, his powers substantially intact - was how to renew the spirit through the flesh (a precious vessel in which the spirit rested)...
>
> She thought she could restore order and sanity to his life, and if she did that it would be logical to marry her. Or, in her style, he would desire to be united with her. And it would be a union that really unified. Tables, beds, parlours, money, laundry and automobile, culture and sex knit into one web. Everything would at last make sense, was what she meant. Happiness was an absurd and even harmful idea, unless it was really comprehensive; but in this exceptional and lucky case where each had experienced the worst sorts of morbidity and come through by a miracle, by an instinct for survival and delight which was positively religious - there was simply no other way to talk about her life said Ramona, except in terms of Magdalene Christianity

> - comprehensive happiness was possible. In that case, it was a duty; to refuse to answer the accusations against happiness (that it was a monstrous and selfish delusion, an absurdity) was cowardly, a surrender to malignancy, capitulating to the death instinct. Here was a man, Herzog, who knew what it was to rise from the dead. And she, Ramona, she knew the bitterness of death and nullity, too. Yes, she too! But with him she experienced a real Easter. She knew what Resurrection was. He might look down his conscious nose at sensual delight, but with her, when their clothes were off, he knew what it was. No amount of sublimation could replace that erotic happiness, that knowledge.
>
> Not even tempted to smile, Moses listened earnestly, bowing his head. Some of it was current university or paperback chatter and some was propaganda for marriage, but, after such debits were entered against her, she was genuine. He sympathized with her, respected her. It was all real enough. She had something genuine at heart.
>
> When he jeered in private at the Dionysiac revival it was himself he made fun of. Herzog! A prince of the erotic Renaissance, in his macho garments! And what about the kids? How would they like a new stepmother? And Ramona, would she take Junie to see Santa Claus?
>
> (pp.191-193)

The comparison of Ramona's speeches to opera and heraldry is very suggestive. If we consider what these two arts have in common, we find that they share several characteristics. They are both in essence spectacular or showy; they are both composite arts, a synthesis of different elements striving to be a unified whole; and, especially, they are both highly artificial, at the apex of the complicatedly civilized, requiring a knowledge of elaborate conventions or codes if they are to be understood.

Ramona's language has all these features. She speaks in the 'high style'. Everything is on a grand scale, described in absurdly inflated terms. ('Here was a man, Herzog, who knew what it was to rise from the dead ... with him she experienced a real Easter. She knew what Resurrection was'.)

Ramona's speech is a composite fabrication of many different registers and jargons. She combines religion ('tempted by God', 'salvation', 'blessings', 'spirit', 'miracle', 'Magdelene Christianity', 'rise from the dead', 'Easter', 'Resurrection'), psychology ('frigid', 'castrating', 'death-instinct', 'conscious', 'sublimation'), and emotional cliché ('depth and maturity', 'deep man', 'promise of his soul', 'meaning of life', 'riches', 'the art of love').

However, this mixture of jargons is unified by its consistently elevated tone. Rather than a confusion of styles, Ramona has a range of keys in the high style. Furthermore, she is expressing the one message through various different systems of language or ways of interpreting reality: namely, that she can remould Herzog's life, or, more specifically, that through a sexual relationship with her, his whole life will be changed for the better. Her remarks centre around the concept of renewal through sex, and she explains this concept each time in different terms.

In terms of religion, sex becomes rebirth; a means of renewing the spirit through the body, a kind of mutual salvation. Her references to psychology treat the same theme in Freudian terms: through a 'frigid', 'castrating woman' Herzog has been repressed. To find freedom and release from repression, he must 'learn to trust his instincts'. Sex here is a means of release; happiness lies in the unconscious and instinctual, not in the conscious and mental. Her references to Herzog as a beautiful but sad man who betrayed the promise of his soul by lying himself into love with Madeleine, but who can nevertheless find true happiness (and the meaning of life) through the riches of love, reiterate the same theme of regeneration in a different realm of discourse: that of popular romance.

Each of these 'systems' seeks to be a total way of explaining reality, and each rests on a different concept of love (spiritual, sexual, romantic). Ramona seeks to unify these three separate strands into a coherent whole, as opera seeks to unify singing, acting, music, and spectacle, and heraldry seeks to unify symbol, representational art, pattern, and words. Sex for Ramona is 'not merely simple pleasure, but metaphysical, transcendent pleasure - pleasure which answered the riddle of human existence' (p.157).

Ramona's concept of 'the meaning of life' is founded on a desire for unity. This becomes apparent on examination of these two statements:

> What he really must do was to pursue the meaning of life, not in disintegration, where he would never find it, but humbly and yet proudly continuing 'his learned studies'.

> He would desire to be united with her. And it would be a union that really unified ... Everything would at last make sense.

She talks as if there were a 'right answer'. That such a vision is both glibly simplistic and impossibly idealistic is suggested by Bellow in two ways: by the inclusion of realistic and deflating detail, and by the constant reminder of a disorder and a diversity that she chooses to ignore.

He mocks her idealization of marriage, by suggesting that marriage is distinguished not by a sudden discovery of the meaning of life, but by the management of day to day domestic problems:

> And what about the kids? Would they like a new stepmother? And Ramona, would she take Junie to see Santa Claus?

His 'low style' brings us down to earth and highlights the absurdity of her highflown symbolic allusions.

The combination of styles is even more ludicrous in the following passage:

> With him she experienced a real Easter. She knew what Resurrection was. He might look down his conscious nose at sensual delight, but with her, when their clothes were off, he knew what it was.

The pictorial detail of 'when their clothes were off' and the rather too concrete metaphor 'look down his nose' are a bathetic intrusion into her pompous and grandiose imagery, and an ironic reminder of the real subject of her speech.

Such inflated and abstract idealism has, Bellow suggests, nothing to do with ordinary life, and it is this aspect of reality- the mundane and familiar, the domestic and the trivial - that Ramona conspicuously fails to integrate into her world picture:

> Tables, beds, parlours, money, laundry and automobile, culture and sex knit into one web. Everything would at last make sense.

Nothing seems to be excluded from her vision of marriage; reason,

emotion, the material, the physical, and a spiritual need for coherent explanation, all seem to be accounted for. However, the formulation of the sentence, and even the punctuation, reveals an underlying disunity. The sentence which attempts to unify is divided against itself. Tables, beds, parlours, money, laundry and automobile surely all belong to the same category - the external paraphernalia of marriage - and do not particularly need unification. However they are listed as separate items as if they belonged to different frames of reference. They are further separated irreconcilably from culture and sex, which surely do not belong in the same category . . but which are unceremoniously lumped together by the punctuation of the sentence and the use of 'and' (which causes us to make a break in the sentence after 'automobile' and to link culture and sex). Her vision of unity thus contains the seeds of disunity within itself.

We have seen the excessive qualities, the artificiality, the attempt to unify and order diversity in Ramona's speech. It also resembles opera in another way. One of the most striking things about Ramona's theorizing is that it is not completely divorced from reality; she is not entirely phoney. She operates by a convention or code. As in opera we accept the convention that people will sing instead of speaking, and in heraldry, we interpret symbols as having relevance to external reality, so Herzog interprets Ramona:

> She was genuine ... it was all real enough. She had something genuine at heart.

Once again there is an abrupt shift of perspective, and our laughter at Ramona is transformed into a certain sympathy with her. What she is actually saying is to be ignored; her reasons for saying it, or the intentions behind the gesture, are ultimately more important. We see these intentions most transparently revealed in her third role, that of sympathetic confidante:

> 'We lived together on a high level, all of us. Except Phoebe. She merely went along.'
> 'What is she like?'
> 'She has attractive features but she looks severe. She

comes on like the head nurse.'

'She didn't care for you?'

'... Her husband was a cripple. He knows how to make the most of it, emotionally, with his lurid sob stuff. She had bought him cheap because he was factory damaged. New and perfect, she could never have afforded such a luxury. He knew and she knew and we knew. Because this is an age of insight. The laws of psychology are known to all educated people. Anyway, he was only a one-legged radio announcer but she had him to herself. Then Madeleine and I arrived, and a glamorous life began in Ludeyville.'

'It must have upset her when he began to imitate you.'

'Yes. But if I was going to be swindled the best way was to do the job in my own style. Poetic justice. Philosophical piety describes the style.'

'When did you first notice?'

'When Mady began to stay away from Ludeyville. A few times she holed up in Boston. She said she simply had to be alone and think things over. So she took the kid - just an infant. And I asked Valentine to go and reason with her.'

'And this was when he began to give you those lectures?'

Herzog tried to smile away the quick-welling rancour whose source had been touched. he might not be able to control it. 'They all lectured. Everyone lectured. People legislate continually by means of talk. I have Madeleine's letters from Boston. I have letters from Gersbach, too. All kinds of documents. I even have a bundle of letters written by Madeleine to her mother. They came in the mail.'

'But what did Madeleine say?'

'She's quite a writer. She writes like Lady Hester Stanhope. First of all, she said I resembled her father in too many ways. That when we were in a room together I seemed to swallow and gulp up all the air and left nothing for her to breathe. I was overbearing, infantile, demanding, sardonic and a psychosomatic bully.'

'Psychosomatic?'

'I had pains in my belly in order to dominate her, and got my way be being sick. They all said that, all three of them. Madeleine had another lecture about the only basis for a marriage. A marriage was a tender relationship resulting from the overflow of feeling, and all the rest of that. She even had a lecture about the right way to perform the conjugal act.'

'Incredible.'

'She must have been describing what she had learned from Gersbach.'

'You don't need to go into it,' said Ramona. 'I'm sure she made it as painful as possible.'

'In the meantime, I was supposed to wind up this study of mine, and become the Lovejoy of my generation - that's the silly talk of scholarly people, Ramona, I didn't think of it that way. The more Madeleine and Gersbach lectured me, the more I thought that my only purpose was to lead a quiet, regular life. She said this quietness was more of my scheming. She accused me of being on "a meek kick", and said that I was now trying to keep her in line by a

> new tactic.'
> 'How curious! What were you supposed to be doing?'
> 'She thought I had married her in order to be "saved", and now I wanted to kill her because she wasn't doing the job. She said she loved me, but couldn't do what I demanded, because this was so fantastic, and so she was going to Boston one more time to think it all through and find a way to save this marriage.'
> 'I see.'
>
> (pp.198-9)

A startling reversal of roles is apparent here. Ramona is no longer lecturing Herzog: here she is the audience, and he is the lecturer. Previously we witnessed Herzog 'listening earnestly, bowing his head', reduced to total passivity. Ramona goes further, and actually participates in her own reduction, feeding Herzog's ego. Her language here could scarcely be more different from that in the previous extract. It is bare, elementary, and colourless, made up of only two kinds of construction: exclamation ('Incredible!' ... 'How curious!' ... 'You don't mean it!') and question ('What is she like?' ... 'She didn't care for you?'), both of which fulfil the same function: they serve to link the various sections of Herzog's narrative and to impel it forward, by expressing interest in what he has just said and offering direct or indirect encouragement to continue. Her remarks only take identity from the substance of Herzog's speech.

We notice again, more intensely than before, the element of pathos that we have previously observed in Ramona's character. Here she is listening to Herzog talk about his ex-wife. Herzog is ostensibly disparaging towards Madeleine, but it is also obvious that he is totally bound up in her, and has no thought to spare for Ramona's feelings. She is effaced by him, but she also effaces herself. The docility with which she not only listens to him totally absorbed in talking about another woman, but even feeds that absorption, is pathetic, and it is a pathos which appears to eclipse the comedy at this point.

Ramona could interestingly be compared to Madeleine. In the scene where we first meet Madeleine, all excitement and interest is centred in her. She reduces Herzog to a mute witness of her performance. He, as we have suggested, wants to be so reduced;

Ramona, in the same way, is totally submissive, feeding Herzog's self-indulgence. This suggests that Ramona is structurally the complete reverse of Madeleine, feeding Herzog's ego instead of requiring him to feed hers.

There is a sense, however, in which Ramona is not only feeding Herzog, but feeding on him. This is suggested very powerfully in the following extract:

> He was beginning to see that his particular brand of short-sightedness, lack of realism, and apparent ingenuousness conferred a high status on him. For Ramona it evidently surrounded him with glamour. And provided that he remained macho she would listen with glistening eyes, with more sympathy, and more, and more. She transformed his miseries into sexual excitements and, to give credit where it was due, turned his grief in a useful direction.
>
> ... When he was done, it would be Ramona's turn. You treat me right, I treat you right.
>
> (p.164)

This suggests that her submissiveness is really a means of gaining power over him. The words 'she transformed' and 'turned' make her the originator of the action. The 'glistening eyes' suggest tears, but also eagerness, a too-active participation in his misery. There is a vampire-like quality about Ramona's sympathy: she is gaining strength from his loss.

The above quotation also links this third aspect of her character to the first two. This role, like the others, stems from her conviction that 'man's constitutional tensions, of whatever origin, needed sexual relief': everything, for Ramona, is ultimately explicable in terms of sex.

The structural parallel with Madeleine may be usefully pursued by comparing their respective attitudes to sex. It is interesting that the same complex of elements we distinguished in Madeleine's character also figure in Ramona's: namely, roleplaying, religion, intellectualizing, sex, and power. In each case Madeleine uses one or other to replace sex; Ramona uses one or other to express sexuality. Madeleine replaces sex by theatrics, Ramona makes theatrics of sex. Madeleine makes sex of theories, Ramona makes theories of sex. Madeleine replaces sex by religion, for Ramona, sexuality

is religion, and ultimately, where Madeleine replaces sex with power, Ramona uses sex as power. Herzog recognizes this when he says:

> In emancipated New York, man and woman, gaudily disguised, like two savages belonging to hostile tribes, confront each other. The man wants to deceive, and then to disengage himself; the woman's strategy is to disarm and detain him.
>
> (p.195)

For Ramona, like Madeleine, is ultimately trying to gain power over Herzog: the sexual ideology is designed to this end. However, whereas Madeleine wants to exert her own personality at the expense of Herzog's, to destroy him in order to magnify herself, Ramona merely wants him as a husband:

> she senses that I am for the family. For I am a family type, and she wants me for her family.
>
> (p.205)

This is the source of the sympathy we feel for Ramona and is the reason for the fact that whereas Madeleine is sharply satirized, Ramona is comically pathetic. What we perceive behind Madeleine's facade is a need to dominate and destroy; what we perceive behind Ramona's mask is the tired, ageing woman who desperately needs a husband and family:

> He had seen her when she was tired, upset and weak, when the shadows came over her eyes, when the fit of her skirt was wrong and she had cold hands, cold lips parted on her teeth, when she was lying on her sofa, a woman of short frame, very full, but after all, a tired, short woman whose breath had the ashen flavour of fatigue. The story then told itself - struggles and disappointments, an elaborate system of theory and eloquence, at the bottom of which lay the simple facts of need - a woman's need.
>
> (p.205)

Here comic pathos shifts into painful pathos. Ramona's sexuality so far has been linked to life, vivacity, colour, warmth, substantiality. Here, all the images are reversed: her eyes, previously 'brilliant', are now 'shadowed', her clothes, which were previously

a part of her, an expression of her sexuality, now sit badly on her; light becomes darkness and warmth becomes cold. The images here of shadows, cold, ashen breath, fatigue, powerfully suggest death, in startling contrast to the vitality we have so far associated with Ramona.

This scene forms a structural parallel with the scene where Madeleine applies her make-up in the bathroom. But the death-mask is an overlay, a facade that Madeleine herself constructs, whereas here the presentiment of death is revealed beneath Ramona's facade. The contrast is significant: the former scene is an image of Madeleine's inhumanity, the latter a touching reminder of Ramona's humanity.

III

Renata in Humboldt's Gift appears to play much the same role as Ramona, and at first sight her governing principle seems identical with Ramona's:

> I knew her theory well. Whatever was said, whatever was done, either increased or dimished erotic satisfaction, and this was her practical test for any idea. Did it produce a bigger bang?
>
> (Humboldt's Gift p.355)

Comparison, however, with a similar statement of Ramona's principle reveals some significant differences:

> She, Ramona, wanted to add riches to his life, and give him what he pursued in the wrong places. This she could do by the art of love. What he had to learn from her was how to renew the spirit through the flesh.
>
> (Herzog p.192)

Renata's theory is much simpler. It is, in fact, scarcely a theory at all, but more of a yardstick or test. Ramona's dogma is, in contrast, an elaborate ideology. She transforms pleasure into idea, whereas Renata turns ideas into pleasure. Further, Renata is not trying to teach, preach or convert, whereas Ramona is attempting to convince Herzog of the validity of her construction of reality.

The language of the two statements reflects these differences. 'A bigger bang' is in a totally different register from 'renew the spirit through the flesh': the one deliberately deflates, the other deliberately inflates.

The difference between Bellow's treatment of Ramona and his treatment of Renata is the difference between high and low burlesque. If, in Ramona's case, 'subject is ludicrously elevated by style of presentation', in Renata's case 'style is lower in dignity than subject'.

Renata is thus a kind of counterpart or complement to Ramona. In both, a norm is overdone, but it is overdone in different directions, and Ramona's pretentiousness is replaced in Renata by crudity of feeling and reaction: she is criticized more for being too inflexibly what she is, than for attempting to be what she is not. Comedy, however, dislikes pretension more than it dislikes crudity and Renata's down-to-earth lack of romanticism brings with it a verve and vitality which is absent from the portrait of Ramona. This comic delight mitigates any criticism to which Renata exposes herself, much as pathos dilutes the harshness of the satire against Ramona.

The foundations for our understanding of Renata's character are laid in Citrine's first description of her:

> Later that same night I boasted, 'I can still beat a junkie in the hundred-yard dash.' And to whom did I brag of this power of my legs? To a young woman named Renata. We were lying in bed. I told her how I took off - I ran like hell, I flew. And she said to me, as if on cue (ah, the courtesy, the gentility of these beautiful girls), 'You're in terrific shape, Charlie. You're not a big fellow, but you're sturdy, solid, and you're elegant also.' She stroked my naked sides. So my pal Humboldt was gone. Probably his very bones had crumbled in potter's field. Perhaps there was nothing in his grave but a few lumps of soot. But Charlie Citrine was still outspeeding passionate criminals in the streets of Chicago, and Charlie Citrine was in terrific shape and lay beside a voluptuous friend. This Citrine could now perform a certain Yoga exercise and had learned to stand on his head to relieve his arthritic neck. About my low cholesterol Renata was well informed. Also I repeated to her the doctor's comments about my amazingly youthful prostate and my supernormal EKG. Strengthened in illusion and idiocy by these proud medical reports, I embraced a busty Renata on this Posturepedic mattress. She gazed at me with love-pious eyes. I inhaled

> her delicious damp, personally participating in the triumph of American civilization (how tinged with the Oriental colours of Empire). But in some phantom Atlantic City boardwalk of the mind I saw a different Citrine, this one on the border of senility, his back hooked, and feeble. Oh very, very feeble, pushed in a wheelchair past the little salt ripples, ripples which, like myself were puny. And who was pushing my chair? Was it Renata - the Renata I had taken in the wars of Happiness by a quick Patton-thrust of armour? No, Renata was a grand girl, but I couldn't see her behind my Wheelchair. Renata? Not Renata. Certainly not.
>
> (p.12)

Although all the references to Renata are subordinated to Citrine's analysis of his own middle-aged vanity and fading virility, each reference is very suggestive and the main features of her character are all there in embryo form. Citrine's self-analysis, moreover, implies a good deal about their relationship, and thus about Renata herself.

We are intensely aware in this passage of Renata's physical presence and this forms a telling contrast to our first impression of Denise, a few pages later, as a disembodied voice. We first see Renata as she is lying in bed. The sensuality of her appearance contrasts with Denise's 'cold' and 'exquisite' beauty of blonde hair and 'amethyst' eyes. There is a lack of subtlety, even a hint of crudity, implied in the words 'voluptuous' and 'busty', and this robust and slightly coarse vitality is in distinct opposition to the cold intellectual refinement we associate with Denise.

In contrast to her vivacity, however, there seems to be a tough, unfeeling side to her character:

> And who was pushing my wheelchair? Was it Renata ... No, Renata was a grand girl, but I couldn't see her behind my wheelchair. Renata? Not Renata. Certainly not!

She is evidently not the self-sacrificing type. It is impossible for Citrine to associate her in his mind with the non-vital, with the infirm or weak. Renata, it appears, consistently refuses to have anything to do with ideas falling outside her scheme of values or running counter to her immediate needs. This self-sufficiency is the source of her vitality - she refuses to compromise herself in any way - but it also somewhat undermines

that vitality and causes us to question its nature.

Citrine's attitude to Renata is similarly complex and ambivalent. The tone he adopts towards her swings between two extremes. He tends to praise her in exuberantly comic hyperbole ('the Renata I had taken in the Wars of Happiness'). Such grandiose and exaggerated descriptions will, however, be followed almost at once by a return to the immediate present, and tangible reality. 'I embraced a busty Renata on this Posturepedic mattress'. This, too, has an element of gusto, but the incongruous and undignified detail of the mattress has a deflating effect. The mockery is self-ridicule on Citrine's part, rather than criticism of Renata, but a very different attitude to Renata can be discerned at the root of Citrine's dissatisfaction with himself. In this passage his thoughts turn mainly on a consciousness of his own ageing, and an attempt despite this to persuade himself that he is still young and fit. He is, however, perfectly conscious of what he is doing, and is able throughout to stand aside and regard himself dispassionately and criticially.

This self-criticism, revealed overtly in the words 'boasted' and 'illusion and idiocy', and more indirectly in his mocking reference to himself as 'this Charlie Citrine' (where he coolly and ironically views himself as a kind of specimen), is made up of two elements: he feels that he is deluding himself (illusion) and that he is making himself ridiculous (idiocy). However, this self-criticism also reflects on his relationship with Renata. It is in the effort to impress her that he places such importance on his physical condition and appearance. There is the suggestion here that her influence is trivializing, causing him to think too exclusively in terms of the physical and outer at the expense of the inner life.

There thus appears to be a fundamental duality in Renata's character and a corresponding ambivalence in Citrine's attitude towards her. The tension between the two aspects of her character is maintained throughout the book, and is in evidence both in her behaviour, and in the comments of other characters. George Swiebel's attitude is essentially celebratory:

> 'She's a good cook. She's lively. She has plants and knick-knacks and the lights are on and the kitchen is steaming

> and goy music plays. Does she flow for you? Does she get wet when you lay a hand on her? Stay away from those dry mental broads. I have to be basic with you otherwise you'll shilly-shally. You'll be trapped again by a woman who says she shares your mental interests or understands your higher aims. That type already has shortened your life. One more will kill you! Anyhow, I know you want to make it with Renata.'
>
> I most certainly did! It's hard for me to stop praising her. In her hat and fur coat she drove the Pontiac, her out-thrust leg in spangled textured panty hose bought in a theatrical-speciality house. Her personal emanations affected even the skins of the animals which composed her coat. They not only covered her body but were still in there trying.
>
> (p.190)

Like Citrine, he links Renata with movement, energy, action, with the physical and the sexual. In four lines he connects her with all five senses, sight ('the lights are on'), hearing ('goy music plays'), touch ('lay a hand on her'), taste and smell (implicit in 'she's a good cook' and 'the kitchen's steaming'). But whereas Citrine merely admires her beauty, George sees it as invested with significance: he regards Renata as some sort of life principle, as standing for life. This he does by comparing her with Denise. This contrast, implicit in the introductory passage, is here brought out into the open. Where Renata is linked with liberating energy, Denise is seen as suffocating and confining ('you'll be trapped'); where Renata is associated with sexuality and fertility, Denise is connected with aridity and frigidity ('dry mental broad'); and where Renata is linked with the material and the concrete ('plants and knick-knacks'), Denise is wholly spiritual ('shares your mental interests', 'understands your higher aims'). Finally, Denise becomes a Death figure ('will kill you', 'shorten your life'). Renata, it is implied, is on the side of life.

Renata thus appears to be the anti-type of the satirized character. According to Scott 'comedy reminds us ... that we are of the earth, earthy' (p.30). The comedian, therefore, 'delights to wallow in the thickness and density of the concrete world ... in all of its smells and sounds and sights and tactilities' (p.27). The function of such earthy images is, according to Bakhtin, 'to apply a bodily and popular corrective to ... narrow-minded seriousness and individual idealistic and spiritual pretence'

(Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and his World, p.22). It is precisely this role that Renata appears to play in relation to Denise. She functions as an eiron figure, an ironic counterpart, making a physical mockery of Denise's 'higher aims' and 'mental interests'.

Such a character is not, Scott suggests, merely reductive, for 'the comic man is unembarrassed by even the grossest expressions of his creatureliness ... he has no sense of being under any cruel condemnation, nor does he have any sense of desperate entrapment within a caged prison. He may say, without ironic bitterness, "I'm only human", in full recognition of the fact that the making of this admission is, in itself, the condition of his life being tolerable' (p.20). Bakhtin substantiates this, finding that 'the bodily element is deeply positive ... Exaggeration has a positive, assertive character. The leading themes of these images of bodily life are fertility, growth and a brimming over abundance' (p.19). Such images thus both deride and mock the world of sterile abstractions and ideals and provide a positive, renewing and regenerating counter-force. This is essentially the function that George assigns to Renata.

But it must be remembered that George is himself seen as a comically exaggerated 'priest of the body' and that he is therefore not a reliable guide to the part ultimately played by Renata in the values of the novel. Citrine, however, also portrays Renata in images of rebirth and revitalizing energy:

> Even to lie unconscious beside her was a distinct event. Energizing influences passed into my hands from her breasts during the night. I allowed myself to imagine that these influences entered my fingerbones like a sort of white electricity and surged upwards to the very roots of my teeth.
>
> (p.319)

Bellow's stylistic treatment of Renata contrasts interestingly with his treatment of Ramona. In the case of Ramona his comic method was to deflate her pretentious and abstract speeches by the inclusion of some incongruously mundane detail. With Renata, although there is a similar combination of the sublime and the ridiculous, the comedy works in precisely the opposite way. Citrine

delights in exaggeration, elevating Renata to the level of myth, turning her into a sexual legend. The exaggeration has a comic joy and relish, but there is also a preposterous, ludicrous element, caused by the intrusion of some rather too concrete physical detail. In each case, the metaphor is extended in a literal way, and an image which begins in the abstract is translated into the actual. Such incongruous detail brings to earth but does not, as in Ramona's case, deflate, for the preposterous is a combination of the ridiculous and the daring, and this inventive, far-fetched quality makes the comedy essentially celebratory.

The preposterous also contains an element of abnormality and this is in evidence in Citrine's description of Renata's fur coat:

> Her personal emanations affected even the skins of the animals which composed her coat. They not only covered her body but were still in there trying.
>
> (p.190)

The metaphor of Renata's regenerating energy is again interpreted in a ludicrously literal way, but the image has a grotesque, hyper-real, slightly obscene quality. The sense of superabundance, of excess of life takes on a tinge of the unnatural. The following image also suggests unnaturalness, though in quite a different way:

> I was your marvellous sex-clown ... cooking dinner in a top hat with my behind bare.
>
> (p.417)

Here Renata has the artificial sexuality of the cabaret artist or the majorette. The two images are both cartoon-like. There is a Mae West quality about Renata: she is a parody on herself, a 'satire on the thing - itself'. Parody is exaggerated gesture and, although we delight in the playfulness of Renata's caricature of her own sexuality, she ultimately also has the hollowness of parody, the gesture without the meaning.

The suggestion that Renata is superficial is developed by Citrine in the following passage:

> Furthermore our relationship made me entertain vain and undignified ideas. An epithalmologist told me in the Downtown

> Club that a simple incision would remove the bags under my eyes. 'It's just a hernia of one of the tiny muscles,' Dr Klosterman said, and described the plastic surgery and how the skin would be sliced and tucked back. He added that I had plenty of backhair left which could be transplanted to the top. Senator Proxmire had it done and for a time wore a turban on the Senate floor. He had claimed a deduction, disallowed by the IRS - but one could try again. I considered these suggestions but realized presently that I must stop this foolishness! I must fix my whole attention on the great and terrible matters that had put me to sleep for decades. Besides, something might be done at the front of a person but what about the rear? Even if the baggy eyes were fixed and the hair was fixed, wasn't there still the back of my neck? I was trying on a fancy check overcoat at Saks not long ago and in the triple mirror I saw how fissured, how deeply hacked I was between the ears.
>
> I bought the coat anyway, Renata urged me to, and I was wearing it today. When I got out at the county building, giant Mrs Sunderland said, 'Golly, what a jazzy coat!'
>
> (p.190 -191)

Citrine becomes affected by the emphasis given in their relationship to the external, material world and begins to entertain 'vain and undignified ideas'. In essence, he begins to believe that the outer transforms the inner. If he has plastic surgery, he actually believes that this will make him younger. However, for Citrine, there always remains a gap between the spiritual and material: he realizes that to place so much importance on the outer or material is to neglect the inner life. The outer remains a facade for Citrine: 'Something might be done at the front of a person, but what about the rear?'

What has gone wrong here is that Citrine has begun to treat his body as a possession (to have plastic surgery is to treat your body as a garment). Comedy, which celebrates the body, does not delight in material possessions. An obsession with the petty, the inert, is very different from a focus on the organic, the fertile, the abundant:

> As bodies and objects begin to acquire a private individual nature, they are rendered petty and homely and become immovable parts of private life, the goal of egotistic lust and possession. This is no longer the positive, regenerating and renewing lower stratum, but a blunt and deathly obstacle to ideal aspirations. Their link with life and the cosmos is broken.
>
> (Bakhtin, p.23)

Citrine has not only effectively turned his body into a possession, but by attempting to halt the process of ageing he is interrupting the natural rhythm of life. However, he realises that life resists all such attempts:

> Even if the baggy eyes were fixed and the hair was fixed, wasn't there still the back of my neck? ... in the triple mirror I saw how fissured, how deeply hacked I was between the ears.

Citrine becomes aware of the discrepancy between his attitude and Renata's with regard to material goods, when he is faced with the mutilation of his Mercedes 280SL:

> I had really bought this Mercedes 280-SL because of my friend Renata. When she saw the Dodge compact I was driving when we met she said, 'What kind of car is this for a famous man? There's some kind of mistake.' I tried to explain to her that I was too susceptible to the influence of things and people to drive an eighteen-thousand-dollar automobile. You had to live up to such a grand machine, and consequently you were not yourself at the wheel. But Renata dismissed this. She said that I didn't know how to spend money, that I neglected myself, and that I shirked the potentialities of my success and was afraid of it. She was an interior decorator by trade, and style or panache came natural to her. Suddenly I got the idea. I went into what I called an Antony and Cleopatra mood. Let Rome in Tiber melt. Let the world know that such a mutual pair could wheel through Chicago in a silver Mercedes, the engines ticking like wizard-made toy millipedes and subtler than a Swiss Accutron - no, an Audemars Piquet with jewelled Peruvian butterfly wings. In other words, I had allowed the car to become an extension of my own self (on the folly and vanity side), so that an attack on it was an attack on myself. It was a moment terribly fertile in reactions.
>
> (pp.38-39)

Their attitudes are neatly polarized: both believe that possessions are more than mere external trappings, but for Renata they are an expression of self, for Citrine an extension. Renata's comment to Citrine: 'There's some kind of mistake', implies that not to have possessions is not to exist, or rather, that not to have the right possessions is not to be what you are to the fullest extent. It is no accident that she is an interior decorator. The interior decorator and the artist are both concerned with

self-expression in totally different ways. Citrine, in contrast, believes that the self exists independently of such external signs, and that to place an undue emphasis on material goods corrupts and warps the essential self. To surround yourself with expensive objects is both egotistic and petty. It is a kind of self-glorification, and yet, since attention is diverted from the human to the non-human, it is equally a diminishing of the self.

This attitude is crystallized in the mock-heroic self-mockery of: 'Let the world know that such a mutual pair could wheel through Chicago in a silver Mercedes'. The tone of this is totally different from Citrine's earlier fantastic hyperboles and far-fetched comparisons. The attack is much sharper, aimed both at Citrine's own pretensions to grandeur and the banality of a world of goods and possessions. The descent, in other words, is a real descent. In the previous comparisons, the images which brought to earth also brought to life; the details which specified and made precise were also riotously inventive - a daring leap of the imagination. The Chicago-Mercedes image is merely a pathetic anticlimax, a descent from splendour to banality.

The description is an interesting exploration of the aesthetics of luxury. Beauty here is something one possesses - a Mercedes or Swiss Accutron. In other words it bears a strong relationship to money. It is also connected with technology rather than art and is measured in terms of accuracy and precision ('the engines ticking like wizard-made toy millipedes and subtler than a Swiss Accutron or an Audemars Piquet with jewelled Peruvian butterfly wings'). The combination of sterile mechanised accuracy with superfluity and extravagance has a sickening, unnatural quality and is in complete contrast to the warm and vibrant images earlier associated with Renata.

It is made clear throughout the book that Renata is pursuing Citrine for his money. For her, marriage is based on a profit motive, and this continual substitution of money for love shows a materialism which excludes emotion:

> 'What arrangements are we going to make?' said Renata.
> 'For you in Italy? Will a thousand dollars hold you for a week?'
> 'The most awful things are said about you back in Chicago Charlie, but when a person gets to know you, you turn out

> to be sweet - as sweet a guy as I ever knew. What do you say we make love.'
>
> (p.349)

If Renata is without the narrow-minded seriousness and abstract idealism that comedy abhors, she is by the same token without 'the romance and the delicacy' in which comedy delights, and she becomes 'a blunt and deathly obstacle to ideal aspiration'.

In Bellow's portrait of Renata 'the evergrowing, inexhaustible, ever-laughing principle which uncrowns and renews is combined with its opposite: the petty inert material principle. This second aspect mingles with the first to form a complex and contradictory combination' (Bakhtin, p.24).

Although contradictory in the sense implied by Bakhtin, Renata's materialism is, as we have suggested before, a function of her intense involvement with reality. Her egotism is the underside of that self-sufficiency which makes her so vital and alive, and the limitation of her vision, a corollary of that spurning of abstract idealism which makes her such a delightful comic character.

We have so far considered Renata at one remove, through others' eyes, and in terms of her relationship with Citrine. In the scene which follows, where Citrine and Renata take the plane from Chicago to New York, she is presented directly and dramatically and we are aware of the contradictory nature of her behaviour:

> When we reached the take-off position and suddenly began to race, tearing from the runway with an adhesive-plaster sound, she said, 'So long, Chicago. Charlie, you wanted to do this town some good. Why that bunch of low bastards, they don't deserve a man like you here. They know fuck-all about quality. A lot of ignorant crooks are in the papers. The good guys are ignored. I only hope when you write your essay on boredom that you'll let this city have it right in the teeth.'
>
> We tilted backward as the 727 climbed and heard the grinding of the retracted landing gear. The dark wool of clouds and mist came between us and the bungalows, industries, the traffic, and the parks. Lake Michigan gave one glint and became invisible. I said to her, 'Renata, it's sweet of you to stand up for me. The truth is that my attitude towards the USA - and Chicago is just the USA - hasn't been one hundred per cent either. I've always hunted for some kind

of cultural protection. When I married Denise I thought I had an ally.'

'Because of her college degrees, I suppose.'

'She turned out to be the head of the Fifth Column... But I'm bound to say that I didn't have to be such a sensitive plant. After all. Chicago is my own turf. I should have been able to take it.'

'She cried in the night about her wasted life and that was what did it. You've got to have your sleep. You could never forgive a woman who kept you awake with her conflicts.'

'I'm thinking about sensitive plants in Business America because we're headed for New York to find out about Humboldt's will.'

'A complete waste of time.'

'And I ask myself, Must Philistinism hurt so much?'

'I talk to you, and you lecture me. All our Milan arrangements had to be changed. And for what! He had nothing to leave you. He died in a flophouse, out of his mind.'

'He was sane again before he died. I know that from Kathleen. Don't be a bad sport.'

'I'm the best sport you'll ever know. You've got me confused with that up-tight bitch who drags you to court.'

'To get back to the subject, Americans had an empty continent to subdue. You couldn't expect them to concentrate on philosophy and art as well. Old Doc Lutz, because I read poetry to his daughter, called me a damn foreigner. To pare corns in a Loop office was an American calling.'

'Please fold my coat and lay it on the rack. I wish the stewardesses would stop gossiping and take our drink orders.'

(pp.301-303)

In this dialogue, the latent opposition between Citrine and Renata emerges into the open. As their conversation develops, his remarks become more and more abstract and hers become more and more factual and concrete. Their lines of thought diverge further and further until communication breaks down altogether.

She begins by reinterpeting what he has said in much simpler, more concrete terms. Citrine speaks of Denise as an 'ally' and as 'cultural protection'. Renata reinterprets this instantly on a lower level - 'because of her college degrees'. Similarly, when Citrine says 'I didn't have to be such a sensitive plant. After all, Chicago is my own turf, I should have been able to take it', he is abstracting at two removes: from particular events to an analysis of his marriage as a whole, and from this to the problems of the sensitive individual in Business Chicago. Renata reverses the whole process, and brings the discussion back to particular events ('she cried in the night about her wasted life, and that was what did it').

Citrine continues to abstract, and The Individual versus Chicago now becomes The Poet versus Business America, or The Conflict between Inner and Outer. (It is ironic that this should be the subject of his reflections.) Here their conversations begin to diverge seriously. The word 'will', for example, has different implications for each of them. To Citrine the word is its most abstract meaning, a wish or desire. He is travelling to New York to fulfil 'Humboldt's last wishes'. For Renata, it takes on concrete and material connotations - the money. Finding out about Humboldt's will is a waste of time: it is unlikely to be productive materially. They are beginning to talk not only in different terms, but about different things, or rather the terms they use are so different that they cannot talk about the same things. Renata points this out when she remarks: 'I talk to you and you lecture me'. She feels that she is talking to him about facts, about reality and that he is talking at her in meaningless abstractions. They are both, however, locked in their own realms of discourse. Communication between them from this point on breaks down completely. Citrine continues to reflect about art in America; Renata meanwhile is concerned with her own physical comfort - with the external, the factual, and the momentary:

> Please fold my coat and lay it on the rack. I wish those stewardesses would stop gossiping and take our drink orders.

Finally communication ceases altogether:

> Renata had nothing to say to this. As a rule her own reflections satisfied her perfectly and she used my conversation as a background to think her own thoughts. As far as I could tell, these thoughts had to do with her desire to become Mrs Charles Citrine, the wife of a Pulitzer chevalier.
>
> (p.305)

She has reduced Citrine to the level of his decorations. He has ceased to be a person: he exists for her in terms of external signs and outer show.

Our reactions to Renata in this dialogue are complex and contradictory. She is, it is true, bringing Citrine down to earth,

back to reality, and there is a certain comic satisfaction to be gained from this. On the other hand, Citrine is indulging not in sterile abstraction but in flights of fancy and imaginative connections, and Renata's vision in contrast appears limited and trivial: her remarks all relate to herself or her own concerns.

This dialogue between Renata and Citrine forms an interesting contrast to Herzog's after-dinner conversation with Ramona. Both men are talking to their mistresses about their ex-wives. Ramona listens attentively, offering questions, exclamations, and encouragement to continue. Renata, as we have seen, fights back. Ramona is feeding Herzog's self-absorption; Renata is absorbed in herself. Finally, where Ramona gains our sympathy through her self effacement, Renata earns our good will with the zest and punchiness of her comments.

We can see this more clearly if we examine her language, which reflects exactly the mixture of tough materialism and earthy vitalism present in her character. Her speech is very simple in comparison to Citrine's. She uses concrete nouns ('flophouse', 'bitch', 'court', 'coat rack', 'drinks', 'stewardesses') where Citrine uses abstract nouns ('Philistinism', 'protection', 'philosophy', 'art', 'calling'). She uses verbs expressing movement ('change', 'leave', 'fold', 'lay', 'take') whereas many of Citrine's verbs are to do with cerebral activity ('think', 'expect', 'say'). There is a dearth of qualifiers and adjectives. While basic and simple, her language is, however, not bare and colourless. It gains its vitality from a high proportion of slang and expletives. She uses a particularly tough and reductive brand of slang characterized by the force of its expression ('fuck-all', 'right in the teeth') and its insulting and denigrating purpose ('low bastard', 'ignorant crooks', 'uptight bitch'). Bakhtin finds that: 'it is characteristic for the familiar speech of the market place to use abusive language...while humiliating and mortifying it at the same time revived and renewed' (p.16).

However, while Renata's abuse is punchy and zestful, it acts ultimately as a check or stop rather than as an opener of fresh perspectives. For in the last analysis Renata's matter-of-fact realism entails a lack of imagination, which means she is locked within herself. She has a narrowness of vision incompatible

with the comic imagination. To find a character Bellow wholly delights in, who succeeds in fusing the inner and the outer, who represents an open, imaginative encounter with the world, we must turn to 'The Slut'.

Chapter III

THE SLUT

> She couldn't wash a tomato without getting her sleeves wet...
> (Mr Sammler's Planet p.16)

> The miraculous survival of goodness was the theme of her life. Dangerous navigation, monsters attracted by her boundless female magnetism - spells, charms, prayers, divine protection secured by inner strength and purity of heart - this was how she saw things. Hell breathed from doorways over her feet as she passed - but she did pass safely.
> (Humboldt's Gift p.163)

I

Bellow's Sluts - Thea in The Adventures of Augie March, Lily in Henderson The Rain King, and Demmie in Humboldt's Gift - all share a common quality: a tendency to disorder. They live in a state of great confusion, in untidy and sometimes squalid surroundings, amid a great turmoil of ideas and emotions. In each case it is precisely this element which at once defines the character, and gives rise to the comedy. The comedy occasioned by disorder will be of a radically different nature from that produced by a fixed or rigid attitude to life. Rigidity, as we have seen, offers opportunities for satire. Disorder, on the other hand, may give rise to comic delight. According to Scott, comedy celebrates

> that zest and spontaneity and independence in the human creature that would make him an intractable nuisance for every order that would define itself in such terms ... as to prevent its making any room for a man to move about in and stretch himself.
> (p.31)

Scott deliberately identifies delight with disorder, seeing order as inimical to comedy. He connects the two in the suggestion that disorder is the natural condition of life, arising out of an innate tendency in the human creature, whereas 'order' is artificially imposed and constitutes a limitation of possibility. Delight in life, Susanne Langer claims, is 'the underlying feeling of comedy':

> Real comedy sets up in the audience a sense of general exhilaration because it presents the very image of livingness.
>
> (p.348)

This identification of disorder and delight, however, needs some qualification, for the two do not necessarily go together. Some types of disorder are hateful, or inspire feelings of despair and hollowness, rather than delight. The disorderly character who finds life merely irrational, for example, will be at best farcical, at worst grotesque, and both farce and the grotesque are, to different degrees, rather disturbing visions of life. The disorderly character in comedy, that is to say, is never merely chaotic: his vision of life is not meaningless.

The difference between the absurd and the comic character can perhaps best be highlighted through a consideration of the relationship between the comic character and his environment. Scott sees the disorder which operates in the comic character matched by a corresponding disorder in our environment. The comic hero consents to:

> take life on the terms of its own created actuality and the art of comedy is devoted to an exhibiton of his deep involvement in the world; so it shirks nothing, none of the irrelevant absurdities, none of the vexatious inconveniences that are the lot of such finite creatures as ourselves.
>
> (p.20)

Langer concurs with this finding that 'the world, that presents all obstacles also supplies the zest of life' (p.349). It is this double vision that defines the comic view. The character who attempts to ignore life's 'vexatious inconveniences' and to live according to a pattern or ideal, is mocked by comedy, while the character who sees life <u>only</u> as a collection of 'irrelevant absurdities' goes beyond comedy in a different direction: towards the absurd or grotesque. The comic character, however, finds delight <u>within</u> life, in the very contradictions and complications that cause him such difficulty, for in contradiction there is possibility and in complication there is variety.

The comic vision is optimistic, but it is not facile. It does not believe 'all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds'. Comedy must earn its optimism. The comic imagination, Scott

tells us, 'requires a certain courage': it entails 'facing the fact that we are finite and conditioned and therefore subject to all sorts of absurdities and interruptions and inconveniences and embarrassments - and weaknesses' (p.21). The comic character is not defeated or made despairing by knowledge of his limitations and imperfections or by knowledge that the world is 'fraught with disasters' (Langer, p.329). Instead he maintains a kind of joyous innocence in the face of all opposition, believing ultimately that life is good. Such a belief is not the lesson of experience, nor does it rest on logical proof: it is a kind of intuition or trust. Comedy, Christopher Fry suggests, is 'an escape ... from despair, a narrow escape into faith ...' it believes in a universal cause for delight, even though knowledge of the cause is always twitched away from under us, which leaves us to rest on our own buoyancy' (Christopher Fry, 'Comedy', p.77). This faith is not 'a vulnerable optimism, but a hard-won maturity of delight ... an active patience declaring the solvency of good' (p.78). It is this faith to which Viola abandons herself in Twelfth Night:

> O Time, thou must untangle this, not I
> It is too hard a knot for me t'untie
>
> (Act II, scene ii)

and it is this faith which is realized in the traditional 'happy end' of comedy. However, as Northrop Frye remarks, such an ending is neither the logical nor inevitable conclusion of comedy, it comes only after a series of disillusionments and disappointments, and when it comes it is by an entirely unexpected twist of plot. It always has something of the miraculous:

> The watcher of death and tragedy, has nothing to do but sit and wait for the inevitable end, but something gets born at the end of comedy ...
>
> (p.170)

The comic character is the embodiment of this faith. He abandons himself to the 'motion and rhythm of living in the world' (Langer p.344): he is deeply and passionately involved in concrete reality and the present moment. Because of this, he

is disorganized, chaotic, blundering, but he also discovers a zest and a joy in living, conspicuously absent from the satirized character. Above all, he is spontaneous, entirely free of the vices of self-dramatization or pretentiousness which comedy so detests.

Bellow's concept of the celebrated character gains in depth and maturity as we pass from Thea to Demmie. All three share the qualities outlined above as central to the comic character - disorganization, spontaneity and vitality - but Thea's untidiness is a function of her idealistic nature, Lily's illogicality stems from her naivety, and in Demmie disorder is equated with innocence.

II

Thea, in The Adventures of Augie March, is the first character through whom Bellow explores the idea of disorder and its connection with comedy. She is, in fact, the first fully realised female character Bellow has created; her predecessors, Mary in The Victim and Iva and Kitty in Dangling Man, are passive or even absent from much of the narrative, scarcely characterized at all.

Thea is interesting because in many ways she is a prototype for Bellow's later female characters, uniting tendencies which become the ruling principles of two distinct types of character, those satirized and those celebrated by comedy. Together these two tendencies could be defined as a striving towards an idealized reality, and an inability to arrange the reality which already exists.

In the following passage, which acts as our introduction to Thea, it is the second tendency which predominates. She seems to prefigure the 'Slut' of Bellow's later novels:

> I said I had no money, and she answered seriously, 'Take what you need from the refrigerator.' She was in the habit of leaving the dough she got in change from the delivery men and also cheques and so forth in the refrigerator. The money was mixed up with rotting salad leaves and lying with saucers of bacon grease, which she didn't like to throw away. Anyway, the fives and tenners were there, and I was to pick up what I needed on the way out, as a man takes a handkerchief from his drawer on slight thought.
>
> Thea outfitted me before the trip. In which connexion,

for some reason, I get the picture something like the Duke of Wellington stepping out in the dress of the Salisbury Hunt, blue coat, black cap, and buckskins. Maybe this is because Thea had such very exact ideas as to what I should put on. We went from shop to shop in the station wagon to try clothes. When she thought a thing was right she kissed me and cried, 'Oh, baby, you make me happy!' unmindful of all the stiffness in the salespeople and the other customers. When I picked something she didn't like she'd give a laughing start and say, 'Oh, you fool! Take it off. That's like what the old lady in Evanston thought was so smart.' The clothes Simon had given me she disliked too. She wanted me to look like a sportsman, and she got me a heavy leather jacket at Von Lengerke and Antoine's that required you to want to kill game or you couldn't wear it. It was a knockout, with a dozen different kinds of pockets and slits for cartridges and handline, knife, waterproof matches, compass. You could be thrown in the middle of Lake Huron in it and hope to live. Then for boots we crossed Wabash Avenue to Carson's, where I hadn't gone since Jimmy Klein trapped me that bad moment in the revolving doors.

In these joints it was she who did the talking. Mostly silent, feeling full of blood, I came up smiling to try on the things and walk inside the triple mirror to let her turn me by the shoulder and see. I was glad over her least peculiarity - that she spoke high, that she didn't care that her slip showed a loop from her brilliant green dress, or that there were hairs on her neck that had escaped the gathering of the comb, hairs of Japanese blackness. Her dresses were expensive, but as I had noticed her hat trembling when she had come up to my room, there never lacked one piece of disorder caused by excitement, and where arrangement failed.

She was cuckoo about dime stores, where she bought cosmetics and pins and combs. After we locked the expensive purchases in the station wagon we went into McCory's or Kresge's and were there by the hour, up and down the aisles with the multitude, mostly of women, and in the loud-played love music. Some things Thea liked to buy cheaply; they maybe gave her the best sense of the innermost relations of pennies and nickels and expressed the real depth of money. I don't know. But I didn't think myself too good to be wandering in the dime store with her. I went where and as she said and did whatever she wanted because I was threaded to her as if through the skin. So that any trifling object she took pleasure in could become important to me at once; anything at all, a comb or hairpin or piece of line, a compass inside a tin ring that she bought with great satisfaction, or a green-billed baseball cap for the road, or the kitten she kept in the apartment - she would never be anywhere without an animal. This little striped and spike-tailed tom, like a cat of the sea in the wide darkness of the floors of those rooms of the suite that Thea never used. She rented a big place and then settled in a space-economizing style, gathering and piling things around her. There were plenty of closets

> and dressers but she was still living out of the suitcases, boxes, cases, and you had to approach the bed at the centre of this confusion through spaces between. She used sheets as towels and towels as shoe rags or mats or to wipe the kitten's messes, for it wasn't housebroken.
>
> (Saul Bellow, The Adventures of Augie March pp.368-9)

What this initial presentation of Thea most strikingly communicates is her confused and disorganised nature. Two features characterize her chaotic behaviour. In every case, the disorder is based on some kind of inappropriacy. Thea surrounds herself with furniture, but lives out of a suitcase. Her untidiness contrasts incongruously with her carefully chosen and expensive clothes, and she consistently uses objects for inappropriate purposes: towels become shoe-rags, the fridge becomes a safe, sheets become towels. Secondly, her confusion is evoked in terms of profusion and abundance. Thea is surrounded by a wealth of material objects, all apparently unrelated to one another.

Bellow's style in this passage reflects and highlights both these features. He delights in compiling lists where unconnected or incongruous objects are placed in close proximity: 'a comb, or hairpin, or piece of line, a compass inside a tin ring that she bought with great satisfaction, or a green-billed baseball cap for the road or the kitten she kept in the apartment ...'. His sentence structure is also designed to reflect internal contradiction. His sentences often fall into two halves, with the second half representing an unexpected development or abrupt change of perspective. 'I said I had no money, and she answered "Take what you need from the refrigerator" ...'. 'She rented a big place, and then settled in space-economizing style ...'

Bellow's style creates a tremendous sense of Thea's energy and vitality. This energy is in part the energy of release. Thea's contradictory behaviour seems to burst apart the constraints of order and predictability. Similarly, Bellow's style demands a mental energy of the reader to connect the disparate halves of his sentences and assimilate the unexpected. The cataloguing and listing of objects imparts a sense of enjoyment to the description, and places Thea firmly in tangible reality. Bellow himself is dwelling on and revelling in the things of this world as Thea

takes pleasure in a compass, a comb or a kitten.

Thea's appearance intensifies this sense of vitality and excitement. She is spoken of in terms of vivid colours: her hair is 'of a Japanese blackness' and her dress is 'brilliant green'. Bellow specifically links this vital energy to disorder: 'there never lacked one piece of disorder caused by excitement, and where arrangement failed.'

Another element we may note in this description is Thea's total lack of affectation:

> When she thought a thing was right, she kissed me, and cried 'Oh, baby, you make me happy'. Unmindful of the stiffness in the sales people and other customers ...
>
> I was glad over her least peculiarity - that she spoke high, that she didn't care that her slip showed a loop from her brilliant green dress.

Bellow seems to connect this lack of self-awareness with disorder ('she didn't care that her slip showed a loop from her brilliant green dress') and to contrast it directly with 'stiffness': an inflexible adherence to order or convention. The unselfconscious character is spontaneous, and spontaneity is consonant with a lack of order, in that the spontaneous reaction is instinctual, it arises out of circumstances and is governed by chance.

The complex of elements - disorder, zest, and spontaneity - that we have isolated in the foregoing discussion are precisely those that define the celebrated character in Bellow's fiction. This combination of qualities is a particularly delightful one. Scott suggests that the hallmark of the celebrated character is his

> great capacity for living intensely in the present moment ... This may be why he is so impatient with the restraints of ... codes and laws, for, however relevant they may be to the general circumstances of life, he finds them to be always ineffective and irrelevant to the immediate occasion in all of its uniqueness and contingency .... It is this passionate commitment to the present moment and to the concrete reality ... that makes (the comic character) so wonderfully and richly human.
>
> (pp.30-31)

There is, however, a certain ambiguity to be found in Bellow's first description of Thea. Each of the qualities responsible for her appeal has a less attractive underside and our reaction to her is complex. We feel a mixture of attraction and uneasiness.

Thea's disorder is presented largely in terms of images of junk (cosmetics, pins, combs, the merchandise of dime stores), dirt ('she used ... towels as shoe rags or mats or to wipe the kitten's messes') and decay (rotting salad leaves and saucers of rancid bacon grease). The overriding impression is as much one of meaningless chaos as a fertile or creative muddle. Her lack of self-consciousness, moreover, verges on freakiness. Her behaviour in the shops is oddly abrupt. Augie draws our attention to this in the words evoking her directness: 'I was glad over her least peculiarity'. There is a similarly intense and frenetic quality about Thea's energy, a tendency to over-react, and an anxious quality about her amassing of possessions.

In each case, there is a dangerous extremism in her actions. What is missing from the description is a sense of joy. There is a kind of frantic emptiness about Thea, a hollowness in the pleasure she takes in the stream of useless objects which appear briefly and then are swallowed up in the 'wide darkness' of her apartment.

Our ambivalent attitude to Thea is caused partly by the discrepancy between style and content in the description. Our delight in Bellow's vital, energizing, and exultant style is tempered by misgivings about the actual nature of the qualities he describes.

Bellow is, of course, dramatizing Augie's passionate involvement with Thea, and his style is a reflection of this. At several points in the description it is implied that Augie's vision of Thea is idealized and therefore not reliable: '... I went where and as she said and did whatever she wanted because I was threaded to her as if through the skin').

However, Thea is in herself both seductive and dangerous, as Augie implies in the following comment:

> Here Thea appeared with her money, her decided mind set on love and great circumstances, her car, her guns and boots Leicas, her talk about Mexico, her ideas. One of the chiefest

> of these ideas being that there must be something better than what people call reality. Oh, well and good! Very good and bravo! Let's have this better, nobler reality! Still, when such an assertion as this is backed by one person and maintained for a long time, obstinacy finally gets the upper hand. The beauty of it is harmed by what it suffers on the way to proof. I know that.
>
> (p.370)

A totally different principle seems to be at work in this delineation of Thea. Whereas the stress has been on variety, on unrelated profusion, now unconnected objects and ideas ('love and great circumstances, guns, Leicas, boots, Mexico, ideas') all become part of the same thing: her conviction that there is a better and nobler reality. They are all a means to an end. 'Love', for Thea, according to Augie, 'sets you free for action'. It is thus, like guns, Leicas, and boots, subordinate to, or part of, the paraphernalia of her search for a 'higher reality' which leads her to try to reject civilisation and return to nature in Mexico.

Augie finds nothing fundamentally wrong with this aspiration, but he distinguishes the ideal from the attempt to live by it. A single-minded devotion to an ideal entails the refusal to admit contradiction and therefore a narrow and limiting view of life. Life is not lived to the full, it becomes merely the pathway to the ideal, and the driving force and assertion necessary to pursue the ideal detract from its beauty and finally eclipse it. One's day-to-day behaviour, is after all, reality; an ideal is by definition only visionary.

While Bellow recognizes the beauty and nobility of Thea's aspirations, he is equally alive to a destructive quality in an assertion of the will. The project with which Thea identifies herself - the 'ancient art of falconry' - combines these two elements, nobility and destructiveness. It also has a hint of freakiness - a quality earlier associated with Thea. The qualities Augie notes in the eagle's flight, symbolic of aspiration, but also of will, reflect on Thea's pursuit of her ideal:

> It was glorious how he would mount away high and sit up there really as if over fires of atmosphere as if he was governing from up there ... he had a nature that felt the triumph of beating his way up to the highest air ... And

doing it by will.

(p.394)

In fact, in Thea's case the search for a nobler reality debases. This is evident in the change of narrative plane that comes with the move to Mexico: Thea ceases to be a properly realized character and becomes a symbol. This section of the book has been criticized for its unreality, for its move from dense, crowded realism to abstraction and image. But with this shift Bellow effectively makes the point that Thea's search for a higher reality removes her from life altogether. She is no longer characterized by her own attributes, but in terms of her ideal: in terms of the Mexican scenery, of the image of falconry, of the creatures she collects. In some ways Thea <u>is</u> Mexico:

> The more south we were, the more deep a sky it seemed, till, in the valley of Mexico, I thought it held back an element too strong for life, and that the flamy brilliance of the blue stood off this menace and sometimes, like a sheath or silk membrane, showed the weight it held in sags.
>
> (p.394-5)

Thea also seems to hold an element too strong for life. The 'flamy brilliance' recalls the vividness and colour we noted in the earlier description, but with a dangerous growth in intensity. The single-minded dedication to an ideal involves energy, but it is a concentrated energy, an assertion of the will.

There is an interesting suggestion here that this intensity deepens as their journey progresses, with a corresponding increase in unreality. As they continue into Mexico, the scenery becomes more barren and infertile and there are frequent images of death:

> There are corpses of dogs, rats, horses asses by the road. The bones dug up out of the rented graves are thrown into a pile when the lease is up ... the burden carriers with the long lines lie in the garbage at siesta.
>
> (p.395)

Thea's devotion to her cause is similarly sterile and life-denying. By the end of the Mexican episode, she has also become

totally eccentric. On Augie's last meeting with her, she is completely absorbed in her collection of monstrous reptiles, and has become a kind of travelling freak-show. Her project has lost its former beauty and nobility.

This intense and inflexible idealism bears a close resemblance to the 'predilection of the self to identify itself too completely with some special interest or project' ('The Bias of Comedy', p. 30) or, in other words, to all that comedy mocks in the satirized character. This certainly seems to contradict the chaotic energy and spontaneity in evidence in the earlier description. It may be that Augie's knowledge of Thea develops and deepens as he comes to know her better and his early infatuation is replaced by a growing alienation. The seeds of her later self are, however, present from the beginning, and her disorganization is a function of her idealism.

Thea's particular brand of confusion consists in using things for a purpose for which they were not designed and thus devaluing or debasing the object. There is an overall sense of extravagance and waste. This disorder derives directly from 'excitement', her pursuit of her idea leads her to neglect ordinary reality. Her disorder is thus a symptom of her divorce from the real world, not of her deep involvement in it.

In Thea, Bellow explores comedy's attitude to the idealist. This attitude is essentially ambivalent. Idealism entails a dangerous concentration of energy and a tendency to freakishness, and these constitute a limitation of humanity. However, the idealist is fundamentally innocent. Idealism is a form of naivety and Thea is entirely devoid of the vice which comedy dislikes above all others - self-dramatization. Thea's idealism differs from Madeleine's or Denise's attempts to present themselves as better than they are, in that idealism involves imagination, and thus the capacity to go beyond the self. What is wrong with Thea is that she tries to make imagination literal fact. Imagination, in her, has hardened into obsession, and this is what limits her humanity. However, precisely <u>because</u> she is reaching after something beyond herself, she is utterly unselfconscious: she literally doesn't care about how her actions appear in others' eyes. She has a kind of awkward

innocence which is ultimately endearing, despite its tendency to eccentricity; and this clumsy directness, together with her dangerous vitality are the twin sources of the rather uneasy attraction we, and Augie, feel towards her.

Augie's commitment to Thea represents an experiment with idealism as a way of life. The Mexican episode, coming at the centre of the novel, has a visionary, dream-like quality, and Augie's affair with Thea comes directly after his entanglement with Simon and the Magnus family and his total immersion in the accumulation of possessions. Augie rejects this base materialism (the sense that man is no more than the sum total of his possessions) and the move to the abstract purity of Mexico comes as a relief. However, Augie finds Thea's idealism no more satisfying than the acquisition and greed of the Magnuses. Interestingly, he does not reject Thea, she eludes him. He finds himself incapable of living up to her high standards and gradually declines through a softening of the will into a life of drunken dissolution.

If Augie's affair with Thea teaches him something about the impossibility of living for an ideal, it also teaches him the necessity of living within the present moment.

> I had wanted to marry her, but there isn't any possession. No, no, wives don't own husbands nor husbands wives, nor parents children. They go away or they die. So the only possessing is of the moment.
>
> (p.471)

Through Thea, Augie apprehends one of the central intuitions of comedy, and his visits on his return from Mexico to Mama and Georgie, strangely still and unchanged in their respective institutions, are the beginning of his realization that 'when the striving stops life is there as a gift' (p.592).

III

The idealistic quality associated with Thea makes its re-appearance in Bellow's portrayal of Lily and again, much modified, in Demmie: all three characters are associated in different ways with good, and, unlike many of the women in Bellow's fiction,

with love. Lily, in Henderson The Rain King, is, like Thea, disorderly, unconventional, and something of an idealist. Both the nature of these qualities and the tone of Bellow's presentation have, however, undergone considerable modification. Her energies are less directed, more diffuse, and Bellow's attitude towards her is correspondingly softened.

Significantly, the first time we meet Lily she is out of control:

> It was a sparkling night and the snow was ringing. She was parked on a hill about three hundred yards long and smooth as iron. As soon as she drove away from the curb the car went into a skid and she lost her head and screamed, 'Eugene!' She threw her arms about me. There was no other soul on that hill or on the shovelled walks, nor, so far as I could see, in the entire neighbourhood. The car turned completely around. Her bare arms came out of the short fur sleeves and held my head while her large eyes watched through the windshield and the car went over the ice and hoarfrost. It was not even in gear and I reached the key and switched off the ignition. We slid into a snowdrift, but not far, and I took the wheel from her. The moonlight was very keen.
>
> 'How did you know my name?' I said, and she said, 'Why, everybody knows you are Eugene Henderson.'
>
> After we had spoken some more she said to me, 'You ought to divorce your wife.'(
>
> I said to her, 'What are you talking about? Is that a thing to say? Besides, I'm old enough to be your father.'
>
> (Saul Bellow, Henderson The Rain King, p.13)

Her loss of control over the car is symptomatic of her general lack of restraint, and is reflected in her immediate loss of self-control: ('she lost her head and screamed, "Eugene". She threw her arms about me'). This is an interesting reaction. Any loss of self-control implies the discarding of social conventions and reversion to instinct, but Lily's action seems particularly surprising and unpredictable: she does not merely scream in panic, but embraces and addresses by his Christian name a man whom she has only known for ten minutes. Her action seems oddly disconnected from its context.

Bellow's style mirrors both the uncontrolled and the disconnected aspects of Lily's actions. With the phrase 'her bare arms came out of the short fur sleeves and her large eyes watched

through the windscreen' he suggests that Lily is not the author of her own actions, or at least is not consciously directing them. His sentences, like Lily's remarks, are abrupt and disconnected; there is a deadpan quality about the style, a lack of explanation.

Admittedly, Lily is at first reacting to her loss of control of the car, but her later behaviour also exemplifies this blend of unconventionality and illogicality. Both are equally in evidence in her remark to Henderson: 'You ought to divorce your wife', a comment remarkable both for its stunning directness and its total irrelevance to anything that has gone before. She presents this uncalled-for remark, however, as if it were a self-evident fact: her use of 'ought' implies that her suggestion is an eminently reasonable one. Similarly, when Henderson questions her behaviour, implying with 'How did you know my name?' that her actions have exceeded the bounds of social convention, she replies as if she were toally unaware that her actions were in any way unusual. Her tone of surprise ('Why ...') and her reference to social custom ('Everyone knows ...') indicate that to her, her actions are both rational and acceptable.

Both in the above remark and in her use of 'you ought' in her advice on divorce, she is trying to cover with a mask of detachment and objectivity actions which are ultimately only explicable in terms of her own project. Her advice to Henderson, while masquerading as disinterested concern for his welfare, is really serving her own self-interest: she wants him to divorce his wife in order to marry her. The intention to conform is there, although the result scarcely matches up to the intention. This at once differentiates her from Thea, whose awkward abruptness flouts conformity and ignores convention altogether. Lily's unconventional behaviour is due partly to the inability to control herself, partly to sheer miscalculation, as the episode of her reunion with Henderson reveals:

> 'Well!' I said. I hadn't seen her in more than a year, not since I put her on that train for Paris, but we were immediately on the old terms of familiarity just as before. Her large, pure face was the same as ever. It would never be steady, but it was beautiful. Only she had dyed her hair.

> It was now orange, which was not necessary, and it was parted from the middle of her forehead like the two panels of a curtain. It's the curse of these big beauties sometimes that they are short on taste. Also she had done something with mascara to her eyes so that they were no longer of equal length. What are you supposed to do if such a person is 'the same as ever'? And what are you supposed to think when this tall woman, nearly six feet, in a kind of green plush suit like the stuff they used to have in Pullman cars and high heels, sways; sturdy as her legs are, great as her knees are, she sways; and in one look she throws away all the principles of behaviour observed on 57th Street - as if throwing off the plush suit and hat and blouse and stockings and girdle to the winds and crying, 'Gene! My life is misery without you.'?
>
> (p.28)

Lily's weird and eccentric appearance stems not from a rebellion against fashion but from an attempt to follow it. This is partly because her physical appearance in itself lets her down. There is in Lily that tension between body and spirit that Bergson refers to when he writes:

> Matter is obstinate and resists ... where matter succeeds in dulling the outward life of the soul: in petrifying its movements and thwarting its gracefulness, it achieves, at the expense of a body, an effect which is comic.
>
> (pp.78-9)

There is a similar comic tension between Lily's ideal of her appearance and its actual translation into flesh. However, Bergson suggests that our laughter is directed at the body, that 'irksome ballast which holds down to earth a soul eager to rise aloft ... perpetually obstructing everything with its machinelike obstinacy' (pp.92-3). Bellow's attitude goes beyond this and our laughter is not a mockery of the discrepancy between body and soul, matter and ideal, but a delight in the fact that they co-exist:

> this tall woman, nearly six feet sways ... sturdy as her legs are, great as her knees are, she sways.

An idea central to comedy is that even mountains of flesh, and 'swoll'n parcels of dropsies' have the capacity for delicacy of

feeling and expression. Comedy celebrates the need to dream in the humblest and grossest of its creation: even Bottom has his vision.

However, if Lily's physique in itself lets her down, she also badly miscalculates her own effects. While trying to create a fashionable image for herself she simultaneously demonstrates her total incapacity to bring off the calculation. Her attempts to improve her appearance have only a ludicrous effect, and she finally discards even these concessions to conformity, 'as if throwing off the plush suit and hat and blouse and stockings and girdle to the winds'.

If such inadvertent self-betrayal differs from Thea's stubborn honesty, it also differs from the facade of the satirized character. The satirized character also calculates her effects, and also betrays herself inadvertently, but the humour of Lily's self-betrayal is of a totally different kind. The difference is that Lily is incapable of duplicity, and her efforts at calculation only make this more obvious, as her first attempt at seducing Henderson reveals:

> 'My mother is playing bridge,' said Lily 'I have to phone her and tell her not to come home. There is a phone in my bedroom'. So we went up.
>
> (p.14)

This is an inversion of a normal or logical sequence of thought (a more rational order would be: 'we are going to bed, so I must phone my mother to tell her not to come home'). However, once again, Lily is unaware of any deviation from rationality and presents her curiously inverted logic as a sequence, as if one thought led on to the next. More importantly, however, she has misunderstood and completely ruined the sophisticated stratagem she is attempting to employ for luring Henderson to her bedroom, by giving herself away in the middle - rather like putting the punch-line before the joke.

This is what makes Lily so delightful: her motives are always transparent. Her duplicity is like that of a child who, attempting deception, merely gives herself away. Lily's vision of the world

is altogether like a child's. Her interest reaches out in all directions, but everything is ultimately interpreted in terms of self, as her part in the following discussion demonstrates:

> From start to finish Lily had just this one topic, moralizing; one can't live for this but has to live for that; not evil but good; not death but life; not illusion but reality. Lily does not speak clearly; I guess she was taught in boarding school that a lady speaks softly, and consequently she mumbles, and I am hard of hearing on the right side, and the wind and the tyres and the little engine also joined their noise. All the same, from the joyous excitement of her great pure white face I knew she was still at it. With lighted face and joyous eyes she persecuted me. I learned she had many negligent and even dirty habits. She forgot to wash her underthings until, drunk as I was, I ordered her to. This may have been because she was such a moralist and thinker, for when I said, 'Wash out your things,' she began to argue with me. 'The pigs on my farm are cleaner than you are,' I told her; and this led to a debate. The earth itself is like that, corrupt. Yes, but it transforms itself. 'A single individual can't do the nitrogen cycle all by herself,' I said to her; and she said, Yes, but did I know what love could do? I yelled at her, 'Shut up.' It didn't make her angry. She was sorry for me.
>
> (pp.19-20)

An argument or 'debate' implies a cogent and lucid sequence of thought, and Lily's part in the 'debate' in fact preserves the form of logical argument or reasoned objection (Yes, but ...) but her sentences are totally disconnected; they do not follow on from each other, nor are they a rational response to what Henderson says. The only unity they possess is in terms again of Lily's own project ('Yes, but did I know what love could do?'). Henderson eventually becomes exasperated with her and 'yells at her to shut up' much as one becomes exasperated with a child's insistence, while we, more detached from the incident than Henderson, view her with a kind of amused tolerance.

We note the difference here between Lily's imagination and Thea's: Thea's imagination is self-transcendent, it makes her self-forgetful: Lily's always returns to the point of departure. Further, Thea's imagination is firmly fixed on an ultimate goal, Lily's takes the form of wild generalizations: 'one can't live for this, but has to live for that ...'. Lily's 'moralizing' is

also connected with joy, an element we noted as absent from Bellow's portrait of Thea.

Generalization is, in one sense, an exploration of reality. It is, in another, a flight away from it, into abstraction. It is also, no matter how wild or wide-ranging, a form of categorization. Henderson attacks Lily's love of theorizing in two ways. In every case he tries to interpret her crazy abstractions precisely, literally, and in concrete terms ('a single individual can't do the nitrogen cycle all by herself'). He also draws attention to her own failure to live up to her elevated moral principles by reminding her of her own personal uncleanliness and small moral lapses (she is a compulsive liar and blackmailer). As in Thea's case, Lily's inability to organize herself on the simplest practical level is a function of her being 'such a moralist and thinker', and, as in Thea's case, we delight in a reality that is more complex than her classification of it would suggest. In Lily's case, however, she is her own complex reality: she herself is more complicated, contradictory, and unpredictable than she realises. She is, in a sense, her own worst enemy, and this endears her to us.

Her love of theorizing and her adherence to convention share a common quality: Lily follows <u>forms</u> of behaviour without understanding meaning. She is simple-minded: she grasps at ideas without ever really getting the point, and this is the source of our dual response to her. Simple-mindedness is a form of foolishness: a limited vision of reality, and we find it constricting or restraining, sometimes a little exasperating. However we respond with delight to her fresh enthusiasm for new ideas even if these are imperfectly understood, for simple-mindedness is also a form of innocence or naivety.

Lily's function in <u>Henderson The Rain King</u> is somewhat unclear. Henderson classes her together with all the other symbols of his cluttered and chaotic existence:

> What made me take this trip to Africa? ... A disorderly rush begins - my parents, my wives, my girls, my children, my farm, my animals, my habits, my money, my music lessons, my drunkenness, my prejudices, my brutality, my teeth, my soul.
>
> (p.7)

However, though Lily certainly does annoy Henderson, and does drive him to Africa, he returns to her at the end of the trip, whereas he abandons or attempts to shake off the influence of most of the other constituents of the disorderly rush. Lily annoys Henderson, I believe, in a different way from the other symbols of chaos in his life, she represents a different kind of disorder. What annoys him most about her is her 'damned exalted glory': the sight of her 'great pure joyous face' is enough to drive him into a rage. Lily, in other words, finds a joy and meaning in the clutter and junk of everyday life which to Henderson is meaningless and filled with terror, and it is, I think, because she is such a positive reminder of what he lacks that she annoys him so much. It is a vision of chaos - the sight of Miss Lenox's room - that drives Henderson to Africa:

> The last little room of dirt is waiting. Death will annihilate you and nothing will remain and there will be nothing left but junk.
>
> (p.40)

It is noteworthy that he does not think of Lily, does not write to her during the trip, until he can write:

> I had a voice that said I want! I want? It should have told me she wants, he wants they want. And moreover, its love that makes reality, reality. The opposite makes the opposite.
>
> (p.267)

Lily functions as a kind of ideal in that Henderson's quest in Africa is a search for the kind of joy that she possesses naturally. However she is not an idealized character, being full of foibles and failings, and Henderson, after all, runs away from her in search of a more meaningful reality rather than pursues her as goddess or vision.

IV

In the Demmie of Humboldt's Gift, however, Bellow's concept of the celebrated character has deepened and matured. She represents a clearer and more positive 'ideal' than Thea or Lily. That Demmie

is a comic character of a rather different kind from her predecessors is revealed in the way she is presented. Generally, Bellow's technique in the presentation of his comic female characters is to use a series of 'vignettes'. The first in this series usually introduces us to one aspect of the character - the aspect she wishes to present to society at large. Subsequent 'vignettes', however, make us aware of very different aspects of personality which undermine and contradict the image she presents to the world. We have the sense, therefore, of a complex living character who shifts and alters subtly each time we encounter her. The technique is also, obviously, designed for satire. We gradually become conscious that there is more to the character than meets the eye, and our delight increases with each successive discovery we make about her true nature. In the case of Demmie, however, Bellow's very first description of her introduces us to every aspect of her character. Later descriptions substantiate rather than challenge this first impression. This is convincing on the level of narrative realism - Demmie is dead, and therefore her personality is crystallized into a series of images in the narrator's mind. He remembers the essence of her character, and it is pure essence that we are presented with, whereas in the case of the other characters we must recognize essential self from what is implied or revealed in their behaviour. This method of presentation, however, also radically alters the nature of the comedy. Perhaps more important than our knowledge of the essential nature of Demmie's character is Demmie's own self-awareness. Bellow is careful to make this clear at the beginning. Demmie informs Citrine:

> Since we love each other, you have a right to know ... I have a record, - hubcap stealing, marijuana, sex offences, hot cars, chased by cops, crashing, hospital, probation officers, the whole works. But I also know about three thousand Bible verses.
>
> (p.22)

This at once differentiates her from her predecessors. Madeleine or Denise, for example, do not know what they are, or will not accept what they are. Demmie both knows what she is, and accepts the imperfections and contradictions in her character.

There is thus no facade for satire to undermine, and our subversive delight in the incongruities which, without their knowledge, break apart the worlds which Madeleine and Denise have constructed becomes an open delight in the imperfections and incongruities which Demmie cheerfully admits. Our point of view does not, therefore, differ substantially from Demmie's own in this respect, and our appreciation is a form of celebration. Our delight in each subsequent description of Demmie is not the delight of discovery, as with Madeleine and Denise, but the delight of recognition.

For reasons implied above I shall base my analysis of Demmie mainly on Bellow's first description of her, making reference to subsequent description only when the points raised in the first description seem to me to be substantially amplified further on:

> Demmie - her full name was Anna Dempster Vonghel - taught Latin at the Washington Irving School, just east of Union Square, and lived on Barrow street. 'There's a Dutch corner in Delaware,' said Demmie. 'And that's where the Vonghels came from.' She had been sent to finishing school, studied classics at Bryn Mawr, but she had also been a juvenile delinquent and at fifteen she belonged to a gang of car thieves. 'Since we love each other, you have a right to know,' she said. 'I have a record - hubcap-stealing, marijuana, sex offences, hot cars, chased by cops, crashing, hospital, probation officers, the whole works. But I also know about three thousand Bible verses. Brought up on hellfire and damnation.' Her Daddy, a backwoods millionaire, raced around in his Cadillac spitting from the window. 'Brushes his teeth with kitchen cleanser. Tithes to his church. Drives the Sunday-school bus. The last of the old-time Fundamentalists. Except that there are scads of them down there,' she said.
>
> Demmie had blue eyes with clean whites and an upturned nose that confronted you almost as expressively and urgently as the eyes. The length of her front teeth kept her mouth slightly open. Her long elegant head grew golden hair and she parted it evenly, like the curtains of a neat house. Hers was the sort of face you might have seen in a Conestoga wagon a century ago, a pioneer face, a very white sort of face. But I fell first for her legs. They were extraordinary. And these beautiful legs had an exciting defect - her knees touched and her feet were turned outward so that when she walked fast the taut silk of her stockings made a slight sound of friction. In a cocktail crowd, where I met her, I could scarcely understand what she was saying, for she muttered in the incomprehensible fashionable Eastern lockjaw manner. But in her nightgown she was the perfect country girl, the farmer's daughter, and pronounced her words plainly and clearly. Regularly, at about 2 a.m., her nightmares

> woke her. Her Christianity was the delirious kind. She had unclean spirits to cast out. She feared hell. She moaned in her sleep. Then she sat up sobbing. More than half asleep myself, I tried to calm and reassure her. 'There is no hell, Demmie.'
>
> 'I know there is hell. There is a hell - there is!'
>
> 'Just put your head on my arm. Go back to sleep.'
>
> (pp.22-3)

Demmie's character is built on a series of oppositions. Bellow repeatedly uses the construction 'she was ... but she had also' to emphasize incongruity and contradiction in her character. She is placed successively as the society girl (the product of finishing school and attender of cocktail parties), the Latin scholar ('studied classics at Bryn Mawr', 'taught Latin at the Washington Irving school'), the juvenile delinquent ('hubcap stealing, marijuana, sex offences, hot cars, chased by cops, crashing, hospital. The whole works'), the fundamentalist Christian ('I also know about three thousand Bible verses. Brought up on hellfire and damnation'), and the country girl ('a pioneer face' '... in her nightgown she was the perfect country girl, the farmer's daughter'). In each case she is placed very precisely as a perfect representative of a particular American type: ('studied classics at Bryn Mawr', '... muttered in the incomprehensible Eastern lockjaw manner', '... her Christianity was the delirious kind', '... the last of the old time Fundamentalists', '... the sort of face you might have seen in a Conestoga wagon a century ago'). Similarly, in each case some kind of excess is implied: ('the perfect country girl', '... the whole works', '... three thousand Bible verses' ...). Demmie is in fact an ensemble of stereotypes, each of which could be satirized for excess or for comic rigidity. In her case, however, all these stereotypes conflict comically with each other, and there is no sense of her being rigidly tied down to any one classification. On the contrary, categories that are normally self-contained and mutually exclusive collide with and impinge on each other. Our delight is in a sense of possibility or of freedom that stems from the coexistence of opposites. With Demmie then, Bellow's comic method is to use a collage technique based on incongruous juxtaposition. He never mentions any one element in Demmie's character without instantly reminding us of the existence of opposing elements

and delights in compiling lists where incongruous and contradictory elements are placed in close proximity to each other:

> With all this she knew the gospels by heart, she had been a field-hockey star, she could break Western horses, and she wrote charming bread and butter notes on Tiffany paper.
>
> (p.152)

There are three major oppositions built up in this first description of Demmie. Citrine contrasts both her social sophistication and her intellectual education with her juvenile delinquency: 'She had been sent to finishing school, studied classics at Bryn Mawr but she had also been a juvenile delinquent', and Demmie herself contrasts her delinquency with her religious upbringing: 'I have a record ... But I also know about three thousand Bible verses. Brought up on hellfire and damnation.' Finally, Citrine contrasts her social elegance with her country simplicity:

> In a cocktail crowd, I could scarcely understand what she was saying, for she muttered in the incomprehensible Eastern lockjaw manner. But in her nightgown, she was the perfect country girl, and pronounced her words clearly and plainly.

Although all three quotations imply a contrast between education and nature, the first two do so in terms of an opposition between order and disorder, the last in terms of an opposition between innocence and sophistication.

While Demmie's Latin studies are seen primarily as evidence of her social status ('she studied classics at Bryn Mawr'), Latin shares with etiquette and Fundamentalism a reliance on rules and codes of behaviour. Demmie has been brought up in a strict moral, social, and intellectual discipline. Her delinquency is a violation of the social and moral codes she has been taught to obey. It is, like her nightmares about hell, evidence of an excess of imagination, or of an uncontrolled or neurotic imagination: both are images of chaos, symptomatic of an unformulated attitude to life.

Although we delight in this urge to disorder, the bias of comedy is not towards chaos. Our delight in Demmie is not moralistic

- she is not in any way condemned for her delinquency - but stems from the fact that chaos co-exists with order in her nature. If Demmie were merely the product of a finishing school, she would be satirized for comic inflexibility, if she were merely chaotic, she would be grotesque like Shula in Mr Sammler's Planet. She is, however, as much the society girl as the juvenile delinquent, and our sense of the richness and vitality of her character comes from the fact that the one extreme does not exclude the other.

Further, there is some evidence that Demmie does not see life as meaningless chaos. Citrine tells us:

> The miraculous survival of goodness was the theme of her life. Dangerous navigation, monsters attracted by her boundless female magnetism - spells charms prayers divine protection secured by inner strength and purity of heart - this was how she saw things. Hell breathed from doorways over her feet as she passed, but she did pass safely.
>
> (p.163)

This explains the coexistence of such apparently conflicting elements in Demmie's character. Demmie accepts life 'on the terms of its own created actuality' with all the disorder, contradiction, and imperfection that this implies. She accepts the rhythm of life and surrenders herself to the present moment. Her character, chameleon-like, adapts to fit the occasion. Langer claims that this adaptation to situation is an essential element in 'the improvised rhythm of animal existence': 'the impulse to survive appears in the ... power ... to seize on opportunities. All creatures live by opportunities in a world fraught with disasters' (p.329).

However for Demmie life is not merely fragmentary - a series of unrelated and meaningless phenomena - nor is it only 'fraught with disaster'. It is unified, sanctified, and made coherent by a kind of faith in the 'miraculous survival of goodness'. Her life is a narrow escape from despair into faith. That it is not an escape from truth is demonstrated by her admission of 'dangerous navigation, monsters'. This unifying belief is why we sense that, despite the changes in her character, Demmie is always unalterably herself, and why we feel with Citrine that 'I didn't love the farmer's daughter in Demmie less than the society girl' (p.144).

The tone of the passage is, of course, comic. The examination of this tone involves consideration of the second opposition we noted: that between sophistication and innocence. The tone rests on a form of irony. Citrine is underlining the naivety of Demmie's vision of the world by exaggerating her concept of its dangers. As in most satire the comedy works by placing her limited view within the context of our wider field of vision. However, it differs from most satire in that its subject is innocence, and therefore operates on a reverse principle. It is not Demmie's limited view of the world that is criticized, but our wider knowledge. Her fresh innocence is celebrated, our stale sophistication condemned. This 'reversed irony' is the second source of comedy in the characterization of Demmie. Just as our open delight in the incongruities in her character may be seen as a reversal of our secret delight in the flaws we discover in satirized characters, so our celebration of her unselfconscious innocence is a reversal of the criticism of self-dramatization and artificiality.

If we return to the passage on pp.22-3 of Humboldt's Gift, we can identify three elements in Demmie's character which, taken together, constitute her particular kind of innocence. There is an ingenuous quality which is especially evident in her speech: her use of childish slang, and her emphatic insistent tone. ('There is a hell, there is!'). Citrine underlines the childlike nature of her midnight nightmares by speaking to her as he would to a child: 'There is no hell, Demmie ... Just put your head on my arm. Go back to sleep'.

Demmie also has a rustic simplicity: she is 'the perfect country girl'. This simplicity is identified with plainness, directness, and honesty; Citrine cannot understand what she is saying when she adopts 'the fashionable Eastern lockjaw manner', but in her nightgown she pronounces her words 'plainly and clearly'.

Finally she has a religious innocence, stemming from her Fundamentalist background. Her fear of hell is evidence, not of a guilty conscience but rather of an unsophisticated lack of cynicism.

The childlike quality we notice in Demmie is due largely to her lack of self-consciousness, and as such could be seen as a lack of sophistication about herself - as the opposite to

self-dramatization. The self-dramatizing character is self-conscious without having self-knowledge. Demmie, as we have seen, has self-knowledge, but is totally unselfconscious, as the following passage suggests:

> She gripped and shuffled the deck, growling, 'I'm going to clean you out, sucker.' She snapped down the cards and shouted 'Gin! Count 'em up.' Her knees were apart. 'It's the open view of Shangri-la, that takes my mind off these cards, Demmie,' I said.
>
> (pp.164-165)

Her childlike absorption in the game results in an equally artless lack of self-awareness, or inability to conceive of herself in the eyes of others. The innocence revealed above is, of course, innocence of her own sexuality, and in this she contrasts with Bellow's other women whose relation with sexuality has somehow broken down. Demmie has no idea of the power of her own sexuality, and this is what makes her so appealing. Demmie's relations with Citrine are marked by this lack of knowledge of her own power. Rather than trying to dominate the hero she actually puts herself in his power by declaring her intentions:

> What she mostly wanted, of course, was an engagement ring. She made no secret of that. 'Buy me this ring, Charlie, then I can show my family that it's on the up-and-up.'.
>
> (p.165)

Demmie's relation to society is also an innocent one, as her behaviour at the Littlewood party shows:

> Littlewood took me aside and proposed man to man that we do a swap. 'An Eskimo wife-deal. What say we have a romp?' he said, 'A wingding.'
>
> 'Thanks, no, it isn't cold enough for this Eskimo stuff.'
>
> 'You're refusing on your own? Aren't you even going to ask Demmie?'
>
> 'She'd haul off and hit me. Perhaps you'd like to try her. You wouldn't believe how hard she can punch. She looks like a fashionable broad, and elegant, but she's really a big honest hick.'.
>
> (p.144)

The innocence defined here is an innocence of fashionable corruption and is identified with the rusticity we noticed before. It is implied on p.22 that, although Demmie's education has given her a surface polish, her real innocence shines through: that education has not spoiled or even altered her essential self. This is suggested by the opposition 'in her nightgown ... in a cocktail crowd' implying that when she has shed the external accoutrements of social behaviour she is essentially untouched. Similarly, although Demmie has been a model cocktail party member all evening, a young lady of breeding, wearing a black chiffon dress, and with her hair 'brushed long and gold on her head', her worldliness is marked by purely external signs. It is a sophistication that has been imposed on her, and, as her reaction to Littlewood's suggestion shows, she refuses a sophistication that is artificial and corrupt, and will not 'adapt' amorally to <u>any</u> situation. Part of the delight we feel in her innocence is a delight in a nature which <u>despite</u> education remains uncorrupted. Bellow defines this type of innocence most often in terms of honesty and plainness. An opposition is made between the 'fashionable, incomprehensible' manner of talking she adopts at cocktail parties, and her plain clear speech at home. Similarly, Littlewood's elaborate and refined verbalizations are designed to hide meaning, to pass crudity off as sophistication. Demmie's apparently cruder response, the simplest possible way of conveying her meaning, really reveals a greater sensitivity.

Finally, Demmie's innocence is also a religious innocence, an innocence which governs her relation to the world, to her environment. This kind of innocence is opposed to cynicism. We can see this most clearly in Citrine's comment: 'There is no hell, Demmie'. Demmie's belief in hell does not imply a guilty conscience. The point is rather that she still accepts the existence of good and evil, than that she is ignorant of, or self-deceived about, evil. The difference between Citrine's point of view and Demmie's is the difference between boredom and wonder. Life for Demmie is full of perils ('dangerous navigation' ... 'monsters') but it also contains 'miraculous goodness'. The world is a constant surprise to Demmie:

> More than once I rushed into Barrow Street to flag down a cab, and take Demmie to the emergency room at St Vincent's. She sunbathed on the roof and was burnt so badly that she became delirious. Then, slicing veal, she cut her thumb to the bone. She went to throw garbage down the incinerator and a gush of flame from the chute singed her.
>
> (pp.151-152)

Here, her fresh, open response, her capacity to be surprised by her environment, is identified with disorder. Both her innocence and her disorder are, in essence, the refusal of a formulated, programmed response to life; and she embodies the 'feeling of comedy ... a feeling of heightened vitality, challenged wit and will engaged in the great game with chance. The real antagonist is the World' (Langer, p.349).

The fact that Demmie eventually succumbs to one of the disasters with which her world is fraught, and dies by accidental violence, does not shake the faith on which Bellow's comedy is based, though it does test it. Demmie's death and survival in Citrine's memory in a sense symbolize the triumph of the faith of the comic vision over the monsters and dangerous navigation of life. Demmie achieves grace in Citrine's memory, and becomes, in the true sense, an 'icon' of human actuality, a vivid and heightened representation. The darker side of Demmie, her nightmares and suffering, drinking and pill swallowing - the side that fears hell and dangerous monsters, that is strongly drawn to sickbeds, terminal cancers, funerals - is alchemized by Citrine's delight in the memory of her 'beauty, innocence and virtue' into a vision that is finally both joyous and hopeful. We feel in Demmie the truth of Christopher Fry's words: 'Comedy is an angle of experience where the dark is distilled into light' (p.77).

We have suggested that Demmie is a coherent and unified character on a theoretical level. She is also psychologically plausible. A consideration of the way she is presented raises the question: how can a character composed of a mélange of different types be convincing and realistic? While it is true that Demmie is presented more as essence, as a series of images, than as a fully realized character, nevertheless appearance, background, behaviour, and language all coalesce to create the impression of

a complex, living personality.

The roots of her character are to be found in her background:

> Her Daddy, a backwoods millionaire, raced around in his Cadillac spitting from the window. Brushes his teeth with kitchen cleanser. Tithes to his church. Drives the Sunday-school bus. The last of the old-time Fundamentalists.
>
> (p.22)

In this brief sketch of Demmie's father we find the roots both of her conformity and her rebellion. Her father is a recognizable American type, a 'Fundamentalist millionaire' or puritan capitalist. Demmie's strict social and religious education derive from her father's wealth and position on the one hand and from his Fundamentalism on the other. Her delinquency and neuroticism can be seen as a reaction from this enforced, restricting order. However there is also an undercurrent of violence in Father Vonghel, suggested here in the references to his crude primitivism ('spitting from the window' ,'...brushes his teeth with kitchen cleanser') and taken up and developed more specifically later on:

> He was a violent man. There was a scar on Demmie's head where he had banged the child's head on a radiator, there was another on her face where he had jammed a wastepaper basket over it ...
>
> (p.152)

This seems to relate to, and perhaps account for, Demmie's agonized reversion to crime. Further, although the amassing of wealth and puritanism are generally not unconnected, they seem at odds with each other in Vonghel. His crude vigour (related to Fundamentalism) refuses to be altered or modified by wealth or social position. He represents the raw innocence of America, the driving energy of the American pioneer businessman, just as his daughter, as an amalgam of American types, represents both the neuroticism and 'naivety' of modern America.

Demmie's appearance also unites the same mixture of elements we noted in her character. Her face is at times childlike, with upturned nose, blue eyes, open mouth, but is at other times 'like a pioneer woman's, gaunt'. She can be elegant 'in black chiffon',

or a 'farmer's daughter in her nightgown'.

Demmie's speech also reflects her character. Although she is characterized in essence, rather than revealed through conduct, an analysis of her language reveals the same mixture of disorganization and innocence we have suggested is the basis of her personality:

> 'Since we love each other, you have a right to know,' she said, 'I have a record - hubcap stealing, marijuana, sex offences, hot cars chased by cops, crashing, hospital, probation officers, the whole works. But I also know about three thousand Bible verses. Brought up on hellfire and damnation.' Her Daddy, a backwoods millionaire raced around in his Cadillac spitting from the window. Brushes his teeth with kitchen cleanser. Tithes to his church. Drives the Sunday-school bus. The last of the old-time Fundamentalists. Except there are scads of them down there.
>
> (p.22)

She speaks in a kind of verbal shorthand. Her sentences are rarely completed, with frequent breaks in thought, and changes of subject. She tends to miss out words, and to pack the maximum amount of information into the words she does use. Her syntax is disorganized and chaotic, though not illogical like Lily's. It gives an impression of vitality, partly because of the frequent jumps in thought and the vivid images she uses, and partly because her language is so condensed, and colourless words ('he','is', 'gives', 'was') are left out. There is also a childlike quality about her language, due partly to her use of slang, and partly to a sense of excitement, a sense that her words are tumbling out faster than her thoughts, and that she is constantly having to catch up with and correct herself.

Demmie's role in the novel is that of ideal. On both a realistic and a symbolic level she represents the potency of good. On a practical level, her many small acts of tenderness add up to a goodness that is 'genuine and deep' (p.164). She guides and advises Citrine, and gives him 'a good deal of counsel about the conduct of life'(p.150).

> She bought postage stamps and commuter tickets, she cooked briskets of beef and pots of paella for me, lined my dresser drawers with tissue paper, put away my scarf in mothflakes.
>
> (p.164)

On a symbolic level, she is a powerful metaphor for the triumph of life, the distillation of darkness into light.

Chapter IV

THE SAINT

the still point of the turning world.
(T.S. Eliot: 'Four Quartets' in
The Complete Poems and Plays p.173)

I

Several critics have noticed the presence of non-comic characters in comedy. Wylie Sypher mentions 'the contrast between the boaster (alazon) and the self-depreciator (eiron) and midway between these two characters is the "straightforward" man who neither exaggerates nor understates' (Wylie Sypher, 'The Meanings of Comedy', in Comedy, ed. Sypher, p.228).

Northrop Frye also notes the presence of non-comic characters in comedy, although he sees this character as appearing in several different roles or guises:

> the technical hero and heroine are often not very interesting people ...
>
> the hero's character has the neutrality that enables him to represent a wish fulfilment ...
>
> Fictional comedy...often follows the same practice of grouping its interesting characters around a...dullish pair of technical leads ...
>
> the hero...is an eiron figure because...the dramatist tends to play him down and make him rather neutral and unformed in character ...
>
> Another eiron type has not been much noticed. This is...an older man who begins the action of the play by withdrawing from it, and ends the play by returning.
>
> ... a character that we may call the plain dealer, an outspoken advocate of a kind of moral norm, who has the sympathy of the audience.
>
> (pp.167, 173, 174 and 176)

Although Frye and Sypher both define comedy in terms of an alazon-eiron conflict, Sypher sees the 'straightforward man' as a compromise between them, whereas Frye sees the non-comic

character either as an eiron figure, or, in the case of the last example, as a 'churl' or 'refuser of festivity'. However, whatever Frye or Sypher's classification, and in whatever roles non-comic characters are found, these descriptions all have some common features. They define a sympathetic character whose speech is to be taken at face value, and all insist on a certain neutrality or dullness. Though not comic in himself, it is legitimate therefore, to consider this character as a particular type in comedy, his role changing according to the kind of comedy, but his basic function remaining the same. Frye hints at this function when he refers to 'a kind of moral norm' though he does not link this with neutrality, nor explain why neutrality should represent a wish-fulfilment. I would like to examine these two statements in connection with the following comments by Corrigan and Potts:

> When talking about comedy, we must always refer to the standards of seriousness which give it its essential definition ... for all of its positive characteristics, comedy is negative in its definition.
>
> (Robert Corrigan, 'Comedy and the Comic Spirit', in Comedy: Meaning and Form, ed. Corrigan p.5)

> ... he (the comic writer) needs not merely a strong feeling for normality but a clear notion of it ... all comic writers must have a norm in view. To detect eccentricity, you must have a centre.
>
> (Potts, pp.46-47)

Both quotations suggest that comedy relies strongly on a notion of what is normal or serious (Corrigan's 'standards of seriousness' correspond here to Potts's 'norm' or 'centre'), but that it defines this by showing what is not normal or serious (Corrigan's 'negative definition' here corresponds to Potts's 'eccentricity'). Maurice Charney supports this view:

> Aristotle's ideal man in the Nicomachean Ethics who finds happiness and peace of mind by seeking his comfortable niche in the mean between extremes, has little place in comedy. The art of comedy is typically concerned not with the normal man, but with persons who cultivate the extremes - either excess or defect, too much or too little, it doesn't matter so long as the effects are out of proportion, disharmonious and incongruous.
>
> (Maurice Charney, Comedy, High and Low, p.69)

I would like to link Potts's and Corrigan's 'norm', 'standard' or 'centre' with Frye's and Sypher's 'straightforward neutral, plain dealer'. Both sets of quotations place a strong emphasis on 'normality' or 'neutrality', and both, interestingly, suggest a concept of 'centre': Frye's 'grouping its interesting characters round a dullish pair of technical leads' and Sypher's 'midway between' correspond neatly to Potts's 'to detect eccentricity you must have a centre'. The function of the neutral or non-comic character, then, is to define a certain moral norm from which the other characters deviate. He exists in the play as a reference point, a still centre about which everything turns. His role changes according to the type of comedy: in a festive comedy he may be there like Lysander in A Midsummer Night's Dream, as a reassuring centre (Frye's 'dullish pair of technical leads'); in a more satirical comedy he may actually become active, and voice the values he stands for, like Thersites in Troilus and Cressida (Frye's 'plain dealer'); in a more disturbing comedy he may leave the play altogether (Frye's 'older man'). The reassuring nature of this often scarcely noticed presence can be shown by the disintegration or dislocation we feel in Measure for Measure, for example, where the Duke renounces responsibility at the beginning of the play, or in the Theatre of the Absurd (Ionesco's La Cantatrice Chauve for instance) where there is no such character, and the world of the play becomes wholly eccentric and unreal.

However, these characters, while representing some kind of standard, are much less interesting, as Frye points out, than the comic characters proper. They represent, as Potts implies, not so much an ideal as a norm: 'He [the comic writer] is trying to present a social point of view, to measure human conduct against a norm rather than an ideal' (p.45). These characters function as a kind of psychological resting place or as a yardstick. The reader must not identify with them too closely or indeed too consciously, or the play or novel will become moralistic. Their neutrality is thus an essential part of what they are.

In Bellow's novels there is nearly always a non-comic, neutral character at the centre of the action, around whom the action seems to turn without his being affected by it or taking part

in it. Only in Seize the Day does this character seem to be absent (or at most very sketchily present in the figure of Olive, who exists only in Wilhelm's memory). This perhaps accounts for the extreme intensity of the novel, and the sense of moral confusion that we share with Wilhelm.

> Could he trust Tamkin - could he? He feverishly, fruitlessly sought an answer
>
> (p.63)

> What's the purpose? Does he want to mix me up? He's already got me mixed up completely. I was never good at riddles.
>
> (p.81)

These neutral characters are, in every case except Mr Sammler's Planet[1], women. Indeed, in the early books they are the only sort of women that Bellow creates, and this may account for the tendency of critics to ignore Bellow's women or to undervalue his characterization of them. The women who seem to me to have this function are: Iva in Dangling Man, Mary in The Victim, Mama in Augie March, Willatale in Henderson The Rain Kind, and Naomi Lutz in Humboldt's Gift.

In Bellow's characterization of these women, sexuality seems irrelevant or non-existent. The hero seems to find in them security, support, warmth, and understanding. In a way Mama typifies them: they are all mother figures rather than sexual partners.

In each case the Saint is conventional or placed firmly in solid, everyday reality. She lives in a world of material objects, facts, and human relationships, not in a world of ideas and theories. The early characters (Iva, Mary, Mama) are distinguished by their

[1] Mr Sammler's Planet has been seen as an anomaly in many ways: this, I think, is because in this book the non-comic norm becomes the central consciousness of the novel. Sammler is himself the 'straightforward man'. He is, of course, a neutral character turned active, corresponding to Frye's 'plain dealer'. Instead of being a neutral reference point, which we use to orient our values, he becomes a reference point with a voice. He interprets these values for us. This shift of emphasis is the source of much of the dissatisfaction critics have felt with the book and accounts for complaints that the book lacks objectivity, does not earn its conclusions, fails to give credibility to any opposition, and is too overtly moralistic.

passivity, which develops into the more positive quality of acceptance in the later characters (Willatale, Naomi).

The function of the Saint in the novels is twofold. We trust her because the hero does. Like him we find a kind of security in the neutral character: structurally she affords a kind of resting place in the novel. She is also the only kind of reliable perspective we have on the hero. With the exception of Sammler, the Bellow protagonist is not completely trustworthy. We may look at other characters as he directs us to, but our view of him does not coincide with his own. Authorial irony and self irony are partly responsible for this. The hero often has insights about himself, or moments where he can see himself in a critical light, and Bellow often directs our attention to his failings and foibles. But the neutral character plays a large part in establishing and maintaining our distance from the hero.

II

Dangling Man and The Victim are not essentially comic novels. Nevertheless I propose to consider them briefly here because the roles played by Iva and Mary seem to me to prefigure the neutral characters in Bellow's comedy proper. Further, though not comic, these books are extremely ironic, and their structure is similar to that of the later, comic novels: the hero takes a satirical view of the other characters, and we in turn have an ironic perspective on him. Although Iva and Mary seem to be vague and shadowy presences in these novels, they play an important part in distancing us from the hero.

Critics have suggested that Dangling Man is a novel too dominated by a single consciousness. Gilbert Porter finds it 'too blatantly cerebral and self-centred' (p.184), and Opdahl complains that Bellow 'provides no single controlling view of his protagonist' (Keith Opdahl, The Novels of Saul Bellow, p.30).

However, most critics point out that despite this apparent one-sidedness Joseph is not presented literally in the novel. Sarah Blacher Cohen explores

> [Bellow's use of] irony to expose Joseph's folly ... When Joseph acts as the strident commentator on the decadent

> times, he expresses Bellow's own views and there is then no distance between author and protagonist. But Bellow is also detached from Joseph, and from his authorial perch he makes us aware of Joseph's disparate attitudes by wry indirection.
>
> (Saul Bellow's Enigmatic Laughter, p.31)

Opdahl discusses Bellow's use of 'juxtaposition - the discrepancy between Joseph's description of an action and his later thoughts about it' and of 'other devices - Joseph's conversations with Tu As Raison Aussi, and Joseph's knowledge of his self-deception' (Opdahl, p.42).

Both, however, feel that the juxtaposition of 'action and idea' is confusing, and that Tu As Raison Aussi is a flimsy and artificial contrivance:

> Without a perceptive second character, or information supplied by an omniscient author, Bellow tries to rely on the irony inherent in Joseph's self-contradiction ... Because the action and the meditation are both given straight, and seem reasonable enough in their own context, we often fail to perceive their ironic contrast.
>
> (Opdahl, p.42)

Nevertheless the critics are unanimous in their dislike of Joseph, and in their feeling that Bellow's treatment of Joseph is ironic. While agreeing that irony in the novel is for the most part 'the irony inherent in Joseph's self-contradiction', I would suggest that the foundations for our judgement of Joseph are laid in the structural contrast between Joseph and Iva, and that Iva, while not fulfilling the role of 'a perceptive second character', at least provides some sort of standard against which, consciously or not, we measure Joseph's behaviour. Bellow contrasts Iva and Joseph in two ways: firstly, in their reaction to people or events, and secondly in their capacity for change.

Iva is distinguished principally by her passivity. Irving Malin notes: 'We see little of her, even in [Joseph's] thoughts ... she is missing; she doesn't exist for Joseph as much as do his "fathers"' (Saul Bellow's Fiction, p.71). This is perfectly true, but tells us as much about Joseph as it does about Iva, as the following passage reveals:

> I am well supplied with books. My wife is always bringing new ones in the hope that I will use them ... Iva has been supporting me. She claims that it is no burden, and that she wants me to enjoy this liberty, to read and to do all the delightful things I will be unable to do in the Army.
>
> (Saul Bellow, Dangling Man, pp.8-9)

Iva is seen through Joseph's eyes, and he perceives her solely in terms of what she does for him. This reveals his egotism or self-absorption, but this absence or neutrality of personality is not wholly the result of Joseph's refusal to notice her or to conceive of her 'otherness'. It is also in some measure quite voluntary. She seems to efface herself, finding her identity in service. From the start, then, an opposition is created: her passivity is at once a trait in its own right, and a function of Joseph's self-absorption.

Secondly, her acceptance of the abnormal situation, her adaptation or submission to it, contrasts with Joseph's reaction, equally passive, but totally distinct. Iva tends to normalize the situation, to incorporate it into their way of life:

> She wants me to read and do all the delightful things I will be unable to do in the Army.

Joseph's ironic 'delightful' is a measure of the difference between his attitude and hers, a difference which the following passage makes clear:

> There is nothing to do but wait or dangle and grow more and more dispirited. It is perfectly clear to me that I am deteriorating, storing bitterness and spite which eat like acids at my endowment of generosity and goodwill.
>
> (p.10)

Indeed, Joseph is even more passive than Iva here. He is changed by the situation he is in, succumbing to its abnormality, and becoming abnormal himself, whereas Iva incorporates it into the familiar pattern of their everyday life.

This tendency of Iva's to accept or restore the status quo is demonstrated again in her role as peacemaker. Twice, when Joseph

has disrupted family relationships by quarrelling with his brother, she arranges a reconciliation. Again, action on Iva's part is not self-assertion, but denotes a willingness to restore normality. Her role as family diplomat contrasts with Joseph's growing violence and increasing estrangement from friends and family: her orthodoxy highlights his peculiarity. Further, her willingness to compromise or to conciliate contrasts with Joseph's tendency to become more and more rooted in an abstract idealism, to adhere to principles and ignore practical considerations. Iva is much more pragmatic. Joseph's refusal of Amos's Christmas present of a hundred dollars is very deliberately contrasted with Iva's acceptance of money from her stepmother:

> Amos, calling me aside, led me up to his bedroom, and there producing a hundred-dollar bill, thrust it like a handkerchief into my breast pocket, saying 'This is our Christmas present to you.'
> 'Thank you,' I said, pulling it out and laying it on the table.
> ...'Joseph!' he exclaimed. 'I don't know what to do with you. I'm beginning to think you're not all there, with your convictions ... Think of Iva sometimes. What's her future going to be like?'
> 'Oh, the future.'
>
> (pp.53-54)

> ... my stepmother gave her an envelope containing a card congratulating us on our anniversary and a cheque.
> 'Now Joseph, don't be angry,' said Iva. 'We can use the money. We both need things ... They wanted to give us a present. It was nice of them. You need another shirt. And some shorts. I can't keep darning them.'
>
> (pp.102-103)

Not only is Iva's pragmatism contrasted with Joseph's impracticality, but her consideration of her parents' feelings and Joseph's needs is directly opposed to Joseph's lack of thought for either Iva or Amos.

Bellow places Iva very firmly in the context of the mundane and banal:

> Those dreams inspired by Burckhardt's great ladies of the Renaissance, and the no less profound Augustan women were in my head not hers ... There are such things as clothes, appearances, furniture, light entertainment, mystery stories,

> the attractions of fashion magazines, the radio, the enjoyable evening.
>
> (p.81)

In contrast to Joseph's rather recherché interests and abstract idealism, Iva is related to what is normal, to popular culture ('light entertainment, mystery stories, the attractions of fashion magazines, the radio'), but also to what is concrete and tangible ('clothes', 'furniture', 'appearances'), Joseph implies that this world is trivial and superficial ('appearances','light entertainment') but this criticism backfires on him, for we feel that the world he opposes so priggishly and disdainfully to hers is an impossibly romantic reverie. Joseph's criticism of Iva reflects adversely on himself in this way, throughout the book.

Lastly, Iva is connected very strongly with celebrations and festivity:

> Iva and I met downtown at six. The occasion was our sixth wedding anniversary. She had decided that we deserved a celebration. We had had none New Year's Eve. It had been a bad year - all the more reason for a good dinner and a bottle of wine. She was determined that this was not to be just another evening.
>
> (p.94)

She is the one who arranges Christmas dinner, who insists on their going to Minna's party, and who organises a small celebration for Joseph's last day as a civilian. In each case the occasion is marked by Joseph's bad grace and aggressive behaviour. He is silent and taciturn at their anniversary dinner, engineers a row with his brother at Christmas, and leaves Minna's party in disgust. In every case Iva's sociability is contrasted with his sour misanthropism, and each occasion marks for Joseph a further withdrawal into self.

There is also a sense in which celebrations represent a heightening or intensification of life ('this was not going to be just another evening'). Joseph's impatience with these occasions is indicative of his growing 'weariness of life'. He comes to resemble Barnadine in Measure for Measure, 'whose contempt for life equalled his contempt for death so that he would not come

out of his cell to be executed' (p.15). Joseph's reading of Goethe is relevant in this respect:

> All comfort in life is based on a regular occurrence of external phenomena. The changes of the day and night, of the seasons, of fruits and flowers and all other recurring pleasures that come to us, that we may and should enjoy them - these are the mainspring of our earthly life. The more open we are to these enjoyments, the happier we are, but if these changing phenomena unfold themselves and we take no interest in them, if we are insensible to such fair solicitations, then comes on the sorest evil - we regard life as a loathsome burden.
>
> (p.15)

It is significant that many of Iva's celebrations are linked to cyclical and seasonal events: Christmas, birthdays, anniversaries, and significant too, that Joseph cannot enjoy their anniversary dinner because of his preoccupation with death:

> Several times during dinner the image of the fallen man came between me and my food, and I laid down my fork. We did not enjoy our celebration.
>
> (p.96)

We find an echo of Goethe's phrase 'the regular occurrence of external phenomena', in Langer's definition of the comic rhythm as a 'vital continuity' ... the round of conditioned and conditioning organic processes' (pp.327-8), and in each of Bellow's neutral characters we find the same attunement to the rhythms of existence, the same willingness to adapt to situations, to restore equilibrium. The difference between them is partly one of involvement: Langer finds the comic character 'tumbling and stumbling ... from one situation into another' (p.342). For the comic character life is a continual contest or battle. Every new situation is an encounter from which he may emerge defeated or triumphant, but with his good-nature, energy, and resourcefulness unimpaired. There is, however, no sense of separation between character and world in the case of the neutral character. She is identified with, or in some cases seems to symbolize, that world and hence lacks the tension that is the source of comedy. Iva differs also from the comic

character in another respect: she never enacts or dramatizes the joy that, according to Goethe, stems from the sense of continuity, and which seems implied in her love of festive occasions. This may be either because her self-effacement is such that she only finds happiness in Joseph's happiness, or because she is presented through Joseph and his sour misanthropic gloom conceals her joy. It is only in his maturer comedies that Bellow begins to invest these characters with a sense of joy. In the early works he identifies care for others with self-sacrifice, the loss of self: he does not yet dramatize the good with conviction.

Iva functions in the novel as a backdrop to Joseph's solitary musings and growing alienation rather than as a positive counter force. She acts as the unchanging scene against which we may 'place' the hero. This, in general, is the function of the neutral character in all Bellow's fiction, though, as we shall see, she gradually assumes a more positive aspect.

Mary is absent from much of the action of The Victim. Like the third type of neutral character defined in the introduction to this chapter, she disappears at the beginning of the action, and reappears at the end. The brief glimpse we are given of her at the outset sets certain standards and makes us aware of certain values. With her departure, there is a sense of moral disintegration, and it is only with her reappearance at the end of the book that we return to normality.

Mary is most fully described in the scene where she first meets Leventhal:

> At a picnic on the Chesapeake shore one Fourth of July, he fell in love with a sister of one of his friends. She was a tall, heavy-moving, handsome girl. With his eyes, he followed her in the steady, fiery sparkle of the bay when she climbed to the dock from the excursion boat and started arm in arm with her brother towards the grove and the spicy smoke of the barbecue clouding in the trees. Later he saw her running in the women's race, her arms close to her sides. She was among the stragglers and stopped and walked off the field, laughing and wiping her face and throat with a handkerchief of the same material as her silk summer dress. Leventhal was standing near her brother. She came up to them and said, 'Well, I used to be able to run when I was smaller.' That she was still not accustomed to thinking of herself as a woman, and a beautiful woman, made Leventhal

> feel very tender towards her. She was in his mind when he watched the contestants in the three-legged race hobbling over the meadow. He noticed one in particular, a man with red hair who struggled forward, angry with his partner, as though the race were a pain and a humiliation which he could wipe out only by winning. 'What a difference,' Leventhal said to himself. 'What a difference in people.'
>
> He ran in the egg race, he swam, he felt his spirits thawed out that day. he was with Mary most of the afternoon. They took their sandwiches to the beach, walking half-shoe over in the white sand to find a place to themselves. From sundown when they started back, till they came into the heat of the sluggish harbour among the heels of tankers, and through the yellow film spread over the water and in the air by the mills and piers, they sat together on the fantail of the little steamer. Her brother was waiting for her in the crowd at the gangplank, and they said good night in the noise of the steam plunging loosely skyward.
>
> (Saul Bellow, The Victim, pp.18-19)

Mary is from the start depicted in physical terms. She is tall, heavy-moving, handsome, and we see her running, laughing, wiping her face and throat with a handkerchief. She is, moreover, identified with the natural scene. The Victim is so much a city book that this rare country scene makes an immediate impact. In this passage there is an intensity of perception and a sensuousness that contrast with the unreal dream-like world of the later part of the novel. Like Iva, Mary seems to be identified with celebrations and festivity.

Mary is characterized by her self-acceptance and lack of self-awareness. Leventhal notes 'she was still not accustomed to thinking of herself as a woman', and her lack of competitiveness in the race is contrasted with the reaction of the red-haired man who 'struggled forward, angry with his partner, as though the race were a pain and a humiliation which he could wipe out only by winning'.

This idea of 'place' is central to The Victim. The novel is concerned with exploring 'man's need for, and straining against limits':

> Leventhal thinks at one point: 'The peculiar thing struck him that everything in nature was bounded in size: trees dogs and ants didn't grow beyond a certain size. 'But we' he thought, 'we go in all directions without any limit.' Yet another character says men need a harness, and the wise

> Schlossberg points out the futility involved in a vague greed for limitless life by underlining man's mortality. Man's aspiration is limitless, man is not... Schlossberg is the man who voices the claims of a solving equilibrium: 'It's bad to be less than human and it's bad to be more than human'
>
> (Tony Tanner, Saul Bellow, pp.34-35)

Mary, then, defines a norm in two ways: with respect to atmosphere, and with respect to the values of the novel. That these two are intimately connected may be seen in the following passage which defines the world from which Mary is absent.

> Levanthal's apartment was spacious. In a better neighbourhood, or three storeys lower, it would have rented for twice the amount he paid. But the staircase was narrow and stifling and full of turns. Though he went up slowly, he was out of breath when he reached the fourth floor, and his heart beat thickly. He rested before unlocking the door. Entering, he threw down his raincoat and flung himself on the tapestry-covered low bed in the front room. Mary had moved some of the chairs into the corners and covered them with sheets. She could not depend on him to keep the windows shut and the shades and curtains drawn during the day. This afternoon the cleaning woman had been in and there was a pervasive odour of soap powder. He got up and opened a window. The curtains waved once and then were as motionless as before. There was a movie house strung with lights across the street; on its roof a water tank sat heavily uneven on its timbers; the cowls of the chimneys, which rattled in the slightest stir of air, were still.
>
> The motor of the refrigerator began to run. The ice trays were empty and rattled. Wilma, the cleaning woman, had defrosted the machine and forgotten to refill them. He looked for a bottle of beer he had noticed yesterday; it was gone. There was nothing inside except a few lemons and some milk. He drank a glass of milk and it refreshed him. He had already taken off his shirt and was sitting on the bed unlacing his shoes when there was a short ring of the bell. Eagerly he pulled open the door and shouted, 'Who is it?' The flat was unbearably empty. He hoped someone had remembered that Mary was away and had come to keep him company. There was no response below. He called out again, impatiently. It was very probable that someone had pushed the wrong button, but he heard no other doors opening. Could it be a prank? This was not the season for it. Nothing moved in the stair well, and it only added to his depression to discover how he longed for a visitor. He stretched out on the bed, pulling a pillow from beneath the spread and doubling it up. He thought he would doze off. But a little later he found himself standing at the window, holding the curtains with both hands. He was under the impression that he had slept. It was only

> eight-thirty by the whirring electric clock on the night table, however. Only five minutes had passed.
>
> (pp.24-25)

We notice the strange emptiness, the stillness, the lack of use. The air is stifling, the curtains are motionless, the chairs are covered with sheets reminiscent of shrouds: indeed the whole passage suggests death. The contrast with the vivid detail, the colour, movement, and life of the previous passage could not be more marked.

Furthermore, the passage stresses abnormality. It generates a nightmare, unreal quality. It is clear that the daily routine has been disrupted, that nothing is as usual: the furniture has been moved, the chimneys 'which rattled in the slightest stir of air' are still, the ice trays in the fridge are empty and rattle.

In this pervasive atmosphere of unnatural stillness and emptiness, Leventhal seems uncertain, adrift, his perceptions at fault. Strange inexplicable things occur: the bottle of beer he reaches for has vanished, the bell rings and no-one is there, he cannot be sure whether he has slept or not. This again contrasts with the country scene, with its stress on tangible reality, and on order and place.

Mary's world, a world of sense-data, of verifiable facts, of precise and vivid impressions, is contrasted with Leventhal's nightmare world of half certainties, fears, doubt, and illusions. However, the world she represents is removed leaving a hollow centre about which the action turns. What is normal is, in the greater part of the novel, defined negatively, by its absence.

Mary herself, although possessing a positive joyous element which Iva lacks, represents another failure of Bellow's to dramatize good. What we remember about the novel is her absence not her presence.

III

In Mama of Augie March we have our first sight of the role played by the neutral character in an essentially comic novel.

Although Mama recognizably belongs to the same class of character as Iva and Mary, there are some important differences.

Such differences are, however, disregarded by Irving Malin, who sees Mama as merely one more example in the long line of Bellow's 'inadequately characterized' or 'insubstantial' women:

> Augie's real mother is simple-minded and completely passive. He cannot have any deep respect for her because she is less of a parent than a child.
>
> (Saul Bellow's Fiction, p.77)

Against this, I would argue that Mama, while 'passive', is far from 'insubstantial'. On the contrary, Bellow finds a peculiar strength in her very submissiveness. She is no longer a nebulous, sketchy figure, like Iva or Mary, but has a force of her own - though, as we shall see, this is very different from the energy of either the comic or the satirized figures.

The distinctive quality of Mama's passivity is illustrated in Augie's description of her attitude to grief or suffering:

> When she had a grief she didn't play it with any arts; she took straight off from her spirit. She made no fuss or noise nor was seen weeping, but in an extreme and terrible way seemed to be watching out the kitchen window, until you came close and saw the tear-strengthened colour of her green eyes and of her pink face, her gap-toothed mouth; she laid her head on the wing of the chair sideways, never direct. When sick she was that way also. She climbed into bed in her gown, twisted her hair into braids to keep it from tangling, and had nothing to do with anyone until she felt able to stay on her feet. It was useless for us to come with the thermometer, for she refused to have it; she lay herself dumbly on the outcome of forces, without any work of mind, of which she was incapable. She had some original view on doom or recovery.
>
> (p.65)

Mama's gentleness is seen as a form of simple-mindedness, an animal-like or instinctual response to circumstances. She is incapable of any 'work of mind' or 'arts'; that is, she is a totally unselfconscious being. She neither dramatizes her feelings nor attempts to suppress them. This submission to the 'outcome of forces' is portrayed by Bellow not as weakness but as a kind of strength. Mama's dumb resistance to outside interference has a stubborn determination, and the words 'extreme', 'terrible',

'strengthened', when linked with her surprisingly vivid pink face and green eyes, suggest an intensity remarkable in one so passive, and totally absent from the vaguer figures of Iva and Mary. This energy differs in quality from both the outgoing, zestful energy of the comic character and the controlled and directed energy of the satirized character. It is a concentration of force , but unlike that of the satirized character, it is contained. It takes the form of a reservoir of strength. The difference is highlighted in Bellow's comment: 'in an extreme and terrible way [she] seemed to be watching out the kitchen window, until you came close and saw the tear-strengthened colour of her green eyes and of her pink face'. The 'watching' is wrong, seems too intense, too directed, until a closer inspection reveals that her emotion is quietly contained.

The strength to be found in Mama's acquiescence is a form of faith, Bellow's implication being that the surrender of self to circumstances or the acceptance of limits, requires more courage than the struggle against Fate or limitations. In the following passage, Bellow goes a step further and equates the surrender of self not only with strength but with love:

> And she'd sharply push his forehead off with her old prim hand, having fired off for Simon and me, mindful always of her duty to wise us up, one more animadversion on the trustful, loving, and simple surrounded by the cunning-hearted and tough, a fighting nature of birds and worms, and a desperate mankind without feelings. Illustrated by Georgie. But the principal illustration was not Georgie but Mama, in her love-originated servitude, simple-minded, abandoned with three children. This was what old Lady Lausch was driving at, now, in the later wisdom of her life, that she had a second family to lead.
>
> And what must Mama have thought when in any necessary connexion my father was brought into the conversation? She sat docile, I conceive that she thought of some detail about him - a dish he liked, perhaps meat and potatoes, perhaps cabbage or cranberry sauce; perhaps that he disliked a starched collar, or a soft collar; that he brought home the Evening American or the Journal. She thought this because her thoughts were always simple; but she felt abandonment, and greater pains than conscious mental ones put a dark streak to her simplicity. I don't know how she made out before, when we were alone after the desertion, but Grandma came and put a regulating hand on the family life. Mama surrendered powers to her that maybe she had never known she had and took her punishment in drudgery; occupied a place, I suppose, among women conquered by a superior force of love, like those

women whom Zeus got the better of in animal form.

(p.15)

The phrase 'conquered by a superior force of love' is reminiscent of the earlier 'lay herself dumbly on the outcome of forces'. Mama gives herself up to love in the same way as she does to fate, and love is thus defined as a form of acceptance, an absence of will. Mama's 'drudgery' is both an expression of her love and a symbol of it. Further, her love for Augie's father has the same simplicity as her response to grief and suffering. Bellow implies, with the reference to Zeus, that love is something that Mama does not comprehend, but experiences and accepts without understanding. Her love is not abstract or idealistic but humble and practical, concerned with everyday realities and homely detail ('... a dish he liked, perhaps meat and potatoes, perhaps cabbage or cranberry sauce ...'). Bellow does not devalue this world. Rather, he implies that Mama's reactions are more honest, more trustworthy, and finally, because purer, more powerful than 'conscious mental' responses.

Whereas Iva or Mary's strong connection with the external world linked them with festivity or celebration, Mama is, both in this passage and the last, closely associated with suffering. Acceptance of life or devotion to others seems necessarily to entail pain or grief. The idea that the abnegation of self involves 'punishment' and sorrow is one of the central concerns of the book; an attitude I would like to explore more thoroughly in an examination of the structural contrast between Mama and Grandma.

In the passage we have been considering, Mama is very deliberately compared with Grandma. If Grandma 'teaches' life, Mama is the 'principal illustration' of her lessons, one who submits to experience rather than abstracting from it. Where Mama represents a direct, simple, instinctive response, therefore, Grandma represents a calculating, theorizing, potentially devious attitude; and where Mama's simple-mindedness manifests itself as docility and submission, Grandma's 'conscious mental' efforts are directed into a desperate and aggressive rebellion against the human condition. Grandma's tyranny is that of a 'desperate mankind without feelings'. As Mama feels and reacts without thought, Grandma thinks without

feeling, never reacts without calculation:

> Mama was Winnie's servant, as she was Grandma Lausch's. Loud-breathing and wind-breaking, she lay near the old lady's stool on a cushion embroidered with a Berber aiming a rifle at a lion. She was personally Grandma's, belonged to her suite; the rest of us were the governed, and especially Mama. Mama passed the dog's dish to Grandma, and Winnie received her food at the old lady's feet from the old lady's hands. These hands and feet were small; she wore a shrivelled sort of lisle on her legs and her slippers were grey - ah, the grey of that felt, the grey despotic to souls - with pink ribbons. Mama, however, had large feet, and around the house she wore men's shoes, usually without strings, and a dusting or mobcap like somebody's fanciful cotton effigy of the form of the brain. She was meek and long, round-eyed like Georgie - gentle green round eyes and a gentle freshness of colour in her long face. Her hands were work-reddened, she had very few of her teeth left - to heed the knocks as they come - and she and Simon wore the same ravelly coat-sweaters. Besides having round eyes, Mama had circular glasses that I went with her to the free dispensary on Harrison Street to get. Coached by Grandma Lausch, I went to do the lying. Now I know it wasn't so necessary to lie, but then everyone thought so, and Grandma Lausch especially, who was one of those Machiavellis of small street and neighbourhood that my young years were full of. So Grandma, who had it all ready before we left the house and must have put in hours plotting it out in thought and phrase, lying small in her chilly small room under the featherbed, gave it to me at breakfast. The idea was that Mama wasn't keen enough to do it right.
>
> (pp.7-8)

Mama's real world of facts and objects is contrasted with Grandma's fantasy world of plot and deception, and Mama's appearance ('large-boned, pink-faced, green-eyed') has a warmth and generosity that is the antithesis of Grandma's 'chilly smallness'.

Bellow's presentation of Grandma is also quite different in style from his treatment of Mama. The two portraits are contrasted on a level of mode. Mama is drawn in broad outlines. We have only a general impression of her appearance ('long', 'large', 'pink-faced') and she is portrayed mainly in essence. We learn of her qualities ('docility', 'meekness', 'gentleness') or of her habits ('when she had a grief she would ...') and she is always placed in reference to some larger force or abstraction ('laid herself dumbly on the outcome of forces','... conquered by a superior force

of love', '... some original view on doom or recovery' ...). Bellow's portrait of Grandma, on the other hand, works by the amassing of detail and particulars. She is portrayed in action and through conduct. We are made to feel Grandma's existence, Mama's essence. The one tends towards the symbolic, while the other relies on caricature. These two are opposing modes of delineation; the first working by intensification, the second by exaggeration; the one designed to throw emphasis on the ways in which a character transcends humanity, the other on the ways in which he exemplifies humanity.

Thus the weight carried by Mama in this first section of Augie March counterbalances exactly that of Grandma. The delight we feel in Grandma's minutely catalogued eccentricities is matched by the symbolic radiance of Mama's character and the complex of elements centred in the one is the exact counterpart of those displayed in the other. The conflict between them is the source both of the basic division in Augie's character and of all subsequent tensions in the novel. Tony Tanner defines the central conflict in the novel as follows:

> There are various types and modes of manipulation at work in the world of the book: instruction (Grandma Lausch), advice (Einhorn), adoption (Mrs Renling), familial coercion (Simon), seduction (Thea) and violence (Bateshaw): power and influence may be exercised for different motives and the manipulators may vary enormously in human quality. But such is the world of the book; the individual self continually enticed or threatened or pushed or drawn by other peoples' versions of what life is for and how it should be led.
>
> (p.46)

The book is a chain of successive conflicts between the 'Machiavellians', who try to impose their theories, dogmas, or versions of reality on others, and Augie, who, like the personified 'élan vital', 'tumbles and stumbles' from one situtation to another (Langer, p.342), evading the clutches of one system only to fall into the trap of another. The recurrent rhythm of the book is, Tanner finds, 'a drifting into things, finally stopped by a digging in of heels or by a sudden flight from attachment' (p.48). Augie is torn between the need to assert individuality and the need

for love and commitment. Tanner comments that 'his interest is really in his independent fate with a paradoxical yearning to find a true and committing love' (p.50), and Augie is himself aware of this tension:

> I didn't want to be what they made of me, but wanted to please them. Kindly explain! An independent fate, and love too - what confusion'
>
> (p.464)

He is, in other words, torn between the conflicting attitudes represented by Grandma and Mama; between the strong desire to cultivate a personal destiny with the driving energy this entails, and the realization that 'when striving stops, the truth comes as a gift' (p.592). Augie's hopes are finally 'based upon getting to be still so that the axial lines can be found' (p.592). It is this stillness that Mama represents in the book. Her offering of herself 'to the outcome of forces' is echoed in Augie's intuition about the cessation of striving, and structurally she forms a still centre to the novel. Her unchanging tranquillity contrasts with the general turmoil and colour. The fierce intensity or erratic blundering of the intrinsically comic characters is highlighted against the depth of her repose, and she is presented as an image of quiet to which Augie repeatedly returns for refreshment. Already in the first section, Augie and Simon, growing up, find 'scents noticed by them, coming in fresh from outdoors, not noticed by the 'house-dwelling women'(p.71). This image of a small, confined, unchanging world-in-itself is repeated time and time again, when Augie returns from the outdoor world to find Mama where he left her, strangely still and unmoved by events, in her cell, or home for the blind. These images of stillness have an ambivalent quality for Augie: they are always associated with restriction. He does, however, admit that 'it was perhaps my fault that I saw Mama and Georgie as prisoners' (p.487), and finally comes to the realization that he 'did admire Georgie for the way he took his fate' (p.489): the comic realization that identity is to be found within limits and not in uncontrolled freedom. Mama thus represents what Augie comes to see as the answer to the irreconcilability of human striving - the acceptance of Fate.

Mama forms both a norm and an ideal in the novel. As norm, she acts as a neutral reference point or standard and the energetic comic characters are sharply defined against her passivity: the extent to and way in which their energies differ from hers is a measure of their excess and thus of their comedy. However, although Mama is, like Iva and Mary, connected with the normal, the humble, the everyday, she is also, unlike them, seen as possessing a certain originality of her own. The element of strength in her character transforms her passivity from a neutral quality to a positive one, and marks her as an ideal as well as a norm. As ideal, she embodies the realization of comedy that life can only be lived to the full through a recognition of limitation. Again, the presence of an ideal - non-comic in itself, but comic in the sense of 'required by the comedy' - defines and highlights what is to be viewed as comic. The Machiavellians are thus comic to the extent to which they strive to be superhuman, to transcend the constraints of their humanity, while Augie is comic because he cannot find his limits and has 'trouble getting to be still'.

However, Mama lacks the joy we feel should be connected with the comic ideal. There is always a certain sombreness about the images associated with her. Although in a book full of images of sterility (Mimi aborts her baby, Thea is linked with the barrenness of the Mexican desert, the Renlings are a childless couple, Renée's pregnancy is a fake, Charlotte and Stella are unable to have children) Mama is the only woman to bear children, she is consistently associated with suffering and there is 'a dark streak to her simplicity'. The book thus fails fully to dramatize what it affirms, and leaves us with a sense of inconclusiveness. By the end, Augie 'has not yet learned a way of significantly and confidently relating to the world ... Fascinated by life's possibilities [he] yet fails of true attachment' (Tony Tanner, p.56). We are left with the paradox that whereas 'striving' involves a distortion of life, acceptance only involves pain and grief.

IV

In Henderson The Rain King however we find a figure who exemplifies the same combination of symbolic and realistic modes,

who is like Mama, both norm and ideal, and in whom the quality of joy is fully dramatized.

Willatale in Henderson The Rain King may appear to be a comic rather than a neutral figure, and my inclusion of her may seem a little surprising. However, like Iva, Mary and Mama, she is the structural and moral centre of the novel. Henderson is judged against her, and, once again, the qualities Bellow chooses to emphasize are those of acceptance, closeness to reality, and love or tenderness. I would like to suggest that she represents a development of Bellow's characterization of the neutral character in two major ways. Firstly, she is presented overtly rather than implicitly as the moral centre of the book - its fount of wisdom. Henderson is judged not only against her, but by her. Secondly, the sense of joy or celebration previously only fleetingly perceived in these characters comes to full expression in her.

Although no longer a completely neutral figure, I would argue that Willatale is not a completely comic figure either. The basic conception of her character does not appear to me to be comic; rather, comic light is shed on her by the peculiar attitude of the novel to the values it upholds.

Seen in the context of Bellow's work as a whole, she represents a link between Mama in Augie March, and Naomi Lutz in Humboldt's Gift, and a definite stage in Bellow's conception of the relation between 'ideal' and 'norm'.

Henderson is introduced to Willatale on his visit to the Arnewi, directly after his wrestling match with Itelo:

> Queen Willatale and her sister Mtalba were waiting for me under a thatched shed in the queen's courtyard. The queen was seated on a bench made of poles with a red blanket displayed flagwise behind her, and as we came forward, Romilayu with the bag of presents on his back, the old lady opened her lips and smiled at me. To me she was typical of a certain class of elderly lady. You will understand what I mean, perhaps, if I say that the flesh of her arm overlapped the elbow. As far as I am concerned this is the golden seal of character. With not many teeth, she smiled warmly and held out her hand, a relatively small one. Good nature emanated from her; it seemed to puff out on her breath as she sat smiling with many small tremors of benevolence and congratulation and welcome. Itelo indicated that I should give the old woman a hand, and I was astonished when she took it and buried it between her breasts. This is the normal form

of greeting here - Itelo had put my hand against his breast - but from a woman I didn't anticipate the same. On top of everything else. I mean the radiant heat and the monumental weight which my hand received, there was the calm pulsation of her heart participating in the introduction. This was as regular as the rotation of the earth, and it was a surprise to me; my mouth came open and my eyes grew fixed as if I were touching the secrets of life; but I couldn't keep my hand there forever and I came to myself and drew it out. Then I returned the courtesy, I held her hand on my chest and said, 'Me Henderson. Henderson.' The whole court applauded to see how fast I caught on. So I thought, 'Hurray for me!' and drew an endless breath into my lungs.

The queen expressed stability in every part of her body. Her head was white and her face broad and solid and she was wrapped in a lion's skin. Had I known then what I know now about lions, this would have told me much about her. Even so, it impressed me. It was the skin of a maned lion, with the wide part not on the front where you would have expected it, but on her back. The tail came down over her shoulder while the paw was drawn up from beneath, and these two ends were tied in a knot over her belly. I can't even begin to tell you how it pleased me. The mane with its plunging hair she wore as a collar, and on this grizzly and probably itching hair she rested her chin. But there was a happy light in her face. And then I observed that she had a defective eye, with a cataract, bluish white. I made the old lady a deep bow, and she began to laugh and her lion-bound belly shook and she wagged her head with its dry white hair at the picture I made bowing in those short pants while I presented my inflamed features, for the blood rushed into my face as I bent.

I expressed regret at the trouble they were having, the drought and the cattle and the frogs, and I said I thought I knew what it was to suffer from a plague and sympathized. I realized that they had to feed on the bread of tears and I hoped I wasn't going to be a bother here. This was translated by Itelo and I think it was well received by the old lady but when I spoke of troubles she smiled right along, as steady as the moonlight at the bottom of a stream. ... This was a beautiful, strange, special place, and I was moved by it. I believed the queen could straighten me out if she wanted to; as if, any minute now, she might open her hand and show me the thing, the source, the germ - the cipher. The mystery, you know. I was absolutely convinced she must have it. The earth is a huge ball which nothing holds up in space except its own motion and magnetism, and we conscious things who occupy it believe we have to move too, in our own space. We can't allow ourselves to lie down and not to do our share and imitate the greater entity. You see, this is our attitude. But now look at Willatale, the Bittah woman: she had given up such notions, there was no anxious care in her, and she was sustained. Why, nothing had happened! On the contrary, it all seemed good! Look how happy she was, grinning with her flat nose and gap teeth,

> the mother-of-pearl eye and the good eye, and look at her white head! It comforted me just to see her, and I felt that I might learn to be sustained too if I followed her example. And altogether I felt my hour of liberation was drawing near when the sleep of the spirit was liable to burst.
>
> (pp.69-76)

The characterization of Willatale is complex. It takes two very different forms, forms moreover that seem contradictory or mutually exclusive.

The setting in which Willatale is placed is exotic, unfamiliar. Henderson encounters a tribal queen clad in lionskins in a remote African village. They exchange presents and ritual greetings. However, Willatale is presented on a level that goes beyond the exotic, towards the mythic, the elemental. Emphasis here is not on Willatale's physical reality, but rather on what she stands for, what is revealed through her. Henderson feels she has the key to 'the secrets of life, the source, the germ, the mystery, the cipher'.

The second line of description could not, at first sight, be more different. Willatale is presented as an ordinary elderly lady. Our impression of her benign and comfortable normality is reinforced by such phrases as 'a certain class of old lady', 'you will understand what I mean', 'the golden seal of character', which, by appealing to a shared body of common knowledge, situate her as a familiar everyday 'type'.

However, although the two lines of description seem to conflict, there is a sense in which the one is only a different dimension of the other. All the qualities she possesses on a 'human' level have their counterparts on a 'trans-human' or symbolic level: the benevolence and worldly wisdom of the elderly lady are seen on another level as a divine radiance and an oracular wisdom. Similarly, on a physical level, the very details that place her as an old lady - the overlapping flesh, the mother-of-pearl eyes, the physical solidity - also suggest the image of a primitive idol or goddess. The physical details are all a little grotesque, though they are so in a very different way from the details which evoke Grandma or Mrs Renling. The images of Willatale suggest

natural growth and overflow rather than a warped and distorted abnormality. She is grotesque in the sense described by Bakhtin as the 'realistic grotesque': 'the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed completed unit. It is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits' (p.26). The grotesque details in this portrait of Willatale act in two ways. They show her as a realistically imperfect creation rather than as an ideal. At the same time the caricaturistic exaggeration gives her an image-like quality, like a primitive, misshapen idol. The characterization of Willatale is balanced in this way between myth and reality, the human and the divine, and she becomes a symbol of reality.

The critics are divided in their response to Willatale, uncertain whether to take her as a character or as a symbol. Malin finds that 'she doesn't emerge as a person - after all, she is supposedly much more than a mere person' (Saul Bellow's Fiction, p.83), and Clayton comments that 'reality is Willatale. This reality is joyful ... She, like the lioness, manifests reality' (p.176).

Both Malin and Clayton, in fact, see her as pure symbol, though Clayton implicitly acknowledges her ambivalence by seeing her as 'standing for ... reality'. Malin, however, I think, misses some of the subtlety and the point of the dual characterization. According to Opdahl 'the queen has found joy by reconciling opposites. She finds her joy by accepting the world at the same time that she has risen above ordinary human limitations' (p.127). Willatale has given up all 'anxious care'. She does not strive for an unreal perfection, but accepts the world as it is. By combining the two strands of description in her portrait, Bellow suggests that the ideal is to be found in the human, the homely, the imperfect - joy comes not from striving against limits but from acceptance of them. This acceptance finds its parallel in the grotesque imagery of the portrait where the images of fullness, growth and overflow are at the same time images of old age. Bakhtin finds that this duality is the essence of the grotesque, 'the real grotesque seeks to grasp in its imagery the very act of becoming and growth: its images present simultaneously ... that which is receding and dying and that which is being born' (p.52).

She is, then, more positive than the neutral figure. She is not, however, a comic type, for two important reasons.

Firstly, she possesses a kind of harmony which is absent from the comic character, who is always unbalanced. This may be because of some disproportion of personality, in the case of satire, or because of external difficulties and dangers, in the case of comedy. Willatale's various incongruous qualities coexist without conflicting, and we accept the fact that she is at once old lady and earth-mother, person and myth. Similarly, she is at one with her world; there is no suggestion of the conflict that distinguishes the celebrated character's relation with her environment.

Secondly, the quality of the joy she embodies is very different from the zest of the comic character. Willatale possesses a radiant serenity. Again, the element of conflict, of movement, is lacking.

Willatale <u>is</u> comic in a sense, but the comedy stems from authorial attitude rather than from idiosyncrasies of character - a point which may be elaborated by considering the following passage with regard to tone.

> Itelo protruded his lips to show that I was expected to kiss her on the belly. To dry my mouth first, I swallowed. The fall I had taken while wrestling had split my underlip. Then I kissed, giving a shiver at the heat I encountered. The knot of lion's skin was pushed aside by my face which sank inward. I was aware of the old lady's navel and her internal organs as they made sounds of submergence. I felt as though I were riding in a balloon above the Spice Islands, soaring in hot clouds while exotic odours arose from below. My own whiskers pierced me inward in the lip ... I drew back from this significant experience (having made contact with a certain power - unmistakable! - which emanated from the woman's middle).
>
> (p.72)

The tone in this passage, and indeed in the book as a whole, is far from easy to decipher. The mixed reaction of the critics reflects their uncertainty; they are undecided whether to interpret the work as spoof or affirmation.

It is clear that the novel is to some extent a parody:

> <u>Henderson</u> is a composite parody of all the memorable twentieth century novels of personal and mythic quest into dark regions
>
> (Robert Alter, 'The Stature of Saul Bellow', p.10)

> ... the symbolism of the novel is a put-on. Of course the novel is symbolic. Of course there are patterns out of Freud, Jung, Frazer, but we should see the patterns as parody ...
> (Clayton, p.159)

The problem is the extent to which it is such. From the quoted extract it is fairly obvious that Willatale is a parody of 'the fertile power of an earth-mother, a symbol of regeneration' (Gilbert Porter, p.133). Bellow's comic method is to combine weighty symbolism ('the heat I encountered', '... significant experience', '... power which emanated from the woman's middle'), relying heavily on worn-out clichés of 'personal or mythic quest', with incongruous physical detail ('to dry my mouth first, I swallowed', '... I was aware of the old lady's navel and her internal organs as they made sounds of submergence').

However Henderson is not merely a neutral device for sending up the mythic novel. He is himself the object of a gentle satire, which works in the opposite direction to the parody described above: Henderson is a stereotype or parody of the American abroad, and the incongruity we laugh at in the above passage is also

> the incongruity of hearing Henderson's breezy colloquialisms, not on the neon lighted streets of America but in the middle of darkest Africa ... he thinks in Africa of city metaphors and of city events
> (Marcus Klein, After Alienation, p.49)

So we are never quite sure which universe we are laughing at.

There is, moreover, a sense in which Bellow's style transcends parody and takes hold of the imagination. It is not merely destructive, but genuinely affirmative. Parody (exaggerated mimicry of style) works by mocking cliché. Both the inflated vocabulary, the pretentious symbolism of the mythic quest, and the simplistic banalities of Henderson's speech are derided in this way. However, such phrases as 'I felt as though I were riding in a balloon above the Spice Islands, soaring in hot clouds, while exotic odours arose from below' (p.72), while inflationary, are neither stale nor pretentious, they are rather riotously far-fetched, a daring leap of the imagination. Similarly, such details as 'my own whiskers

pierced me inward in the lip' (p.72) are not merely destructive and deflating but contribute something positive: a precision, a sense of vividness and immediacy. The comedy has a positive, regenerating quality; it laughs at both empty idealism and insensitive crassness, and substitutes for them a rich enjoyment and inventive celebration of the present.

In the same way, Bellow creates an ideal in Willatale, mocks his own creation, and affirms it all in one breath, for ultimately what we appreciate in Willatale is neither the elemental goddess nor the benevolent old lady, but something born out of the conjunction of the two: an 'ideal-within-the-norm'.

Willatale is not only parodied, but is herself a parodist, and this is ultimately her function in the novel. Like the characters we have previously considered, her role is to provide a perspective on the hero.

> Itelo delivered the question and Willatale furrowed up her brow in that flexible way peculiar to the Arnewi as a whole, which let the hemisphere of the eye be seen, purely, glistening with human intention; while the other, the white one, though blind, communicated humour as if she were giving me a wink to last me a lifetime. This closed white shutter also signified her inwardness to me. She spoke slowly without removing her gaze, and her fingers moved on her old thigh, shortened by her stoutness, as if taking an impression from Braille. Itelo transmitted her words 'You have, sir, a large personality. Strong. (I add agreement to her.) Your mind is full of thought. Possess some fundamentall of Bittahness, also.
>
> (p.79)

Willatale's two eyes (like Sammler's) reflect the duality of her characterization; one, the seeing eye, is identified with her humanity, while the other, the blind one, seems to signify a special moral vision or wisdom. This insight is the insight of comedy, for the eye 'communicates humour' to Henderson. Willatale's first reaction on seeing Henderson is to laugh ('her lion bound belly shook with laughter'), and in her subsequent conversation with him she provides an analysis of his character which, though ironic ... is not destructive, but positive and revitalizing. Until her appearance in the novel, we have had no external perspective

on Henderson. His own chaotic and violent actions, together with his ironic self-analysis have been our only guidelines.

Willatale does two things: she confirms our impression of Henderson's absurdity, but also provides a further insight. With her comment 'Man want to live' she tells us that Henderson also possesses an absurd but hopeful quality, a love of life. Her function is thus almost the reverse of Iva's in Dangling Man. She finds Henderson comic, but her vision does not comically undercut him: instead it restores his faith in himself, and places him for us as absurd but capable of salvation.

Willatale thus represents a development of the non-comic norm in two directions: she is not merely a neutral reference point, but a positive ideal and she is an ideal with a voice. Her role may be seen as that of comic 'eye': her function is analytic, but ultimately restorative. These developments are taken a stage further in the characterization of Naomi Lutz in Humboldt's Gift.

V

It may seem strange that a suburban Chicago housewife should bear any resemblance to the queen of a primitive African tribe, but Naomi in Humboldt's Gift is similar to Willatale in several important respects. There is the same tension between idealistic and realistic modes in her characterization, and she has the same 'oracular' function. Like Willatale, too, she is esentially a straight character: any comic effects in her presentation stem from Citrine's whimsical comments and are a reflection on his character, not hers. Like Iva, Mary, and Mama, she is associated with acceptance, with reality, and with normality, she plays a central role in the structure of the novel, and she acts as a standard against which the hero is measured.

All these points emerge in Citrine's memories of his adolescent love affair with her:

> In my highly emotional adolescence I had loved Naomi Lutz. I believe she was the most beautiful and perfect young girl I have ever seen, I adored her, and love brought out my deepest peculiarities. Her father was a respectable chiropodist. He gave himself high medical airs, every inch the Doctor.

> Her mother was a dear woman, slipshod, harum-scarum, rather chinless, but with large glowing romantic eyes. Night after night I had to play rummy with Dr Lutz, and on Sundays I helped him to wash and simonize his Auburn. But that was all right. When I loved Naomi Lutz I was safely within life. Its phenomena added up, they made sense. Death was an after all acceptable part of the proposition. I had my own little Lake Country, the park, where I wandered with my Modern Library Plato, Wordsworth, Swinburne, and Un Coeur Simple. Even in winter Naomi petted behind the rose garden with me. Among the frozen twigs I made myself warm inside her raccoon coat. There was a delicious mixture of coon skin and maiden fragrance. We breathed frost and kissed. Until I met Demmie Vonghel many years later, I loved no one so much as Naomi Lutz. But Naomi, while I was away in Madison, Wisconsin, reading poetry and studying rotation pool at the Rathskeller, married a pawnbroker. He dealt also in rebuilt office machinery and had plenty of money. I was too young to give her the charge accounts she had to have at Field's and Saks, and I believe the mental burdens and responsibilities of an intellectual's wife had frightened her besides. I had talked all the time about my Modern Library books, of poetry and history, and she was afraid that she would disappoint me. She told me so. I said to her, if a tear was an intellectual thing how much more intellectual pure love was. It needed no cognitive additives. But she only looked puzzled. It was this sort of talk by which I had lost her. She did not look me up even when her husband lost all his money and deserted her. He was a sporting man, a gambler.
>
> (p.77)

Naomi is treated on one level in an extremely idealistic way. Citrine uses many superlatives in his description of her ('the most beautiful and perfect young girl' ...'I adored her' ... 'I loved no-one so much as Naomi Lutz'). She is presented in terms of nature and natural beauty ('rosegarden', 'frozen twigs'), and in terms of the ethereal and insubstantial ('fragrance', 'breathed frost'). She has a fresh, youthful, idealized sexuality with no calculation or vanity in it ('Among the frozen twigs, I made myself warm inside her raccoon coat. There was a delicious mixture of coonskin and maiden fragrance. We breathed frost and kissed').

However she is also placed very firmly in a reality of a particularly mundane sort. Both Naomi's father and her husband have banal, almost sordid professions. The passage is coloured by its references to concrete particulars, the trappings of materialist, urban America, and by the use of brand names ('simonize',

'Auburn', 'Fields', 'Saks'). Both Naomi's family background and her married life are defined in terms of material possessions (money, cars, office machinery, charge accounts).

The juxtaposition of these two frames of reference which collide and impinge on each other is comic, but it is a comedy which reflects on Citrine rather than Naomi. He makes it clear by such phrases as 'my highly emotional adolescence', and 'love brought out my deepest peculiarities' that he has idealized Naomi, and has in some way ignored reality. Naomi herself is identified with the reality he neglects ('the charge accounts she had to have' ... 'the kind of talk by which I had lost her'), and acts as a norm against which Citrine's excessive idealization is measured.

However, there is a sense in which these two visions of Naomi are compatible. Citrine's evocation of the young girl is delicate and ethereal, but it is also precise and sensuous (roses-frost-coonskin-fragrance-warmth). The details that evoke this winter love are all very specific and slightly incongruous. This vision of Naomi, though differing from the bourgeois, materialistic aspect we noted earlier is just as firmly rooted in reality, the idealization is not a falsification, but a magnification of value. It is evidently in no way incompatible with the reality of pawn-brokers, chiropodists and rebuilt office machinery, for Citrine says: 'When I loved Naomi Lutz, I was safely <u>within life</u>. Its phenomena added up, they made sense'. It is an essential part of Bellow's vision, and of comic vision in general, that joy and celebration are to be found 'within life' not in an escape from life. The real opposition in the passage is, therefore, not between Naomi and her world - for the difference between them is indicative rather of the variety and possibility to be found 'within life' - but between the continuum represented by Naomi and her world, and a third frame of reference: Citrine's abstract intellectualizing. The language of 'if a tear was an intellectual thing, how much more intellectual pure love was. It needed no cognitive additives', defines a world that is very different both from the world of rose gardens and frozen twigs, and from the world of charge accounts and large cars. As the novel progresses it becomes clear that this world, Citrine's world, is satirized for its lack of relation

to reality, although he himself criticizes the other world, the Chicago world of mere objects, mere fact, as being brutal and reductive. Naomi represents a compromise between these two worlds: the conviction that reality is not necessarily trite and meaningless, that the ideal is to be found within what is normal. As such, she gives us a perspective on Citrine - the only real perspective we have, for authorial irony and self-irony are very equivocal and ambiguous in the novel. She acts both as an ideal in the book (Citrine is measured against her) and as an oracle: she actually voices the values she stands for and administers a corrective to Citrine. Both aspects can be seen in Citrine's meeting with her many years after their adolescent love affair (pp.290-300).

In this later scene, Naomi is presented in terms of the ordinary and mundane:

> She wore layers of sweaters. On her head was a garrison cap and a Sam Browne belt crossed her chest - the works: fleece boots, mittens, her neck protected by an orange havelock, her figure obliterated. She waved her coat - hampered wet arms, gathering kids about her, she stopped the traffic, and then heavy in the back, she turned and footed slowly to the curb on her thick soles. And this was the woman for whom I once felt perfect love.
>
> (p.290)

The accent is on heaviness and physical solidity ('thick soles', coat-hampered arms', 'heavy in the back', 'layers of sweaters', 'her figure obliterated', 'she footed slowly to the curb'). She seems to be weighted, tied down to physical reality and mortality. The contrast between the delicate fresh sexuality of the young girl, and the asexual heaviness of the older woman could not be more marked, and Citrine comments on this demystification with rueful humour: 'And this was the woman for whom I once felt perfect love'. Almost instantly, however, this perception fades into a realization that ideal and real coexist and are compatible.

> I saw the young woman within the old one. I saw her in the neat, short teeth, the winsome gums, the single dimple in the left cheek, I thought I could still breathe in her young woman's odour, damp and rich, and I heard the gliding and drawling of her voice, an affectation she and I both thought utterly charming once. The rain of the seventies looked

> to me like the moisture of the thirties when our adolescent lovemaking brought out tiny drops in a little band, a Venetian mask across the middle of her face.
>
> (p. 290)

Once again she is described with great clarity and in minute detail. The images are all a little incongruous, although in a non-comic way. In the neutral character incongruities co-exist, but do not collide, as they do in the comic character. The phrase 'I saw the young woman within the old one' is reminiscent of the ideal 'within life' that Naomi represents, which is contrasted with the ideal outside life, the vague abstraction of 'perfect love', towards which Citrine strives.

Their respective positions become clearer in the ensuing conversation, where Naomi becomes an active critic of Citrine, instead of a passive standard against which his values are measured.

Their language is startlingly different. Citrine's language contains a high proportion of abstract nouns ('strength', 'needs', 'beauty', 'goodness', 'thought', 'poetry', 'life') whereas Naomi refers to concrete particulars ('gangsters', 'bandages', 'juice', 'bungalow', 'neighbourhood', 'investment', 'property', 'convertible', 'charge account'). She recalls incidents or events:

> You almost choked me to death because I went to a dance with some basket-ball player. And once in the garage, you put a rope on your neck, and threatened to hang yourself if you didn't get your way.
>
> (p.291)

Citrine abstracts from them:

> Superkeen needs were swelling up in me ... I was in the thick of beauty, and wild about goodness and thought and poetry and love.
>
> (pp.291-2)

Naomi's language has a vigour and a sturdiness that Citrine's lacks. Citrine uses fairly long, well formulated sentences, and speaks in an articulate style, whereas Naomi uses shorter, more basic sentence patterns, and uses a high proportion of colloquialisms

and old-fashioned slang. Even more striking, perhaps, are the respective forms their speeches take. Citrine's language contains mostly statements and pronouncements, which give him a lecturing tone. Naomi's speech on the other hand is composed mainly of commands and prohibitions. In every case, these criticize Citrine's idealism, or what she considers to be his lack of contact with reality. She tells him off successively for crankiness, to which she opposes a solid plainness and conventionality ('you are a crackpot', '... you've probably become even more peculiar with time'), idealization, which she counters with down-to-earth common sense ('don't idealize so much', '... you always did provoke people into doing the dirty human thing to you by insisting they should do the goody two shoes bit', '... Boy, have women ever sold you a bill of goods'), sentimentality, in place of which she offers her own direct sincerity ('don't get sentimental, Charlie, please', '... you, of course, you didn't expect a poet to act that way about money did you?' ...), generalization and abstraction ('what do you mean?', '... Do me a favour', '... Don't get carried away') and lack of self-knowledge, supporting this ultimate charge with a penetrating analysis of his character ('But it was a phony. You yourself lost it. You didn't cherish').

In each case she criticises him for being out of touch with reality. She sees him as having a false relationship to his environment (crankiness, abstraction, and generalization), to others (sentiment, idealizing), and to himself (lack of self-knowledge).

Citrine's dialogue with Naomi could be compared with his conversation with Renata on the plane, which directly follows it and makes a telling contrast. The two conversations have certain similarities: in both Citrine is talking on one level, and the woman on another, in both she is trying to bring him down to her level. However, I think there is a fundamental difference: Renata's role is reductive, Naomi's is creative. Naomi's language is not crude and forceful like Renata's, and it is not merely factual, but full of ideas and perceptions. Her language does not gain its vigour from insult and invective, but from its vivid images and common-sense simplicity. Renata talks about things, Naomi about people, Renata's world is one of crude materialism, Naomi's is one of human emotions and perceptions. Renata's remarks are

centred around herself. There is a tension in the conversation, she is trying to steer Citrine into thinking about her, whereas Naomi's remarks are centred around Citrine (although she is not feeding his ego, as Ramona feeds Herzog's, but analysing and correcting). Renata and Citrine are in effect having two different conversations, Naomi and Citrine are communicating. Where Renata merely criticizes, Naomi offers something positive of her own: 'you are a crackpot, but you do have a real soul'. Renata is thus ultimately 'placed' against Naomi. Her exaggerated sexuality is measured against Naomi's homely charm, and her crude and reductive materialism contrasted with Naomi's warmth and positive generosity. Naomi acts in the novel as a kind of 'golden mean' against whom the other characters may be shown up as disproportionate or unbalanced. Demmie's chaotic energy and zest is heightened in contrast to Naomi's stability and sense of order 'within life', and, at the other end of the spectrum, Denise's intense, anxious, and unhappy status-seeking is opposed to her balanced and self-sufficient contentment.

Naomi also 'places' Citrine. He says of her 'she was the Anima, the counterpart soul, the missing half' (p.297), and she is in a sense the other half of the hero, positive where he is negative. She is the only character to see him 'from the outside'; she completes our picture of him, confirming his view of the other characters in the novel, but ironically undermining his self-conception. She is the means by which we not only perceive the other characters' deviation from the norm, but ultimately see them in relation to each other.

Each of the Saint figures thus forms the focal point of a novel, and each represents a different way of organizing structure. As backcloth, still centre, comic eye, or golden mean, each is a measure or norm, and a positive ideal, for in comedy the ideal <u>is</u> the norm. The precise combination of norm and ideal varies from character to character, and the relative proportions of each determine the nature of the characterization: the element of norm predominates in the neutral, unformed Iva, the ideal quality in the more symbolic creations of Mama and Willatale, while Naomi

is finally both realistic character and ideal.

In every case, she provides a comic perspective on the hero. In the earlier novels she acts as ironist: the hero's faults are seen in relation to, or criticized by, her and she becomes the main means of orienting our values. In the later works the neutral figure is comedian as well as ironist: she not only criticizes the hero, but delights in him as well, revealing to him not only his faults but also his positive qualities and this marks the development of Bellow's novels from a sour and brooding irony to a richly human comedy.

The neutral character exhibits a kind of contained energy. She is a fulcrum between the satirized and the comic characters. In her the conflicting elements that are the source of comedy are held in equilibrium, and we feel a harmony of opposites. Wylie Sypher remarks that 'the saint and the comic hero both accept the irreconcilables in man's existence' ('The Meanings of Comedy', in Comedy, ed. Sypher, p.237). She thus resembles the celebrated character in her acceptance of disorder, but unlike the celebrated character, she does not exemplify that disorder.

The reservoir of energy contained in the neutral character is equated by Bellow with good. In his early novels he finds it difficult to dramatize good as a positive quality and his portrayal of malign energy has far more force, but in the later novels he becomes increasingly able to associate this character with strength and joy.

The strength embodied in the Saint however is balanced, in Bellow's work, against the energy of another figure, the Matriarch, who goes beyond comedy in a different direction altogether.

Chapter V

THE MATRIARCH

> I always heard from women that I didn't have the profounder knowledge of life, that I didn't know its damage or its suffering
>
> (Augie March, p.180)

I

The Matriarch, as her name implies, is an older woman, a mother figure. However, she represents a very different type of motherhood from that of the Saint, being associated with power, control and domination, rather than with gentleness and service. In fact, she forms a structural contrast with the Saint; she is her counterpart, the other face of motherhood. She is to be found, however, only in two books: Augie March and Herzog. In both these works the hero has a similar family background, a poor, immigrant Jewish family, where the father is weak (or in Augie's case, non-existent) and the mother is a Saint figure, represented by submissiveness and gentleness (Mother Herzog is a slighter, less fully depicted Mama, just as Aunt Zipporah is a faint shadow of Grandma). In neither book is the Matriarch head of her own family; rather, she has 'adopted' the hero, or the hero's family.

In both books, the weakness or absence of the father governs the relationships between the hero and the other male characters, the 'Reality Instructors' or 'Machiavellians', who replace the hero's father. Fiedler speaks of 'the emotional transactions of males ... son and Machiavellian surrogate father' ('Saul Bellow', p.7), and Geismar comments on 'the uneasy relationship of father and son ... the tangled sibling relation of oppressor and victim' (Maxwell Geismar, American Moderns, p.220), while Malin mentions 'the search for a father in Augie March', (Saul Bellow's Fiction, p.65), and sees the hero as typically 'involved with many fathers' (Saul Bellow's Fiction, p.69).

What has not, I think, been generally recognized, is that the hero's own gentle, passive mother is replaced, in the course of the novel, by a number of dominating, authoritarian, surrogate mothers (Aunt Zipporah in Herzog, Grandma Lausch, Mrs Renling, and Cousin Anna in Augie March) who either try to direct family

affairs, replacing the mother as head of the family (Aunt Zipporah, Grandma Lausch), or attempt to adopt the hero and incorporate him into their own family (Mrs Renling, Cousin Anna).

In that her relationship with the hero is inspired by authoritarianism, the Matriarch most obviously resembles the Bitch. There are, however, several important differences, the most obvious being that the Bitch's relationship with the hero is a sexual one, the Matriarch's a maternal one. Power, for the Bitch, is an expression of her personality; she attempts to crush and destroy the hero, extending her ego at the expense of his. The Matriarch is more like Bellow's men: she teaches 'reality'. By controlling or adopting others, she consolidates her view of what is real. The Bitch lives in her own world; the Matriarch is attempting to construct, to mould the hero's character, opinions, and attitude to life.

In this concern with reality she aligns herself with the Saint, who also acts as a kind of oracle or reality-teacher. Here again, however, the Matriarch is the counterpart of the Saint: where the latter is identified with a joyful acceptance of life, the former conceives of life as 'nasty, brutish and short'.

As with his other female characters, Bellow founds the Matriarch on a stereotype, but personalizes and individualizes the type, so that we have the sense of an original living creation. Interestingly, she is the only female character in Bellow's novels to be based on a Jewish type (the Jewish mother); his other women conform to representative American types: the ambitious and dominating wife, the sex-goddess, the American princess. To the extent to which Bellow uses the type as a base, seizing on and elaborating those elements which fit into the novels' scheme of values, so his comedy transcends the comedy of type, and each character becomes an individual comic creation.

Comedy, in the figure of the Matriarch comes partly, then, from social satire - the comedy of the representative - but mostly from the satirizing of individual foibles or vices. Bellow's comic tone in his presentation of the Matriarch is complex. For most part he is content to ridicule her pretension and hypocrisy, but within that ridicule there is always a darker note, which takes

his treatment of her beyond the bounds of comedy. Sarah Blacher Cohen comments on Bellow's treatment of Grandma Lausch: 'We smile rather than sneer at Grandma Lausch's affectation...and our reaction to [her] hypocrisy is just as mirthful, but Augie cannot laughingly excuse [her] comic rigidity ...' (Saul Bellow's Enigmatic Laughter, p.68).

Bellow sees much in the Matriarch's behaviour that is essentially harmless, meriting gentle ridicule rather than severe castigation. But ultimately he cannot condone the vision that underlines and gives rise to that behaviour, for the Matriarch's world picture is founded on a contempt for humanity and the human condition: a vision which is contrary to comedy in general and to the values of Bellow's novels in particular. At some point, then, we become aware of this darker side of her character, and genial laughter shifts into a grimmer kind of response. The comedy that Bellow specifically associates with the Matriarch is comedy of the grotesque.

Wolfgang Kayser has defined the grotesque as 'the expression of the estranged or alienated world ... the familiar world is seen from a perspective which suddenly renders it strange, and we are so strongly affected because it is our world that ceases to be reliable and we feel that we would be unable to live in this changed world' (Wolfgang Kayser, The Grotesque in Art and Literature, pp. 184-5), and Thomson stresses the importance of the role of the unnatural or abnormal in the grotesque, which he defines as the 'ambivalently abnormal':

> The classic reaction to the grotesque - the experience of amusement and disgust, laughter and horror, mirth and revulsion, simultaneously is, partly at least, a reaction to the highly abnormal ... Delight in novelty and amusement at a divergence from the normal turns to fear of the unfamiliar and the unknown once a certain degree of abnormality is reached.
> (Philip Thomson, The Grotesque, p.24)

Bellow uses the grotesque in two ways in his portrayal of the Matriarch. She perceives the world in a grotesque way, from an estranged or alienated perspective. Her vision is deformed and abnormal; some aspects (the horrific, the cruel) are exaggerated

at the expense of others. Then again, Bellow at some point causes us to see her in a grotesque light. The function of this perspective is to devalue her vision of the world, to undermine its validity. It is what Kayser calls 'an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world' (p.188). To regard her as comic as well as sinister causes us to question the wholeness of her view of reality. This stress on abnormality makes a further contrast with the figure of the Saint, who is, as we have seen, strongly connected with the familiar and the normal. The Matriarch we feel to be outside life. In all cases we associate her with coldness, inhumanity, images of death. In her, rigidity has gone beyond the bounds of the comic. She is ossified, a marionette. In her vision of the world she is also opposed to the Slut. The Slut, we have noted, accepts the disorder and imperfection inherent in the human condition and rejoices in it. The Matriarch, however, sees life as mere disorder and chaos; she lacks the redeeming imagination that is able to find 'miraculous goodness' among the perils and monsters of life.

Bellow's comedy thus meets the challenge of a negative, or absurd view of life head on. His is not a facile or tritely optimistic vision. He creates a character who gives full voice to a view antithetical to his own, but by satirizing and mocking that character for her lack of humanity, he suggests that such a view is one-sided, incomplete, not fully human. By including such a character, his comedy is strengthened; it embraces and comprehends the absurd, and ultimately, the tragic.

II

As I have suggested, Aunt Zipporah in Herzog, though a later, is a much slighter creation than the Matriarchs in Augie March. I therefore propose to consider her briefly first, before moving on to the more complex figures of Grandma, Mrs Renling and Anna Coblin.

Herzog's reminiscences of his childhood days in Montreal include memories of visits to and from Aunt Zipporah who, like Grandma Lausch, 'put a regulating hand on the family life'.

Aunt Zipporah was critical of this music business. Helen was not a genuine musician. She played to move the family. Perhaps to attract a husband. What Aunt Zipporah opposed was Mama's ambition for her children, because she wanted them to be lawyers, gentlemen, rabbis or performers. All branches of the family had the caste madness of yichus. No life so barren and subordinate that it didn't have imaginary dignities, honours to come, freedom to advance.

Zipporah wanted to hold Mama back, Moses concluded, and she blamed Papa's failure in America on these white gloves and piano lessons. Zipporah had a strong character. She was witty, grudging, at war with everyone. Her face was flushed and thin, her nose shapely but narrow and grim. She had a critical damaging, nasal voice. Her hips were large and she walked with wide heavy steps. A braid of thick glossy hair hung down her back...

In Yaffe's junkyard in St Anne the ragged cliffs of scrap metal bled rust into the puddles. There was sometimes a line of scavengers at the gate. Kids, greenhorns, old Irish-women or Ukrainians and redmen from the Caughnawaga reservation, came with puscharts and little wagons, bringing bottles, rags, old plumbing or electrical fixtures, hardware, paper, tyres, bones to sell. The old man, in his brown cardigan, stooped, and his strong trembling hands sorted out what he had bought. Without straightening his back he could pitch pieces of scrap where they belonged - iron here, zinc there, copper left, lead right and Babbitt metal by the shed. He and his sons made money during the War. Aunt Zipporah bought real estate. She collected rents. Moses know that she carried a bankroll in her bosom. He had seen it.

'Well, you lost nothing by coming to America ' Papa said to her.

Her first reply was to stare sharply and warningly at him. Then she said, 'It's no secret how we started out. By labour. Yaffe took a pick and shovel on the CPR until we saved up a little capital. But you! No, you were born in a silk shirt.' With a glance at Mama, she went on, 'You got used to putting on style, in Petersburg, with servants and coachmen. I can still see you getting off the train from Halifax, all dressed up among the greeners. Gott meiner! Ostrich feathers, taffeta skirts! Greenhorns mit strauss federn! Now forget the feathers, the gloves. Now -'

'That seems like a thousand years ago,' said Mama. 'I have forgotten all about servants. I am the servant. Die dienst bin ich.'...

Engrossed, unmoving in his chair, Herzog listened to the dead at their dead quarrels.

'What do you expect?' said Zipporah. 'With four children, if I started to give, and indulged your bad habits, it would be endless. It's not my fault you're a pauper here!

'I am a pauper in America, that's true. Look at me. I haven't got a copper to bless my naked skin. I couldn't pay for my own shroud.'

'Blame your own weak nature,' said Zipporah. 'Az du host a schwachen natur. wer is dir schuldig? You can't stand alone. You leaned on Sarah's brother, and now you want to lean on me. Yaffe served in the Kavkaz. A finisternish!

> It was too cold for dogs to howl. Alone, he came to America and sent for me. But you - you want alle sieben glicken. You travel in style, with ostrich feathers. You're an edelmensch. Get your hands dirty? Not you.'
>
> (pp.147-150)

An opposition is immediately set up between Zipporah and the Herzog family. She obviously thinks they live in a world of fantasy and is trying to open their eyes to what she considers to be reality. That reality could be summed up as follows: 'To be successful you need to work hard and not be afraid of getting your hands dirty'. Aunt Zipporah feels she has lived by this credo herself ('Yaffe served in the Kaukaz. A finsternish. It was too cold for dogs to howl. Alone he came to America and sent for me'), and can therefore act as its interpreter for others. (It is no accident that Yaffe has made his fortune dealing in scrap metal and junk.) She criticizes the Herzogs for what she considers to be airs and graces that they can ill afford ('But you! You were born in a silk shirt ... You got used to putting on style in Petersburg with servants and coachmen. I can still see you getting off the train from Halifax, all dressed up among the greeners. Gott meiner! Ostrich feathers, taffeta skirts! Greenhorns mit strauss federn.'

Bellow's treatment of this attitude is interesting. He recognizes that Zipporah's words have a certain force, and Herzog admits that there is much truth in what she says: 'Of course Zipporah, that realist, was right ...'. He also is fully aware of the incongruity between the Herzogs' status and their ambitions ('Mama's ambition for her children ... she wanted them to be lawyers, gentlemen, rabbis or performers. All branches of the family had the caste madness of yichus. No life is barren and subordinate that it didn't have imaginary dignities, honours to come, freedom to advance') and concedes that there is an element of fantasy, a lack of reality in the Herzog life-style.

However, although Bellow allows a certain credibility to Zipporah's version of reality, he refuses to admit that it is the whole truth. Her language has colour and force, but ultimately we feel it is excessive and exaggerated: it is too rhetorical, too abusive. The metaphors are too forceful, too violent; her speech though vivid, is crude. Bellow reinforces our impression

that the world she depicts is only a partial truth by suggesting that she is lacking in generosity. Despite the 'roll of banknotes she carried in her bosom' she refuses to lend Father Herzog any money, and on her visits to Napoleon Street she brings one egg: 'one of the children might be sick. A fresh egg had a world of power'. Indeed warmth, which Zipporah so conspicuously lacks, is exactly what Herzog finds to cherish in Napoleon Street ('What was wrong with Napoleon Street? All he ever wanted was there ... Here was a wider range of human feelings than he had ever again been able to find'). Despite poverty, the Herzogs are bound together by love and, Herzog suggests, by hope ('no life so barren and subordinate that it didn't have its imaginary dignities, honours to come, freedom to advance'). What Zipporah sees as unnecessary frills (piano lessons, white gloves, ostrich feathers), are for the Herzogs the symbols of possibility, and of a dignity which can be found in the meanest life. It is this belief in life's essential dignity, and in its potential, that gives the Herzogs their humanity, and it is the refusal to see life as more than brute labour, cruelty, and struggle, that robs Aunt Zipporah of hers.

Herzog's brief but vivid recollection of his past comes at the centre of the novel and constitutes a summary of its main concern. Gilbert Porter defines this as follows:

> Herzog finds himself lost in the wasteland of existential nothingness 'down in the mire of post-Renaissance, post-humanistic post-Cartesian dissolution, next door to the void'. This is alien country for a man of romantic temperament, and Herzog's journey back to familiar ground is a difficult one. His difficulties stem mainly from the dual nature of his character, from the conflict between his sensibilities and his intellect. His academic background compels him to acknowledge intellectually the conclusions required by evidence, and the chaotic evidence of his life shrieks support for the nay sayers, the touters of the existential void. Yet as a man of feeling, Herzog clings desperately to the impulses of affirmation that come from his heart, the insistent voice of intuition. The intellectual need to systematize and reconcile clashes with the emotional desire to believe on the basis of faith.
>
> (Gilbert Porter, pp.146-7)

The distinction between the 'intellectual conclusions required by evidence' and the 'insistent voice of intuition' which Porter defines as the central conflict of the novel is consonant with the opposition between Aunt Zipporah and the Herzogs. Whereas Herzog's rational self may agree with Aunt Zipporah, his intuition sides with his family, and our reaction is very much the same. Although Zipporah affirms that the secret of success is hard work, she offers no definition of that success, or of the ultimate goal of that labour. Life is brutal, and the sum total of life's aspirations seems to be a junkyard. The Herzog family's 'imaginary dignities' may be illusory, but they represent a faith and a belief in life, which in itself is something positive. The emotional impact of the passage is thus greater than its intellectual power to persuade; we feel a vision of life which can find dignity and joy, despite poverty and hardship, to be finally stronger than one which only admits suffering and toil.

There is an element of the grotesque in Zipporah which stems, I think, from the exaggeration, the extremism in her depiction of reality, and also from her lack of humanity. This excess is the source of both the terrifying and the comic in her character. The portrait is on the borderline between caricature and the grotesque.

III

Bellow's other Matriarchs all resemble Zipporah in that they regard reality as harsh and cruel and in that their relation with their fellow creatures is based on hatred and suspicion, but they differ from her in one respect. Where Zipporah advocates a confrontation with, or immersion in, this reality, the earlier Matriarchs try to evade it in some way. Bellow's attitude to them is thus more complex than his attitude to Zipporah; he seems to regard the evasion of reality as a human weakness, to be treated with mockery and ridicule, but the contempt of reality on which it is based as something anti-human and calling for much severer criticism. Although Bellow's purpose in his treatment of all three Matriarchs remains the same: the exorcism and control through

comedy of a reductive and debasing view of life, the nature of that comedy, and Bellow's attitude to the grotesque both undergo some changes. Comedy of the grotesque is associated in Mrs Renling with the sinister, in Grandma Lausch with the macabre, and in Anna Coblin with the fantastic.

Mrs Renling is perhaps the simplest of the Matriarchs in Augie March. Bellow's attitude to her is more straightforward, less ambivalent than to either Grandma or Anna. Mrs Renling, a childless woman who wishes to adopt Augie, is in fact the last of Augie's substitute mothers. Both Malin and Cohen recognize her as another example of an 'authoritarian woman' or 'leader' but neither see her as being as tyrannical and dangerous as Grandma. Malin talks of her 'noble concentration, her leadership' (Saul Bellows' Fiction, p.78), and Cohen sees her as merely 'a nitpicking social (w)renling' (Saul Bellows's Enigmatic Laughter, p.69). I feel, however, that Bellow's study of power in Grandma is not merely more intense, but more complex, and his presentation of the more negative aspects of her tyranny is qualified by an appreciation of her magnificance. His treatment of Mrs Renling is simpler, and focuses only on the negative aspects of her authoritarianism - the capacity of power to inspire fear - and she is thus ultimately a more sinister creation than Grandma.

Mrs Renling is presented first and foremost as a snob:

> I moved into a student loft in Evanston, where soon the most distinguished thing was my wardrobe. Maybe I ought to say my livery, since Mr and Mrs Renling saw to it that I was appropriately dressed, in fact made a clotheshorse of me, advancing the money and picking out the tweeds and flannels, plaids, foulards, sports shoes, woven shoes Mexican style, and shirts and handkerchiefs - in the right taste for waiting on a smooth trade of mostly British inclination. When I had sounded the place out good I didn't go for it, but I was too stirred up at first, and enthusiastic, to see it well. I was dressed with splendour and working back of the most thrilling plate glass I had ever ever seen, on a leaf street, in a fashionable store three steps under a western timber from the main part of Renling's shop, which sold fishing, hunting, camping, golf and tennis equipment, canoes and outboard motors. You see now what I meant by saying that I have to marvel at my social passes, that I was suddenly sure and efficacious in this business, could talk firmly and knowingly to rich young girls, to country-club sports and university students, presenting things with

one hand and carrying a cigarette in a long holder in the other. So that Renling had to grant that I had beat all the foreseen handicaps. I had to take riding lessons - not too many, they were expensive. Renling didn't want me to become an accomplished horseman. 'What for?' he said. 'I sell these fancy guns and never shot an animal in my life.'

But Mrs Renling wanted me to become a rider and to refine and school me every way. She had me register for evening courses at Northwestern. Of the four men who worked in the store - I was the youngest - two were college graduates. 'And you,' she said, 'with your appearance, and your personality, if you have a college degree ...' Why, she showed me the result, as if it already lay in my hands.

She played terribly on my vanity, 'I'll make you perfect,' she said, 'completely perfect.'

Mrs Renling was pushing fifty-five, light-haired, only a little grey, small, her throat whiter than her face. She had tiny, dry red freckles and eyes of light colour, but not gentle, her accent was foreign; she came from Luxembourg, and it was a great pride of hers that she was connected with names in the Almanach de Gotha for that part of the world. Once in a while she assured me, 'It is all nonsense; I am a democrat; I am a citizen of this country. I voted for Cox, I voted for Al Smith, and I voted for Roosevelt. I do not care for aristocrats. They hunted on my father's estate. Queen Carlotta used to go to chapel near us, and she never forgave the French, because of Napoleon the Third. I was going to school in Brussels when she died.' She corresponded with ladies of the nobility in different places. She exchanged recipes with a German woman who lived in Doorn and had something to do with the Kaiser's household. 'I was in Europe a few years ago and I saw this baroness. I knew her long. Of course they can never really accept you. I told her, "I am really an American." I brought some of my pickled watermelon. There is nothing like that over there, Augie. She taught me how to make veal kidneys with cognac. One of the rare dishes of the world. There's a restaurant now in New York that makes them. People have to make reservations, even now, in Depression time. She sold the recipe to a caterer for five hundred dollars. I would never do that. I go and cook it for my friends, but I would consider it beneath me to sell an old family secret.'

She could cook all right, she had all the cooking arcana. She was known all over for the dinners she threw. Or for those she cooked at other places, because she might decide to make one anywhere, for friends. Her social set were the hotel manager's wife at the Symington, the jewellers, Vletold, who sold to the carriage trade - the heaviest, crested, cymbal-sized fruit dishes and Argonaut gravy boats. There also was the widow of a man involved in the Teapot Dome Scandal, who bred coach dogs. Any number of people like this. For new friends who didn't know her veal kidneys she'd prepare everything at home and cook it at their table. She was an ardent feeder of people, and often cooked for the salesmen; she hated to see us to go to restaurants, where

> everything, she said, in her impersonator's foreign voice that nothing could interrupt, was so cheap and sticky.
>
> That was just it, with Mrs Renling - she couldn't be interrupted or stopped, in her pale-fire concentration. She would cook for you if she wanted to, feed you, coach you, instruct you, play mah-jongg with you, and there was scarcely anything you could do about it, she had so much more force than anybody else around; with her light eyes and the pale, fox stain of her freckles lying in the dust of powder or on the back of her hands, with long hard rays of the tendons. She told me I would study advertising in the School of Journalism at the university, and she paid my fees, and so I did. She also chose for me the other courses I needed for a degree, stressing that a cultured man could have anything he wanted in America for the asking, standing out, she said, like a candle in a coal mine.
>
> I had a busy life. In my new person of which, at the time, I was ungodly proud. With my class evenings, evenings in the library reading history and the cunning books for creating discontent in the consumer; attending Mrs Renling's bridge or mah-jongg soirées in her silk, penthouse parlour, something of a footman, something of a nephew, passing around candy dishes, opening ginger ale in the pantry, with my cigarette holder in my mouth, knowing, obliging, with hints of dalliance behind me, Sta-comb shining on my hair, flower blooming out of my lapel, smelling of heather lotion, snitching tips on what was what in behaviour and protocol.
>
> (pp.153-155)

Mrs Renling wants to take Augie over, to reconstruct his personality, to make him 'perfect, completely perfect'. This is idealism of a kind distrusted in comedy, in direct opposition to comedy's vision of man as 'contingent, imperfect, human'. However when we examine the nature of the perfection that Mrs Renling desires for Augie we find that it consists merely in the accumulation of social accomplishments. Mrs Renling outlines a three point plan for Augie's 'refinement and schooling', envisaging improvements in his appearance, his personality and his education. She makes a clothes-horse of him , 'dressing him with splendour', and under her influence Augie finds himself 'marvelling at his social passes, sure and efficacious, talking firmly and knowingly to rich young girls, to country club sportsmen and university students'. She encourages him to take riding lessons and evening courses at the university. All three improvements are on exactly the same level for Mrs Renling. Her comments reveal that she considers education to be nothing more than another social accomplishment

('with your appearance, and your personality, if you have a college degree ...', 'she also chose for me the other courses I needed for a degree, stressing that a cultured man could have anything he wanted in America for the asking'). A degree is an acquisition, a possession, something to be added to such refinements as Stacomb, heather lotion, and cigarette holders.

If Mrs Renling's ideal of perfection for Augie is one where emphasis is placed on those mannerisms and gestures which make him socially distinctive, she also takes great pride in those aspects of her own upbringing and education that make her distinctive and different. Bellow tells us that her accent was foreign, that she came from Luxembourg and that 'it was a great pride of hers that she was connected with names in the Almanach de Gotha for that part of the world'. Her language is very precise, clearly articulated, almost too perfect; the slight foreignness seems very carefully cultivated. Similarly, she sets great store by her ability to cook rare and complicated dishes, making a great mystery of the recipes and a ritual of their preparation.

Her snobbery is founded on a conception of herself as important and distinctive, as 'more-than-human', and built up by the activity of that self-image in her relations with society. She emphasizes or cultivates anything which will make her seem original or important in the eyes of the world. This deliberate cultivation of originality for its own sake is, Bellow suggests, completely superficial. She is, and Augie becomes, a mere collection of gestures and mannerisms. It is also, in its obsession with appearance and show, a form of vulgarity. She is continually boasting and dropping names, and the friends she associates with are remarkable for their ostentation ('Her social set were the hotel manager's wife at the Symington, the jewellers Vletold who sold to the carriage trade, the heaviest crested, cymbal-sized fruit dishes and Argonaut gravy boats'). The same combination of showiness and good-bad taste is apparent both in the clothes she chooses for Augie ('plaids, foulards, sports shoes, woven shoes Mexican style') and in the degree courses she selects for him ('she told me I would study advertising in the school of Journalism ... stressing that a cultured man could have anything he wanted in America for the asking').

In each case there is the same confusion of excess with quality, the same assumption that biggest is best. Similarly, in each case materialism is masquerading as culture. The jeweller's silverware is notable not for its design but for its size, Augie measures 'refinement' in terms of clothes and possessions, and 'culture' seems important only in that it opens the door to worldly success. The effect of Mrs Renling's 'schooling' on Augie is to coarsen rather than to refine. He becomes 'knowing, obliging, with hints of dalliance behind me, Sta-comb shining on my hair, flower blooming out of my lapel, smelling of heather lotion, snitching tips on what was what in behaviour and protocol' - a marvellous combination of slickness, flashiness, and greasy insincerity.

There is little warmth in Bellow's satire of Mrs Renling's snobbery. He points out with deadly accuracy the elements of self-advertisement and self-seeking underlying her pretensions to refinement and gentility. However, there is a more dangerous side to her snobbery than mere affectation; there is a quality of ruthlessness in her treatment of Augie. Augie is led to believe that he is a social success 'in his new person of which he was ungodly proud, talking firmly and knowingly to rich young girls'. The reality of the situation is, however, that he is no more than a flunkey, 'something of a footman, something of a nephew'. While gratifying Augie's vanity, she manages to ensure that he is kept subordinate. This concealed ruthlessness is of the essence of the sinister.

Her need for power over others is related to her snobbery. It stems from the same self-conception, the same need to validate herself in the eyes of the world, the same lack of self-doubt, but is more dangerous, in that it involves or injures others. The motive behind her adoption of Augie is thus selfish rather than altruistic. She wants to 'build him into her world, to consolidate what she affirmed she was (p.178)Bellow treats this aspect of her character with much greater severity; indeed, at times it goes beyond comedy altogether, and strikes a very different note.

> She couldn't be stopped in her pale-fire concentration. She would cook for you if she wanted to, feed you, coach you, instruct you, play mah-jongg with you, and there was scarcely

> anything you could do about it, she had so much more force than anyone else around, with her light eyes and the pale fox stain of her freckles lying in the dust of powder, or on the back of her hands, with the long rays of the tendons. (p.155)

The tone of this description is extremely sinister: there is something very frightening about the combination of coldness and intensity suggested here. A chilling inhumanity is conveyed by his insistence on her paleness ('light eyes', 'pale fox stain of her freckles') and the skeleton - like 'long hard rays of the tendons' in her hands. The conjunction of this inhumanity with her 'force' and 'concentration' suggests an energy that has been perverted, or wrongly channelled. Exactly the same effect is noticeable in her language, where the precision of her speech ('it is all nonsense ... I do not care for aristocrats ...') conveys a certain coldness, and its abrupt directness with the repeated emphasis on 'I' ('I am a democrat. I am a citizen of this country. I voted for Cox. I voted for Al Smith and I voted for Roosevelt') has an unnatural force and intensity.

Although there is a difference in tone between this passage and Bellow's earlier, more humorous evocation of Mrs Renling's affectations, I would like to suggest that the difference is in degree rather than in nature. Previously Mrs Renling's attempts to be 'more than human' made her appear ridiculous; now Bellow makes us aware of a dangerous, potentially evil side to this self-aggrandizement. Comedy and evil are, however, both the result of misdirected energy, and it is the same twisted energy that gives rise simultaneously to the comic and the sinister aspects of her characterization. The point at which comic vice slides into real viciousness, or the nebulous area where the two are confused, where grin becomes grimace, is the area of the grotesque. Our reaction to Mrs Renling is mixed, our laughter is tempered by a certain repulsion, which adds a chilling quality to Bellow's mockery. However, our attitude is not one of unmixed horror; she is not to be taken as seriously as that. The sinister is rather a reminder of what is <u>potentially</u> evil or dangerous than a study of evil in action.

This point may be developed in a consideration of Mrs Renling's attitude to reality.

She tends to live in a fantasy world, in a glorified past ('Queen Carlotta used to go to chapel near us. She never forgave the French because of Napoleon III'), or in a hypothetical future ('"I'll make you perfect - completely perfect". Why, she showed me the result as if it already lay in my hands'). In contrast, her attitude to the real, everyday world is denigratory and abusive. She talks with distaste of 'restaurants where everything was so cheap and sticky', and of a cultured man standing out among the 'uncultured masses like a candle in a coal mine'. Her disgust at ordinary reality, of course, complements her escapism from it. She cannot bear the imperfections and inadequacies of everyday life or ordinary humanity, and attempts to remove herself from them altogether. This is an attitude inimical to the comic vision, as the following passage demonstrates:

> The hotel was vast, and it was brick construction, but went after the tone of old Saratoga Springs establishments, greenery and wickerwork, braid cord on the portières, menus in French, white hall runners and deep fat of money, limousines in the washed gravel, lavish culture of flowers bigger than life, and triple-decker turf on which the grass lived rich. Everywhere else, in the blaze of July, it was scanty.
>
> I had the long bath hours to myself to see what the territory round about was like. It was mostly fruit country farmed by Germans, the men like farmers anywhere, but the older women in bonnets, going barefoot in long dresses under the giant oaks of their years. The peach branches shone with seams of gum, leaves milky from the spray of insecticides. Also, on the roads, on bicycles and in Ford trucks, were the bearded and long-haired House of David Israelites, a meat-renouncing sect of peaceful, businesslike, pious people, who had a big estate or principality of their own, and farmhouse palaces. They spoke of Shiloh and Armageddon as familiarly as of eggs and harnesses, and were a millionaire concern many times over, owning farms and springs and a vast amusement park in a big Bavarian dell, with a miniature railway, a baseball team, and a jazz band that sent music up clear to the road from the nightly dances in the pavilion. Two bands, in fact, one of each sex.
>
> I brought Mrs Renling here a few times to dance and drink spring water: the mosquitoes, though, were too active for her. Afterwards I sometimes went alone; she didn't see why I should want to. Nor did she see what I strayed into town for in the morning, or why I took pleasure in sitting in

the still green bake of the Civil War courthouse square after my thick breakfast of griddle cakes and eggs and coffee. But I did, and warmed my belly and shins while the little locust trolley clinked and crept to the harbour and over the trestles of the bog-spanning bridge where the green beasts and bulrush-rocking birds kept up their hot, small-time uproar. I brought along a book, but there was too much brown stain on the pages from the sun. The benches were white iron, roomy enough for three or four old gaffers to snooze on in the swamp-tasting sweet warmth that made the redwing blackbirds fierce and quick, and the flowers frill, but other living things slow and lazy-blooded. I soaked in the heavy nourishing air and this befriending atmosphere like rich life-cake, the kind that encourages love and brings on a mild pain of emotions. A state that lets you rest in your own specific gravity, and where you are not a subject matter but sit in your own nature, tasting original tastes as good as the first man, and are outside of the busy human tamper, left free even of your own habits. Which only lie on you illusory in the sunshine, in the usual relation of your feet or fingers or the knot of your shoestrings and are without power. No more than the comb or shadow of your hair has power on your brain.

Mrs Renling did not like to be alone at meals, not even at breakfast. I had to eat with her in her room. Each morning she took sugarless tea, with milk, and a few pieces of zwieback. I had the works, the bottom half of the menu, from grapefruit to rice pudding, and ate at a little table by the open window, in the lake airs that lapped the dotted Swiss curtains. In bed, and talking all the while, Mrs Renling took off the gauze chin band she slept in and began to treat her face with lotions and creams, plucked her eyebrows. Her usual subject of conversation was the other guests. She got them down and polished them off, but good. In the leisure of the early hour, when she bravely rode fence on her face. She would die a well-tended lady who had kept up fiercely all civilized duties, as developed before Phidias and through Botticelli - all that great masters and women of illustrious courts had prescribed and followed for perfection, the kind of intelligence to wear in the eyes and the moulds of sweetness and authority. But she had a wrath-ruled mind. Giving herself these feminine cares in the brightness of her suite in the soft-blown-open summer beauty, she was not satisfied without social digging and the toil of grievances and antipathies.

'Did you notice the old couple on my left, last night at the Bunco party, the Zeelands? Marvellous old Dutch family. Isn't he a beautiful old man? Why, he was one of the greatest corporation lawyers in Chicago, and he's a trustee for the Robinson Roundation, the glass people. The university gave him an honorary degree, and when he has a birthday the newspapers write editorials. And still his wife is stupid as her own feet, and she drinks, and the daughter is a drunkard too. If I knew she was going to be here I would have gone to Saratoga instead. I wish there was some way to get an advance guest list from these hotels. There ought to be a service like that. They have a suite for six hundred dollars

> a month in Chicago. And as soon as the chauffeur comes for the old man in the morning - this is something I know! - the bellhop goes out and buys them a bottle of bourbon and bets on a horse for them. Then they drink and wait for the results. But that daughter, she keeps herself a little old-fashioned. If you didn't notice her last night, look for a heavy-built woman who wears feathers. She threw a child out of the window and killed it. They used all their influence and got her free. A poor woman would have gotten the chair,. like Ruth Snyder, with the matrons standing all around and picking up their skirts so the photographers couldn't get a picture of it. I wonder if she dresses like this now so as to feel nothing in common with that young flapper who did that thing.'
>
> You needed a strong constitution to stick to your spendour of morning in the face of these damnation chats. I had to struggle when she called out her whole force of frights, apocalypse death riders, church-porch devils who grabbed naked sinners from behind to lug them down to punishment, her infanticides, plagues, and incest.
>
> (pp.160-162)

The description of the hotel provides a fitting setting for Mrs Renling. It has the same flashy artificiality, the same vulgar excess of luxury ('the deep fat of money, limousines in the washed gravel, lavish culture of flowers bigger than life, and triple decker turf on which the grass lived rich'). There is, too, the same attempt to ignore or to escape the dirty realities of life. The gravel, we note, is washed, and Augie makes the contrast between the 'triple decker turf' of the hotel and the scantiness of the grass elsewhere.

In fact, the whole of the description of the countryside which follows forms a distinct contrast with the description of the hotel. Emphasis is on an honest simplicity and unpretentiousness ('the women in bonnets, going barefoot in long dresses' ...) and on a vivid sensuous apprehension of reality, on small concrete details that bring the scene to life ('The peach branches shone with seams of gum, leaves milky from spray of insecticides'). Attention moves continually from detail to whole and back again. In each case it is the richness of the scene which is stressed, but it is a richness entirely different from the luxury of the hotel, for it is completely natural ('the heavy nourishing air and the befriending atmosphere like rich life-cake'). Against this background man is seen as being in harmony with nature; there is a sense

of continuity, of the cyclical nature of life ('women ... going barefoot in long dresses under the giant oaks of their years ...', 'three or four old gaffers snoozing in the swamp-tasting sweet warmth ... that made other living things slow and lazy blooded'). In this 'befriending atmosphere' Augie feels free to 'rest in (his) own specific gravity ... to sit in (his) own nature tasting original tastes as good as the first man ... outside the busy human tamper'. He is relieved of the need to dramatize himself, to impress others; he is no longer a 'subject matter', and has lost all self-consciousness.

The vision of life seems to me to echo the comic vision described by Susanne Langer:

> The pure sense of life is the underlying feeling of comedy ... the basic biological pattern which all living things share: the round of conditioned and conditioning organic processes that produces the life rhythm.
>
> (pp.327-8)

Comedy delights in and celebrates ordinary life, and it is ordinary life that Mrs Renling despises.

However, if Augie's description of the natural beauty of the countryside contrasts strongly with the corrupt artificiality of the hotel, it forms an even more dramatic contrast with the breakfast scene which follows it.

Here, the stress on nature and natural beauty is replaced by a focus on artificiality and 'human tamper'. We leave the 'sweet warmth' and 'nourishing air' of the outside world for the confined space of a hotel room and our attention is drawn from the 'soft - blown - open summer beauty' to Mrs Renling's 'feminine cares', and cosmetic beautification. However, the contrast is not merely one between nature and artifice, for Bellow is quick to distinguish between the ordering of nature through civilization and art ('civilized duties, as developed before Phidias and through Botticelli - all that great masters and women of illustrious courts had prescribed and followed for perfection, the kind of intelligence to wear in the eyes and the moulds of sweetness and authority'), and the mere application of cosmetics. Mrs Renling has once again

confused form and meaning, surface and depth. Bellow also makes a distinction between the ordering of energies implied in civilization ('the moulds of sweetness and authority') and Mrs Renling's 'wrath-ruled mind - the suggestion that she is the prey of uncontrolled and violent energies. These energies manifest themselves in her vigorous denigration of the other people at the hotel. Her speech is remarkable for its emphasis on the horrific and brutal aspects of reality. It is interesting, however, that she seems to view evil as socially undesirable rather than morally unacceptable ('if I knew she was going to be here I would have gone to Saratoga instead. I wish there was some way to get an advance guest list from these hotels. There ought to be a service like that'). This again is indicative of her preoccupation with forms of behaviour rather than with their meaning. She speaks of crime and violence with disgust, but also with a kind of fascination. She dwells rather too long on the incidents she describes, and treats them in loving detail. This has the effect of associating her rather too closely in our minds with the evil she describes. Augie suggests the same thing when he speaks of 'her whole force of frights, apocalypse death riders, church porch devils who grabbed naked sinners from behind to lug them down to punishment, her infanticides, plagues and incests'. His description gives Mrs Renling a medieval quality which contrasts with the civilization 'he admires' in Greek or Renaissance art. It has something of the quality of a Bosch painting, the same fascination with horrific detail, the same insistence on the monstrous at the expense of the normal. Bellow underlines our perception of Mrs Renling's vision as both abhorrent and invalid, by drawing our attention away from her catalogue of horrors and placing her 'damnation chats' in the context of the 'splendour of the morning' that Augie can see and feel around him.

Bellow's use of the grotesque here corresponds to Kayser's 'exorcism of the demonic elements in the world'. He meets the challenge of facing up to a vision of reality as base and degrading, and defeats it by suggesting that such a vision is grotesque. The grotesque is an encounter with the monstrous, and a repudiation of it through comedy. Our final attitude to Mrs Renling is one

of repudiation; she is cast out, rather like Malvolio in Twelfth Night. Some of the repulsion we feel at the horrors she describes is transferred to her, and although Augie for some time feels a certain fascination for her (much as we are fascinated by the horrific detail of her descriptions), he is horrified and repelled when Thea suggests he may be attracted to her:

> 'I'll tell you what Esther thinks: she thinks you service the lady you're with.'
> 'What?' I cried out and jumped from the seat and gave myself a crack on the head against the dowels of the swing.
> (p.170)

Ultimately, Augie realizes that he 'didn't want to be built into Mrs Renling's work, to consolidate what she affirmed she was'; and comes to the conclusion that

> you don't take so wide a stand that it makes human life impossible ... but try out what of human you can live with first ... take the mixture, and say imperfection is always the condition as found.
> (p.)

IV

In striving for an unreal perfection, Mrs Renling fails to ascribe to real life its true value. Bellow uses the grotesque as a study of her lack of humanity and an expression of her alienation from life. In her case power, or rather the concealment of power - the fact that ruthlessness masquerades as concern - is seen unequivocally as frightening and sinister. In Bellow's portrait of Grandma, however, power is seen as the source of a certain grandeur, as well as inhumanity, and his use of the grotesque makes his presentation of her more ambivalent than that of Mrs Renling.

The essentials of Bellow's characterization of Grandma, and her place in the novel's structure in relation to Mama have been outlined in the previous chapter. I therefore propose to consder her here principally in relation to the other two Matriarchs and to comedy of the grotesque in Augie March.

Sarah Blacher Cohen has pointed out that there is some ambivalence in Bellow's attitude to Grandma. Gilbert Porter confirms this:

> Since Augie knows Grandma is dishonest and garrulous, he recognises her hypocrisy, but he can still respond to the fierceness with which she holds her views, to the protective way she guards her individuality.
>
> (p.67)

Cohen concludes that 'Grandma's comic traits are more prominent than her malicious ones' (Saul Bellow's Enigmatic Laughter, p.68). True as this is, it is too simple. Grandma may indeed be drawn with more humour than Mrs Renling, but Bellow's perspective on her is constantly shifting, and we are continually having to re-examine and reassess our attitude to her.

Grandma is the first of the 'Machiavellians of small street and neighbourhood' that people Augie's early years, and his recollection of her is extremely vivid. His portrait of her is drawn through a child's eyes, qualified at intervals with more adult reflections and judgements. This may go some way towards accounting for its complexity. His childhood awe of her is tempered by an adult recognition of her true nature. Thus we are intensely aware of the power and force of her personality, even while Bellow reminds us of her limitations:

> Grandma Lausch played like Timur, whether chess or Klabyasch, with palatal catty harshness and sharp gold in her eyes. Klabyasch she played with Mr Kreindl, a neighbour of ours who had taught her the game. A powerful stub-handed man with a large belly, he swatted the table with those hard hands of his, flinging down his cards and shouting 'Shotch! Yasch! Menel! Klabyasch! Grandma looked sardonically at him. She often said, after he left, 'If you've got a Hungarian friend you don't need an enemy.' But there was nothing of the enemy about Mr Kreindl. He merely, sometimes, sounded menacing because of his drill-sergeant's bark. He was an old-time Austro-Hungarian conscript, and there was something soldierly about him: a neck that had strained with pushing artillery wheels, a campaigner's red in the face, a powerful bite in his jaw and gold-crowned teeth, green cockeyes and soft short hair, altogether Napoleonic. His feet slanted out on the ideal of Frederick the Great, but he was about a foot under the required height for guardsmen. He had a masterly look of independence. He and his wife - a woman

quiet and modest to the neighbours and violently quarrelsome at home - and his son, a dental student, lived in what was called the English basement at the front of the house. The son, Kotzie, worked evenings in the corner drugstore and went to school in the neighbourhood of County Hospital, and it was he who told Grandma about the free dispensary. Or rather, the old woman sent for him to find out what one could get from those state and county places. She was always sending for people, the butcher, the grocer, the fruit peddler, and received them in the kitchen to explain that the Marches had to have discounts. Mama usually had to stand by. The old woman would tell them, 'You see how it is - do I have to say more? There's no man in the house and children to bring up.' This was her most frequent argument. When Lubin, the case-worker came around and sat in the kitchen, familiar, bald-headed, in his gold glasses, his weight comfortable, his mouth patient, she shot it at him: 'How do you expect children to be brought up?' While he listened, trying to remain comfortable but gradually becoming like a man determined not to let a grasshopper escape from his hand. 'Well, my dear, Mrs March could raise your rent,' he said. She must often have answered - for there were times when she sent us all out to be alone with him - 'Do you know what things would be like without me? You ought to be grateful for the way I hold them together.' I'm sure she even said, 'And when I die, Mr Lubin, you'll see what you've got on your hands.' I'm one hundred per cent sure of it. To us nothing was ever said that might weaken her rule by suggesting it would ever end. Besdes, it would have shocked us to hear it, and she, in her miraculous knowledge of us, able to be extremely close to our thoughts - she was one sovereign who knew exactly the proportions of love, respect, and fear of power in her subjects - understood how we would have been shocked. But to Lubin, for reasons of policy and also because she had to express feelings she certainly had, she must have said it. He had a harassed patience with her of 'deliver me from such clients', though he tried to appear master of the situation. He held his derby between his thighs (his suits, always too scanty in the pants, exposed white socks and bulldog shoes, crinkled, black, and bulging with toes), and he looked into the hat as though debating whether it was wise to release his grasshopper on the lining for a while.

'I pay as much as I can afford,' she would say.

She took her cigarette case out from under her shawl, she cut a Murad in half with her sewing scissors and picked up the holder. This was still at a time when women did not smoke. Save the intelligentsia - the term she applied to herself. With the holder in her dark little gums between which all her guile, malice, and command issued, she had her best inspirations of strategy. She was as wrinkled as an old paper bag, an autocrat, hard-shelled and jesuitical, a pouncy old hawk of a Bolshevik, her small ribboned grey feet immobile on the shoekit and stool Simon had made in the manual-training class, dingy old wool Winnie whose bad

> smell filled the flat on the cushion beside her. If wit and discontent don't necessarily go together, it wasn't from the old woman that I learned it. She was impossible to satisfy. Kreindl, for example, on whom we could depend, Kreindl who carried up the coal when Mama was sick and who instructed Kotzie to make up our prescriptions for nothing, she called 'That trashy Hungarian', or 'Hungarian pig'. She called Kotzie 'the baked apple', she called Mrs Kreindl 'the secret goose', Lubin 'the shoemaker's son', the dentist 'the butcher', the butcher 'the timid swindler'.
>
> (pp.9-11)

In this passage, Bellow highlights three aspects of Grandma's personality: her authoritarianism, her claim to aristocracy, and her love of scheming and strategy. All three aspects spring from her conviction that she is in some way above the common run of humanity and that she can therefore outwit others or bend them to her will; and all three taken together constitute a kind of sovereignty. Bellow emphasizes this by the particular vocabulary he uses. She does not merely give orders but 'commands and governs', 'sends for' and 'receives' people, 'rules' the house. Similarly, she is not merely snobbish but has a certain 'grandeur', does not merely scheme, but has 'inspirations of strategy' and plays chess 'like Timur'.

This has important implications for the tone and type of comedy used in her presentation. She is no ordinary comic pretender, snob, or schemer, but possesses a kind of splendour. Our reaction is thus divided. Bellow exposes her pretensions and ridicules them, but we are nonetheless conscious of their magnificence. Bellow's comic method consists in underlining the marked contrast between her regal manner and the poverty and meanness of her surroundings. She is not ruling a nation but a timid woman and three children; the people she 'sends for' and 'receives' in the kitchen are the butcher and baker, and her elaborate plotting and 'strategy' are all designed to gain discounts or social benefits. Like Mrs Renling she lives partly in a glorified past and partly in a future of plans and strategies.She attempts to ignore the present, or to bend it to fit in with her fixed ideas.

However, if one tendency of Bellow's comedy is to mock Grandma, there is a corresponding counter-tendency. We cannot help taking a delight in her power and energy, her capacity to rise above

her mean surroundings. As I have suggested, this is explicable on a level of narrative realism: Augie as a child sees Grandma as an all-powerful sovereign, but as an adult is aware of her limitations. The ambivalence in our view of Grandma also echoes the tension in the book as a whole, between individuality and fate. Augie is torn between an intense desire to cultivate a 'personal destiny, a fate good enough' and a realization that 'when the striving stops, life is there as a gift'. He thus admires Grandma for her individuality, while distrusting her attempt to force life into her pattern, to make it fit her mould. Finally, it is the tendency of comedy as a whole to delight to some extent in the very characters it deflates and criticizes. Maurice Charney suggests this in Comedy, High and Low:

> pretenders are not only deflated, but also displayed and celebrated ... The justification is in their magnificence. All the memorable comic pretenders ... are superlatives after their own kind, non-pareils, extraordinary men.
>
> (p.62)

However, Bellow limits our appreciation of Grandma's energy in a much more serious way than merely making her the butt of his ridicule. He suggests that there is a fundamental lack of generosity in that energy. This is clear in his comment on her wit: 'If wit and discontent don't necessarily go together, it wasn't from the old lady that I learned it'. Grandma's language is vivid, forceful, full of colour and verve, the compressed images are penetratingly accurate, but her wit is always employed in the service of denigration. Augie, while taking a certain pleasure in the power and energy of her language, makes it clear that his appreciation is tempered by the unpleasant nature of its content:

> She was impossible to satisfy. Kreindl, for example on whom we could depend. Kreindl who carried up the coal when Mama was sick and who instructed Kotzie to make up our prescriptions for nothing, she called, 'that trashy Hungarian', or 'Hungarian pig'.

He implies that there is an absence of warmth which cramps her

wit, prevents it from flowering out into the generosity of humour. There is always something rather crabbed and carping about it. He pinpoints the cause when he says 'she was impossible to satisfy'. Like Mrs Renling, her belief in her own superiority is complemented by a reductive and debasing view of everyday reality, and a lack of respect for other human beings:

> On the sideboard, on the Turkestan runner with their eyes ears and mouth covered, we had see-no-evil, speak-no-evil, hear-no-evil, a lower Trinity of the house ... The old woman like a great lama, - for she is Eastern to me in the end - would point to the squatting brown three, whose mouths and nostrils were drawn in sharp blood red, and with profound wit, her unkindness finally touching greatness, say, 'nobody asks you to love the whole world, only to be honest, ehrlich. Don't have a loud mouth. The more you love people, the more they'll mix you up. A child loves, a person respects. Respect is better than love. And that's respect, the middle monkey. It never occurred to us that she sinned mischievously herself against that convulsed speak-no-evil who hugged his lips with his hands, but no criticism of her came near our minds at any time, much less when the resonance of a great principle filled the kitchen.
>
> (p.14)

If Bellow admires Grandma's fierce individuality, he cannot subscribe to her determining principle that 'the more you love people, the more they'll mix you up', or to her view of life as 'the trustful, loving and simple, surrounded by the cunning-hearted and tough, a fighting nature of birds and worms, and a desperate mankind without feelings'. The novel, however, turns around the paradox that the one entails the other. The preservation of individuality always seems to be detrimental to others, and the love or care for others seems to involve the total abnegation of self; and although Augie towards the end of the novel moves towards a vision of individuality realized through commitment, that vision is never fully dramatized.

It is clear from this passage that Grandma's moral code is based entirely on pragmatic self-preservation: a loud mouth may get you into trouble, loving people may 'mix you up'. Bellow underlines the deficiencies in these principles by suggesting that for the old lady they replace religion. She is seen as a

'lama' and the monkeys as her gods, 'a lower trinity of the house'; any deviation from the code of conduct they represent is 'sin'. The effect of the implicit comparison is to suggest that Grandma's concept of life is one that lacks nobility and dignity. Any spiritual dimension, idealism or conception of the sacredness of human life is conspicuously absent from her 'religion'. In addition, there is something repulsive about the 'squatting, convulsed' monkeys, with their mouths and nostrils drawn in 'sharp blood-red'. They have a primitive, distorted, misshapen quality rather more like medieval gargoyles or devils than gods, and with this image Bellow implies that there is something grotesque as well as ignoble in Grandma's view of life. It is ignoble because based merely on pragmatism, grotesque because it is founded on hate. Thomson's exploration of the qualities of the grotesque is illuminating in this respect:

> There is a norm for caricaturistic exaggeration - a norm of abnormality. When this norm is exceeded, the caricature is no longer simply funny, but disgusting or fearsome besides, for it approaches the realm of the monstrous... In literature particularly, it is not just the degree of distortion or exaggeration which determines whether we find the caricature simply funny or disgusting besides. Obviously the manner in which the caricatured person or feature is presented is a further important factor. Thus Shakespeare's Sir Andrew Aguecheek strikes us simply as ridiculous and comic: the fop is not seen as threatening or disgusting, he is harmless. Malvolio, on the other hand, may well appear grotesque on occasions because he is not only ridiculous, but presented also as being malevolent.
>
> (pp.38-39)

This suggests that grotesqueness can be a moral quality, and that hatred or spite - the wish to harm others - is what makes a character grotesque. Malevolence can thus be seen as a moral equivalent to physical distortion or abnormality, just as in medieval times, physical deformity was taken as indicative of an evil nature. The three monkeys are thus, in a sense, a physical manifestation of the grotesqueness of Grandma's warped morality.

The above quotation also offers an interesting hint as to the relationship between caricature and the grotesque. Thompson defines the grotesque as 'caricature that has exceeded the norm

of abnormality'. Bellow's use of caricature in the portrayal of Grandma is ambivalent: it gives us a sense both of her power and of her limitations. The massive detail in which she is presented is responsible for the vividness and energy of her characterization, but at several points in his presentation Bellow 'exceeds the norm of abnormality' and we have the sense that her energy is perverted. Exaggeration thus serves both to bring her to life and to signal her deviation from the norms of life.

The use of the grotesque, then, is the main method by which Bellow qualifies our appreciation of Grandma's energy, and the moral grotesqueness of her philosophy of hate is matched, on a physical level, by an insistence on her age and decay:

> She shook the crabbed unit of her hand at me with the fierceness of the words, till now spoken only to herself, bitterly, and with them there came out an oceanic lightning of prophecy that had gathered in her skull by the stoveside through days not otherwise very lighted.
>
> 'Remember when I am in my grave. Augie, when I will be dead!'
>
> And the falling hand landed on my arm; it was accidental, but the effect was frightful, for I yelled as if this tap had tenfold hit my soul. Maybe I was yelling about my character, made to feel the worst of it, that I'd go to the grave myself with never the hope of another and better; no power to relieve me of it, purify and redeem me from it; and she was putting herself already beyond life to make her verdict on me binding beyond recall.
>
> 'Gedenk, Augie, wenn ich bin todt!"
>
> But she couldn't stand to dwell long on her death. Heretofore she hadn't ever mentioned her mortality to us, so it was a sort of lapse; and even now she was like a Pharaoh or Caesar promising to pass into a God - except that she would have no pyramids or monuments to make good the promise and was that much inferior to them. However, her painful, dreadful, toothless, gape-gummed crying the cry of judgement in the lock of death worked hard on me. She had the power to make a threat like this more than the threat of ordinary people, but he also had to pay the price of her own terror at it.
>
> (p.46)

With the reference to the 'crabbed unit of her hand' an element of nightmare enters the description. The hand seems to become a thing in itself, detached from the body, to take on an autonomy with the references to 'the unit of the hand' and 'the falling hand'. It also seems to become something other than a

hand, a crab, a claw, finally the hand of Death itself: Augie 'yells as if the falling hand had tenfold hit his soul'. Furthermore, the hand itself seems bony or skeletal, and this is linked to the references to her 'skull' and her 'toothless, gape-gummed crying', which conjure up the image of a death's head. At several points in the narrative Grandma seems to become a macabre, death-like figure. This has a twofold effect. It reminds us of her mortality, which she attempts to ignore. Augie tells us 'she couldn't stand to dwell long on her death', and this is symptomatic of her refusal to accept limits, of her conviction of her superiority, her attempt to go beyond the merely human. Susanne Langer suggests that it is in fact the knowledge and acceptance of death that shapes the comic experience and is ultimately responsible for the 'sense of life' in comedy:

> No matter how people contrive to become reconciled to their mortality, it puts its stamp on their conception of life: since the instinctive struggle to go on living is bound to meet defeat in the end, they look for as much life as possible between birth and death - for adventure, variety and intensity of experience ... The known limitation of life gives form to it, and makes it appear not merely as a process, but as a career.
>
> (p.333)

To deny death is to put oneself outside life altogether, and this is the second function of the macabre in Grandma's characterization. It serves as a reminder of her lack of humanity. The effect of the grotesque or macabre is to alienate. The intrusion of grotesque or macabre detail in a description causes a shock of repulsion, and with this, a violent shift of perspective. We are thus distanced from Grandma instead of appreciating her.

In the following passage the repulsion and alienation we feel at Grandma's macabre appearance is mirrored in our horror at the spiteful pleasure she takes in suggesting Georgie's banishment:

> Presently we all knew what was up. The old woman was ready to deliver her stroke. She waited for an evening when we were all at supper. I came in from delivering death-flowers; Simon was off from the station. The old woman hit out in her abrupt way and declared it was time we did something about Georgie, who was growing up. There was beef stew on

the table, and everybody, the kid included, continued to eat meat and wipe up gravy. But I never assumed, like the old woman, that he was an unwitting topic; not even the poodle was entirely that but knew even when she became deaf before her death that she was spoken of. And sometimes Georgie had the Gioconda's own look and smile when he was being discussed, I declare he did, a subtle look that passed down his white lashes and cheeks, a sort of reflex from wisdom kept prisoner by incapacity, something full of comment on the life of all of us. This wasn't the first time Grandma had spoken of Georgie's future, but now it was not just another observation but getting down to cases. I assume Mama already knew about it, from the look of waiting that came on her face. Sooner or later something had to be done about him, said the old woman. He was hard to manage, now he was growing so tall and beginning to look like a man. What would we do if he took it in his head to take hold of some girl, she said, and we had to deal with the police? This was her rebuke in full for all our difficulty, disobedience, waywardness, and unmindfulness of our actual condition, and I was the main cause of it, as I realized very well. She said Georgie should go to an institution. It was common sense anyhow, that he couldn't stay with us all his life, and we hadn't shown much ability to carry burdens so far. Besides, Georgie had to learn to do something and be trained in basketry or brushmaking or what it was they could teach the feeble-minded, some trade that would help pay his keep. She finished strong, with the threat that neighbours with little daughters already were angry, seeing him roam around the yards, ready to put on long pants. Not making her distaste any too fine, she said he had reached his development of a man. As something lewd that had, however, to be faced. She got this across, in her granny grimace of repugnance, and left us with her horror.

Ah, it was great for her to make us take a long swig of her mixture of reality and to watch the effect come up sober in our eyes. Finishing her speech, she had a terrific look of shrewd pleasure. Her brows were standing up. I maintain that Georgie had an idea of the topic, while he went on and wiped up the beef gravy. I don't want to make out that her position was all wicked evil while his was nothing but sublimity. That couldn't be true. She had a difficult practical burden, that of suggesting this shocking thing by which supposedly we would benefit. We wouldn't have had the strength or wisdom to propose it. Like so many loving, humane people who, however, have to live, just like everyone else, and count on tougher souls to carry them along. But I am allowing Grandma her best excuse. Because there still remains the satisfaction this gave her. She breathed that tense 'Aha!' to herself with which she closed a trap in chess. It was always this same thing; we refused to see where our mistakes were leading, and then the terrible consequences came on. Similar to Elisha's bear that rushed on the children who were taunting him; or the divine blow that cracked down that Jew so thoughtless as to put out a hand to keep the

> ark of the covenant from falling off the wagon. It was punishment for mistakes there would be no time now to correct, that was what it was. She was happy when she could act in behalf of this inexorability she was all the time warning us about.
>
> (pp.60-62)

Just as we feel that Mrs Renling is a little too closely associated with the crime and violence she describes, we sense that Grandma's analysis of Georgie's situation is far from dispassionate. Though Georgie's departure is probably necessary, Bellow suggests that her motive for suggesting it is spiteful. There may be an element of revenge: 'a rebuke for all our difficulty, disobedience, waywardness, and unmindfulness of our actual condition'. Certainly, she has been planning the move for weeks, which gives a premeditated coldness to her action. Bellow talks of her 'hitting out' and 'delivering her stroke', which implies a kind of violence in the action, and her 'terrific look of shrewd pleasure' is one of pure malevolence. However, she mostly wants to 'make them take a long swig of her mixture of reality', to instruct them in the hard lessons of life and force them to share her version of reality: a world of 'hunger, misery, crime ... stockyards, work-certificates, shovel labour, penitentiary rock piles, bread and water, and lifelong ignorance and degradation'. Her principal illustration of the horror of life here is Georgie, whom she speaks of as something disgusting or monstrous. Bellow opposes this in two ways. Firstly he gives us a portrait of Georgie which suggests that although feeble-minded, he is no way disgusting but has a serene beauty and wisdom of his own. (This view is identical with the comic vision which finds dignity and nobility in even the humblest and most imperfect member of creation.) Secondly, he suggests that Grandma's disgust is too personal. There is the same horrified fascination with detail as in Mrs Renling's 'damnation chats', and her 'terrific look of shrewd pleasure' is vampire-like. There is something infinitely more obscene in her 'granny grimace of repugnance' than in Georgie's 'development of a man': the horror and lewdness are all Grandma's own.

However, if he totally rejects Grandma's view of life, it is a measure of the humanity of his comedy that he finally claims

our sympathy for Grandma herself.

Her fall on the ice shortly after her disposal of Georgie is symbolic of and initiates her fall from power in the March family. While Bellow implies that power is self-destructive, he is also aware of the pathos involved in Grandma's loss of power, as the following passage, describing her final departure from the March house, shows:

> On the final day she watched the trunk wag down the front stairs, on the back of the mover, with an amazing, terrible look of presidency, and supervised everything, every last box, in this fashion, gruesomely and violently white so that her mouth's corner hairs were minutely apparent, but in rigid-backed aristocracy, full face to the important transfer to something better, from this (now that she turned from it) disgracefully shabby flat of a deserted woman and her sons whom she had preserved while a temporary guest. Ah, regardless how decrepit of superstructure, she was splendid. You forgot how loony she'd become, and her cantankerousness of the past year. What was a year like that when now her shakiness of mind dropped off in this moment of emergency and she put on the strictness and power of her most grande-dame days? My heart went soft for her, and I felt admiration that she didn't want from me. Yes, she made retirement out of banishment, and the newly created republicans, the wax not cool yet on their constitution, had the last pang of loyalty to the deposed, when mobs silent, see off the limousine, and the prince and princely family have the last word in the history of wrongs.
>
> (p.113)

Here Bellow plays on the same discrepancy between humanity and sovereignty that he used to comic effect earlier on, but here the effect is one of pathos. The difference is one of distance. Previously we felt detached from Grandma, and were therefore able to smile at her failings. Now those same weaknesses arouse our sympathy. Two factors are responsible for this change. Firstly, she had in her early 'grande-dame' days the appearance at least of superiority over her environment, whereas here it is painfully obvious that she is at the mercy of circumstances: the balance of power has changed. We feel some instinctive hostility (coupled though it may be with admiration) towards a character who sets himself up as superior, but feel much closer to an underdog. Secondly, Grandma's self-conception has changed. In the early days, she

was unaware of any discrepancy between her idea of herself and her actual circumstances; here she is only too aware of a distressing actuality. When Grandma was unaware of, or attempted to ignore reality, her regal airs were the source of comedy; here they are the source of pathos.

Yet she is not merely pathetic. Augie expresses a duality of reaction: 'My heart went soft for her and I felt admiration that she didn't want from me'. There is something worthy of admiration still, as well as something moving about Grandma's plight. The way she clings to her last tattered shred of dignity is heroic. In a sense, her sovereignty has become a metaphor for her humanity, instead of a denial of it: an expression of the nobility of human life which refuses to be debased or defeated by external circumstances.

Finally, there is a mood of forgiveness. Augie, in his admiration for Grandma's courage and nobility, forgets her crankiness and pardons her autocracy.

V

The ambiguity of Bellow's attitude to Grandma is consonant with Aquinas's distinction between outgoing and withdrawing passions. He sees the former as compatible, the latter as incompatible with life:

> Man's life consists in a certain movement, which flows from the heart to the other parts of the body and this movement is befitting to human nature according to a certain fixed measure ...
> Consequently, those passions that imply a movement of the appetite in pursuit of something, are not repugnant to the vital movement as regards its species, but they may be repugnant thereto as regards its measure ... If they be excessive they may be harmful to it.
> On the other hand those passions which denote in the appetite a movement of flight or contraction are repugnant to the vital movement, not only as regards its measure, but also as regards its species, wherefore they are simply harmful.
> (William Nelson, The Poetry of Edmund Spenser pp.182-3)

If the 'vital movement' or the 'pure sense of life' is the underlying

feeling of comedy as Susanne Langer claims, then this passage may be taken as having a bearing on the comic sense. Excess is a comic vice, but one that we take a certain delight in, for it is not, in essence, contrary, or harmful to life. Meanness, on the other hand, is threatening or sinister rather than comic. Grandma's striving after nobility, her energy and wit, are outgoing. They are excessive, and therefore comic, but are not inimical to life. Her abuse of reality, however, is a flight from or refusal to accept life, and is seen as harmful in itself, as aberrant or grotesque.

This distinction may be developed in a consideration of Bellow's characterization of Anna Coblin.

When Augie is twelve he is 'farmed out by the old woman to get a taste of life'. One of his first jobs is with his mother's cousin Anna and her husband, who employ him as a paper boy:

> Hyman Coblin came for me in his Ford; George howled when I left the house, he had a way of demonstrating the feelings Mama could not show under ban of the old woman. George had to be shut up in the parlour. I sat him down by the stove and left. Cosuin Anna wept enough for everybody and plastered me with kisses at the door of her house, seeing me dog-dumb with the heartbreak of leaving home - a very temporary kind of emotion for me and almost, as it were, borrowed from Mama, who saw her sons drafted untimely into hardships. But Anna Coblin, who had led the negotiations for me, cried the most. Her feet were bare, her hair enormous, and her black dress misbuttoned. 'I'll treat you like my own boy,' she promised, 'my own Howard.' She took my canvas laundry-bag from me and put me in Howard's room, between the kitchen and the toilet.
>
> Howard had run away. Together with Joe Kinsman, the undertaker's son, he had lied about his age and enlisted in the Marine Corps. Their families were trying to get them out, but in the meantime they had been shipped to Nicaragua and were fighting Sandino and the rebels. She grieved terribly, as if he were dead already. And as she had great size and terrific energy of constitution she produced all kinds of excesses. Even physical ones: moles, blebs, hairs, bumps in her forehead, huge concentrations in her neck; she had spiralling reddish hair springing with no negligible beauty and definiteness from her scalp, tangling as it widened up and out, cut duck-tail fashion in the back and scrawled out high above her ears. Originally strong, her voice was crippled by weeping and asthma, and the white of her eyes coppery from the same causes, a burning, morose face, pieous, and her spirit untamed by thoughts or the remote considerations

> that can reconcile people to awfuller luck than she had. Because, said Grandma Lausch, cutting her case down to scale with her usual satisfaction in the essential, what did she want, a woman like that? Her brothers found her a husband, bought him a business, she had two children in her own house and a few pieces of real-estate besides. She might still be in the millinery factory where she started out, over the Loop on Wabash Avenue. That was the observation we heard after Cousin Anna had come to talk to her - as one comes to a wise woman - amassed herself into a suit, hat, shoes, and sat at the kitchen table looking at herself in the mirror as she spoke, not casually, but steadily, sternly, with wrathful comment; even at the bitterest, even when her mouth was at the widest stretch of tears, she went on watching.
>
> (pp.21-22)

Bellow's treatment of Cousin Anna is different in two respects from his treatment of the other Matriarchs. Firstly, it relies much more on comedy of manners. Although Grandma and Mrs Renling are recognizable 'types', comedy in Anna's characterization is founded rather more solidly on a cultural stereotype: the Jewish mother. Sarah Blacher Cohen notes all the important aspects of the stereotype:

> As Bellow's caricature of the Jewish mother she gives free rein to all her emotions. When she is not wildly mourning the absence of her son or virulently cursing the fiends who spirited him away, she is anxiously priming her nine year old daughter for marriage and melodramatically alerting her greenhorn brother to the dangers of marrying an exploitive American woman, yet she still manages to provide Augie with her macaronic account of the Old Testament unabridged stories, and does not neglect to over feed her brood to compensate for any rough treatment they might receive outside her maternal nest.
>
> (Saul Bellow's Enigmatic Laughter, pp.66-67)

As we can see from Cohen's commentary, the two main comic flaws of the Jewish mother are excessive emotion and excessive possessiveness. (The two together constitute, of course, excessive maternalism.) The way Bellow extends, develops, and explores these two characteristics transforms Anna into a distinctive and individual comic character.

Excess is in fact the key to Anna's character. This brings

us on to consider the second way in which she differs from the other Matriarchs: the quality of her energy. In the other Matriarchs, energy is aimed or channelled. In Anna it is diffuse, uncontrollable, and undirected. This is true both on a physical level (she produced all kinds of excesses ... moles, blebs, hairs, bumps in her forehead, huge concentrations in her neck) and on a spiritual level: Bellow speaks of her spirit as 'untamed'. A contrast is made between Anna's wild uncontrolled grieving for her son, and Grandma's frosty assessment of her situation, 'cutting her case down to scale, with her usual satisfaction in the essential'. The contrast is not only between Anna's undisciplined energy and Grandma's concentrated intensity, but between Anna's emotionalism and Grandma's rationality. Anna basically suffers from an uncontrolled or chaotic imagination. For her, a thing is no sooner imagined than it becomes real. Her son, having run away to join the Marines, is, to her, already dead. The world, accordingly, is a terrible and frightening place, where all her worst fears may be realised.

Where Mrs Renling's or Grandma's view of reality is reductive, Anna's is disproportionate, viewed through a distorting mirror:

> For Anna was terribly religious and had her own ideas of time and place, so that Heaven and eternity were not too far; she had things segmented, flattened down, and telescoped like the stages and floors of the Leaning Tower, while Nicaragua was at a distance double the circumference of the world, where the bantam Sandino - and who he was to her is outside my power to imagine - was killing her son.
>
> (p.25)

Whereas Mrs Renling and Grandma try to prepare their 'sons' for the outside world, instructing them in their versions of reality, preparing them for the hard lessons of life, Anna tries to shield them from reality, keeping them as long as possible within the maternal nest. Bellow suggests, in fact, that Anna's imagination, uncontrolled as it is, is peculiarly limiting and self-regarding. The recurring image of her 'looking at herself in the mirror as she spoke, not casually but steadily, sternly, with wrathful comment even at the bitterest, when her mouth was at the widest stretch of tears', emphasizes this (her grief seems to feed on itself); so does Bellow's comment on her spirit 'untamed by the remote considerations that can reconcile people to awfuller luck than

she had'. Anna's imagination although it seems so expansive and wide-ranging, never goes beyond herself, and this is why her view of the world appears so distorted: she can only see things from her own point of view. Her imagination is like one of those fairground mirrors which try to take in a wider compass than is normally possible from one viewpoint, or a fisheye or wide-angle lens.

It is clear from the above passages that both Anna and her view of the world are grotesque. The same elements that make her comic also make her grotesque: namely excess, a sense of nature having got out of control; distortion, a sense that she, and her view of the world are out of proportion; and a confusion of fantasy and reality.

But although Anna is recognizably grotesque, she lacks the horror or nightmare we find in Mrs Renling and Grandma. Anna's style of grotesquerie is more fantastical. It has affinities with the type of grotesque described by Clayborough:

> The characteristics of the grotesque style of art (were) extravagance, fantasy, individual taste, and the rejection of the natural conditions of organisation.
> (Clayborough, The Grotesque in English Literature, p.6)

Anna totally 'rejects the natural conditions of organisation' for extravagance and fantasy of her own, and is thus to some extent, a distortion of nature. But her energies flow outwards in all directions. There is certainly nothing mean or shrunken about her. She represents, if anything, an excess of life, and although we recognize that this may be harmful, we do not regard it, in Aquinas's phrase, as 'repugnant in species'.

The meaning of the grotesque in Anna's characterization is one with the message of Bellow's comedy: that life, however imperfect, is sacred, and that individuals, however flawed, are members of a common humanity. She is not, because of her imperfections, to be set apart and derided, but to be delighted in and celebrated as a 'contingent, imperfect, earth bound creature'.

CONCLUSION

> Chaos doesn't run the whole show. This is not a sick and hasty ride helpless, through a dream into oblivion ...
>
> (Henderson The Rain King p.165)

> Because of the high rate of speed, decades, centuries, epochs, condensing into months, weeks, days, even sentences. So that to keep up, you had to run, sprint, waft, fly ... You had to be strong enough not to be terrified by local effects of metamorphosis, to live with disintegration, with crazy streets, filthy nightmares, monstrosities come to life, addicts, drunkards and perverts celebrating their despair openly in mid-town. You had to bear the tangles of the soul, the sight of cruel stupidity ...
>
> (Mr Sammler's Planet p.61)

In this conclusion I hope to draw together some of the suggestions and assumptions that have been made during the course of the thesis, focusing successively on the nature of comedy in general, Bellow's comedy in particular, and the role of his women in that comedy. By way of a starting point, I would like to consider briefly a work which has been conspicuously absent from my discussion so far: Mr Sammler's Planet.

Mr Sammler's Planet is not a comedy. I have suggested elsewhere in the thesis that this is due to Bellow's failure to provide any genuine affirmative locus in the society he depicts. The only positives in the work are in the central personage, Mr Sammler himself, or in the dream world of an alternative society on the Moon. There are problems with both these positives. I have already discussed the difficulties involved in making the central consciousness of the action also its moral centre. The reaction of critics to this has on the whole been hostile. Sammler seems to arouse the same dislike in readers as the satirized character in comedy, and for precisely the same reasons: he attempts to set himself up as the super-human judge of an imperfect humanity.[1] The notion

1 Sarah Blacher Cohen however offers an alternative reading of the novel in which she sees Sammler the ironist as himself ironically undercut by Bellow's authorial irony, as sharing the same imperfections as his collection of deviants. The evidence of the novel does not, however, bear this out: the sureness

of an ideal society on the Moon is similarly opposed to comedy: again the ideal is to be found outside humanity, not within it.

I will attempt to define the difference between Bellow's satire and his comedy in a brief consideration of the ways in which the women in Mr Sammler's Planet differ from those in his comic novels.

The three women in Mr Sammler's Planet, Margotte, Shula, and Angela, are not mother figures or sexual partners like the women in the comic novels; they are instead subjected to the scrutiny of a paternalistic or avuncular gaze. However, they do correspond to types in the comic novels, although they are extensions of the type rather than variations on it.

Shula and Margotte are both recognizable versions of the Slut. Both are associated with images of muddle and disorder, although there is a small difference between them, as the following passage will reveal:

> She talked junk, she gathered waste and junk in the flat, she bred junk. Look, for instance, at these plants she was trying to raise. She planted avocado pits, lemon seeds, peas, potatoes. Was there anything ever so mangy, trashy, as these potted objects? Shrubs and vines dragged on the ground, tried to rise on grocer's string hopefully stapled fanwise to the ceiling. The stems of the avocados looked like the sticks of fireworks falling back after the flash, and produced a few rusty, spiky, anthrax-damaged, nitty leaves. This botanical ugliness, the product of so much fork-digging, watering, so much breast and arm, heart and hope, told you something, didn't it? First of all, it told you that the individual facts were filled with messages and meanings, but you couldn't be sure what the messages meant. She wanted a bower in her living-room, a screen of glossy leaves, flowers, a garden, blessings of freshness and beauty - something to foster as woman the germinatrix, the matriarch of reservoirs and gardens. Humankind, crazy for symbols, trying to utter what it doesn't know itself. Meantime the spreading fanlike featherless quills: no peacock purple, no sweet blue, no true green, but only spots before your eyes. Redeemed by a feeling of ready and available human warmth? No, you couldn't be sure. The strain of unrelenting analytical effort gave Mr Sammler a headache. The worst of it was that these frazzled plants would not, could not respond. There was not enough light. Too much clutter.

1 contd.
of its tone stems from the sureness of its values and to believe that Bellow is suggesting that Sammler may be a little wrong or a little extreme in his views, is to render impotent and insipid a novel chiefly remarkable for the passion and vehemence of its invective.

> But when it came to clutter, his daughter, Shula, was much worse. He had lived with Shula for several years, just east of Broadway. She had too many oddities for her old father. She passionately collected things. In plainer words, she was a scavenger. More than once, he had seen her hunting through Broadway trash baskets (or, as he still called them, dustbins). She wasn't old, not bad looking, not even too badly dressed, item by item. The full effect would have been no worse than vulgar if she had not been obviously a nut. She turned up in a miniskirt of billiard-table green, revealing legs sensual in outline but without inner sensuality, at the waist a broad leather belt; over shoulders, bust, a coarse strong Guatemalan embroidered shirt; on her head a wig such as a female impersonator might put on at a convention of salesmen. Her own hair had a small curl, a minute distortion. It put her in a rage. She cried out that it was thin, she had masculine hair. Thin it evidently was, but not the other. She had it straight from Sammler's mother, a hysterical woman, certainly, and anything but masculine. But who knew how many sexual difficulties and complications were associated with Shula's hair? And, from the troubled widow's peak, following an imaginary line of illumination over the nose, originally fine but distorted by restless movement, over the ridiculous comment of the lips (swelling, painted dark red) and down between the breasts to the middle of the body - what problems there must be! Sammler kept hearing how she had taken her wig to a good hairdresser to have it set, and how the hairdreser exclaimed, please! to take the thing away, it was too cheap for him to work on! Sammler did not know whether this was an isolated incident involving one homosexual stylist, or whether it had happened on several separate occasions. He saw many open elements in his daughter. Things that ought but failed actually to connect.
>
> (pp.19-20)

Margotte is 'boundlessly, achingly on the right side ... enormously desirous of doing good'. She is essentially idealistic, searching for order. Shula, on the other hand, is merely chaotic. Both represent, in different ways, extensions or distortions of a Demmie-like figure, but in each a different side of Demmie's character is emphasized. In Margotte, the emphasis is on the images of goodness we associate with Demmie; in Shula, the focus is on the images of disorder.

Citrine's description of Demmie ('her goodness was genuine and deep. She bought me postage stamps and commuter tickets ...') forms a telling contrast to Sammler's characterization of Margotte's boundless, aching desire to do good. The one is simple and practical, the other is vague and idealistic. More importantly, however,

the one symbolizes the potency of good, the other its impotence. Demmie's small gestures of tenderness have a significance for Citrine that goes beyond mere gesture, but Margotte's desire for good never goes beyond the level of gesture. Where Demmie finds that life holds a 'miraculous goodness', Margotte finds only incomprehensible 'messages', and where Demmie ultimately represents the triumph and the power of faith, Margotte symbolizes its failure and its uselessness: the plants 'stapled hopefully to the ceiling are mangy, trashy' and produce only a few 'rusty, spiky, anthrax-damaged leaves'.

'Margotte, like Demmie, is associated with 'clutter', but Shula 'is worse' . Just as the images of the power of faith in Demmie are transmuted into images of failure and hopelessness in Margotte, the images of disorder which characterize Demmie are changed into images of mere chaos in Shula. The difference is that Demmie rises above the merely incidental; Shula represents the triumph of the incidental. We note that whereas in Demmie disparate elements are fused to form a unique and coherent character, Sammler sees in Shula 'many open elements ... things that ought but actually failed to connect'. The image of Shula's clothes ('she was not too badly dressed item by item'), where the parts utterly fail to add up, is a complete reversal of Bellow's presentation of Demmie, where it is the combination of various incongruous and conflicting qualities that makes her so delightful.

Wylie Sypher defines the comic as 'the irrational, the inexplicable, the surprising, the nonsensical' (The Meanings of Comedy, p.195) and what makes Shula amusing is basically that which also makes Demmie comic: the juxtaposition of incongruous and conflicting elements. The difference is that whereas our laughter at Demmie ultimately reinforces our belief in the wholeness and goodness of life, our laughter at Shula is tinged with the horror we feel at the absurdity of a fragmented and meaningless existence. Another comment of Sypher's is illuminating in this connection: 'Comedy begins from the absurd and inexplicable and tolerates the miraculous' (The Meanings of Comedy p.238). The connection is not tenuous: the miraculous is an inexplicable absurdity. The basis of the comic vision is the belief that the irreconcilables and incompatibilities of life are the source of the miraculous as well as

of catastrophe, and the comic character embodies the faith that the marvellous will triumph over the disastrous. It is this faith that acts as the unifying force in comedy, transforming a mere jumble of incompatibles into a whole vision. It is this faith and this unity which is lacking in the portrait of Shula. She represents a view of life as wholly absurd, as containing only irrational, conflicting, chaotic impulses.

In the description of Shula there is a noticeable element of repulsion. This is centred on her sexuality, in such phrases as 'the ridiculous comment of the lips ... the legs sensual in outline but without inner sensuality ...' This element of disgust is even more apparent in the presentation of the third woman in Mr Sammler's Planet, Angela, who is a distortion of another of Bellow's comic types, the High Priestess:

> In Angela you confronted sensual womanhood without remission. You smelled it, too. She wore the odd stylish things which Sammler noted with detached and purified dryness, as if from a different part of the universe. What were those, white-kid buskins? What were those tights - sheer, opaque? Where did they lead? That effect of the hair called frosting, that colour under the lioness's muzzle, that swagger to enhance the natural power of the bust! Her plastic coat inspired by cubists or Mondrians, geometrical black and white forms; her trousers by Courreges and Pucci.
> ... With a low-necked blouse she wore a miniskirt. No, Sammler changed that, it was a microskirt, a band of green across the thighs. The frosted hair was pulled back tightly; the skin was full of female qualities (the hormones). On her cheeks large gold earrings lay. A big, shapely woman childishly dressed, erotically playing the kid, she was not likely to be taken for a boy. Sitting hear her, Sammler could not smell the usual Arabian musk. Instead her female effluence was very strong, a salt odour, similar to tears or tidewater, something from within the woman. Elya's words had taken effect strongly - his 'Too much sex'. Even the white lipstick suggested perversion.
>
> (Mr Sammler's Planet, pp.27, 237)

Like Renata, Angela caricatures her own sexuality but instead of Citrine's riotous celebration of the body Sammler conveys a deep disgust. The difference is again one of wholeness. Whereas with Renata Citrine's emphasis was on the sense of life conveyed through her appearance, Sammler coldly anatomizes Angela. Each detail is fragmentary, detached from the whole, and has a deadly,

repulsive quality. The emphasis is also on the unnaturalness of her appearance and the ways in which fashion distorts and corrupts. The white lips suggest perversion, and the description of the skin sounds as if the hormones have been artificially injected.

Sypher suggests that 'nothing human is alien to comedy' (The Meanings of Comedy, p.213), and Potts echoes this: 'The comic writer need not spare anything in nature, but he must not fall out with nature herself' (Comedy, p.154). In Mr Sammler's Planet Bellow has, it appears, fallen out with nature. Mr Sammler's Planet is informed by the same ideals as Bellow's comedy, but the fact that the one searches in vain for nobility and dignity within a chaotic, bestial, and obscene creation, while the other finds that nobility and dignity in the humblest and grossest of its creation marks them as opposing modes - those of rejection and acceptance.

Comedy finds that 'importance springs from the stress of nature and the cry of life, not from reason and its pale prescriptions' (Georges Santayana, 'The Comic Mask', in Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies, p.137), and where satire, the voice of reason, finds the irrational and inexplicable disturbing and frightening, comedy finds the absurd laughable but also delightful. Above all, comedy is a double vision, finding the sacred within the profane, the marvellous in the everyday. The single focus of satire gives it a greater power and concentration, but comedy, while more evanescent and intangible, is ultimately a more complex vision.

Bellow has himself stated that 'obliged to choose between complaint and comedy, I choose comedy as more energetic, wiser, manlier.' (Gordon L. Harper, 'Saul Bellow - The Art of Fiction, An Interview', Paris Review 37, p.62). Mr Sammler's Planet was an anomaly in Bellow's fiction, and with the publication of Humboldt's Gift, Bellow has once again 'chosen comedy' and, in the words of a sympathetic critic, 'returned to the planet he used to share with us' (Clayton, Saul Bellow: In Defence of Man, p.260). Bellow's 'choice' of comedy as a vehicle for the expression of his conception of human nature has been explained thus by Sarah Blacher Cohen:

> No matter what particular form Bellow's comedy takes, his underlying comic vision is there to oppose his pessimistic

> outlook. This is not to say that his comic vision is unwaveringly cheerful. When his heroes experience intense frustration and disenchantment, it becomes tinged with the dour and the morbid. During such dark moments it is overwhelmed with the same perplexity at the world's absurdity and entertains the same suspicion of its malicious intent that struck Melville's Ishmael when he remarked: 'There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody's expense but his own.' But Bellow's comic vision only seldom regards life as a cruel joke. While not exultingly prophesying the happy ending, it most often holds out the possibility of a hard-won delight in the temporal. Although acknowledging evil, it affirms the prevalence of good. This good, however, is not to be equated with the summum bonum as discussed by the philosophers and touted by the preachers. All too aware of the impossibility of having untarnished virtue, Bellow accepts the actual with its mixture of dross and purity. Like Augie March, he cannot go along with 'the Reverend Beecher telling his congregation, "Ye are Gods, you are crystalline, your faces are radiant!"' Much less idealistic in his assessment of humanity, Bellow defines us as 'not gods, not beasts, but savages of somewhat damaged but not extinguished nobility.' In his novels he therefore refrains from using the tragic mode, since it assumes that man has an exalted nature which, though sorely tested, will ultimately reassert itself. He likewise avoids the mode of strict naturalism which holds that man, no matter how hard he tries to uplift himself, remains essentially brutish. Instead, Bellow chooses the comic mode, since it does not depict man in either extreme. Because it is able to capture the subtleties of man's composite makeup, Bellow finds it best suited to illustrate his hybrid conception of human nature.
>
> (Saul Bellow's Enigmatic Laughter, pp.5-6)

She insists that Bellow is no facile optimist, but gives full weight to the opposition in his novels, and that our delight is the more profound for being 'hard-won'. The central opposition in Bellow's novels is between the hero and a series of male figures - theorists, idealists, and cranks of all kinds. These figures come in two main guises: the Ideal Constructionist, who offers a theory of life, a neatly packaged intellectual system, and the Reality Instructor, the 'nay sayer, touter of the intellectual void'. In either case, the comedy is ideological: the naive and blundering Bellow hero is seduced and threatened by the attraction and danger of the Idea, and eventually manages to break free and and assert his own shaky affirmation of life: 'experience is bigger

than any set of beliefs about it' (Frye, p.229).

If the ideological universe of Bellow's comedy is defined by his men, then moral universe is defined by the women. The women, though peripheral, increase the range of the spectrum of comic response, and add a further, moral, dimension to the comedy. If the men are defined by the cult of ideas, the women are defined by the cult of the personality; they make, in a sense, an ideal construction of the personality.

Within each book the women define the structure. In Dangling Man and The Victim, the women are there as a kind of background against which the hero's actions may be seen and judged more clearly. In Augie March the opposition between Mama and Grandma defines the conflict between acceptance and striving which is the source of the tension within Augie's own character and the basis for every encounter in the novel. A further opposition is set up between Augie's various surrogate mothers, who present a reductive and nihilistic vision of life, and Thea, who reveals the dangers of idealism to Augie. In Henderson The Rain King, it is the search for the joy that Lily embodies that drives Henderson to Africa, and it is in the figure of Willatale that he finds it. Herzog is caught between Madeleine and Ramona, structurally the complete reverse of each other. The intellectual crisis in Herzog's life is brought on by an emotional crisis from which Herzog eventually turns to Ramona for an emotional solution. Finally, in Humboldt's Gift, the women form a kind of magnetic field around the hero. Denise and Renata define opposite poles of stifling refinement and coarse materialism, pretension and crude vitality, arid intellectualism and flamboyant sexuality. Between these two, Demmie and Naomi represent a joyous acceptance of the 'exactly human': Demmie as 'icon of human actuality' and Naomi as golden mean.

The women also define the spectrum of comedy across Bellow's work as a whole. They are distinguished by the quality of energy which determines our moral and our comic response. At one end of the comic spectrum, where comedy turns to satire, we have the frozen energy of the Matriarch, who offers a grotesquely nihilistic view of life. Unlike satire, comedy does not focus on such characters, and finally casts them out, although in so doing it can at its

highest find a saving dignity and grace even in them.

The Bitch, the self-dramatizing female equivalent of the Ideal Constructionist, has a dangerously concentrated intensity which comedy scornfully laughs out. Though such a character may be sinister or threatening when her intensity is linked to malice, her energies may merely expend themselves in empty air. They are then viewed as pretensions or affectations and receives ridicule rather than scorn. Ridicule is also the attitude adopted towards the High Priestess whose energy is that of mere excess, of the exaggerated gesture. With this character the comedy begins to admit a covert regard, for the gesture is harmlessly empty, its flamboyance has a certain magnificence and originality. The zestful energy of the Slut plunges her into dangers and disasters, but her vitality remains unimpaired and we delight in the innocent exuberance that enables her to recover goodness and wholeness from the arbitrary mishaps and disparate conflicts of the world she inhabits. Energy in the Saint finally takes the form of a reservoir of strength. Forces which conflict in the other characters are here held in equilibrium, and we turn to her as a resting place - the one still point of the whirling world of comedy.

Bellow's comedy thus laughs out all affection, pretension, self-dramatization - in a word, the attempt to be more than human. It is equally severe on coarse materialism and reductive nihilism, on the underestimation and the devaluation of life. Between these two extremes are the Slut and the Saint, the one an active version of the other, both defining the ideal-within-the-norm of comedy.

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