

**SAUL BELLOW'S *THE BELLAROSA CONNECTION* AND *THE ACTUAL*:
POSTMODERNISM, PERFORMANCE CULTURE,
AND THE SEARCH FOR SALVATION**

THESIS

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BY

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By

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Romantic poets and other edifying theorists of the nineteenth century had it wrong—poets and novelists will never be the legislators and teachers of mankind. That poets—artists—should give new eyes to human beings, inducing them to view the world differently, converting them from fixed modes of experience, is ambition enough, if one must offer a purposive account of the artist's project. What makes that project singularly difficult is the disheartening expansion of trained ignorance and bad thought. For to put the matter at its baldest, we live in a thought-world, and the thinking has gone very bad indeed.

Saul Bellow

I have spoken of a crisis of culture; but the dangers we confront run a good deal deeper. For men and women do not live by culture alone; and in the narrower sense of the term the great majority of them do not live by it at all. Radical cultural theorists have many faults, but megalomania is unlikely to be among them: it belongs to our very materialism to believe that, in any profound process of social change, we are not likely to be positioned at the centre.

Terry Eagleton

I myself seem to be doing an idiotic thing in looking for signs of highest ability in human types evidently devoted to being barren.

Harry Trellman in *The Actual*

It would be a tremendous understatement, and nearly absurd at this point in his career, to state that Saul Bellow's foremost interest resides in the individual and his or her place in contemporary society. The one constant throughout Bellow's vast work is his conviction that humanity has abandoned the human element in order to capitalize on the material and mechanized environment which he believes may have subsequently annihilated the spirit of the individual person. To accomplish his goal Bellow has studied most major

intellectual and artistic movements and their thinkers and artists and has implemented them into his work, from the English Romantic poets to W.B. Yeats to Friedrich Nietzsche to the current terminology of today's popular culture, in order to effectively comment on humankind's condition. An example of Bellow's training appears in 1989's *The Bellarosa Connection*, in which Bellow describes the backing of his heroine's—Sorella Fonstein's—eyes in terms of “the camera obscura” (40) not simply to incorporate and link them to the mechanics of photography, but also to relate her perception of the world, a perception held by the majority of his characters, to that of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels and their version of reality and society.

In *The German Ideology* (1846), Marx and Engels write: “If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process” (211). Ultimately, this is the concept that Bellow administers in every work he has written—a view that allots him an opportunity to thrust any one of his characters into the current situation of life and have them respond emotionally and intellectually to these life-processes: to present his characters, and their inverted view of the world, in such a manner as to report on the intrinsic problems of life. In almost every Bellow work there is a trace of Marxist philosophy and the process of “dehumanisation” that appears in every aspect of society existent at that moment. His characters suffer through Marx's worst nightmare of alienation and exploitation and consequently are forced to surrender their creative power under these breakdowns—whether they are self- or socially-induced—an extremely postmodern theme. And although Bellow scholars recognize these elements within his fiction—several critics

have examined the Marx issue—the sounding proclamation among these critics is to continue examining his work according to a conservative pattern, one that Bellow has been woven into, that treats him as the greatest living traditional American realist writer alive. What these critics fail to recognize is that Bellow’s intentions and style have changed in the past ten to twenty years, and he has essentially dedicated his recent work to the study of the postmodern condition and the effect it has on the individual.

Marianne M. Friedrich, in *Character and Narration in the Short Fiction of Saul Bellow*, is one of a minority of Bellow critics to examine the postmodern strain in his work. Although Friedrich constantly wavers back and forth in her treatment of Bellow as modernist and postmodernist, she does nevertheless discuss certain elements that are important not only to Bellow, but also to postmodern writers and theorists. She writes: “Bellow insists that the writer today is continuously called upon to explore ever new modes of representation to accommodate in his writing the complexity of the changing socio-economic and cultural conditions of our time” (194). However, Friedrich suggests that Bellow believes these new modes should be presented realistically, a contention that can be both confirmed and refuted in his work, but a view I believe that unfairly pigeonholes Bellow into a fixed pattern. Although I agree with Friedrich’s suggestion that Bellow has “accommodated” the changes of culture and society in his fiction, I reject her claim that Bellow is still the traditional American Realist. Friedrich’s view is merely another example of Bellow scholarship’s outright refusal to apply different approaches of criticism to his fiction even though they realize it has evolved into something beyond their basic blueprint. In *Postmodern Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, Steven Connor describes an interpretation of postmodernism that

uncannily resembles Bellow's design. Connor maintains that the "structural support . . . of the postmodern debate . . . is the emergence of new forms of social, political and economic arrangement" (23). This emergence Connor speaks of is Bellow's purpose in the majority of his fiction and especially in the two works I examine with this thesis: *The Bellarosa Connection* (1989) and *The Actual* (1997). Bellow not only takes a pro-active stance in the creation of a postmodern writing style, but also structures his commentary in such a way as to awaken the reader's awareness of this newly pervasive paradigm. Bellow's participation in postmodernism is essentially threefold: he comments on, reacts to, and at times stylistically participates in postmodernism.

Chapters Two and Four of this thesis are devoted to this postmodern theme in Bellow's more recent fiction. The postmodern vein in this work demonstrates Bellow's growth as a thinker and writer, and his ever-expanding and intensifying vision. Whereas the crux of recent Bellow commentary asserts that his work is now often stagnant, recycled, and benign, I firmly contend that Bellow's work is still as provocative and passionate as his earlier critical masterpieces—even more so now since he clearly perceives the current crisis in culture and the inescapable consequences it has produced.

Instrumental to Bellow's postmodern vision is his treatment of and commentary on the theatrical performance involved in everyday life and human interaction. I will discuss this element briefly in Chapter Two and extensively in Chapter Five. While some critics have explored the Bellowian character's dependence on role-playing, very few, if in fact any, have examined Bellow's attitude on the social-theater of contemporary life and the harvest of normalizing attitudes Bellow believes it has established. This vision is the outlet that allows Bellow to explore the final rudiments of authentic selfhood and discuss

the aspects of contemporary life that have permeated nearly every position of postmodern culture: television, advertising and popular culture, high-capitalism, pseudo- and New-Age philosophies, and the sum of all of these, performing a role for any given set of occasions that arise in order to promote, create, or establish a deportment primarily for financial and social advancement. My contention is that Bellow uses *The Bellarosa Connection* and *The Actual* to expound on this postmodern dimension of role-playing and performance; moreover, he establishes characters in each of these novellas who create and act out lives completely dedicated to performing subscribed and readily-adaptable roles. I plan to utilize the work of preeminent social-theorist Erving Goffman in order to define and unlock Bellow's purpose for his focus on this theme in these novellas, and to also illuminate the social concerns of Bellow—a point closely related to his postmodern approach.

According to Friedrich, the impulse of Saul Bellow "as a penetrating and critical observer of a chaotic and fragmented world [is] always complemented by an equally strong impulse to transcend, to synthesize, to impose order, meaning and value, to move from the fragmentation toward wholeness" (194). The goal of the third chapter of this thesis is to investigate and explain Bellow's faith-in-the-individual trait by examining one of his earliest novellas along with his latest, *Seize the Day* and *The Actual* respectively. The protagonists in both of these works have suffered some form of emotional dislocation from society, whether it be circumstantial or self-applied—usually it is a combination of both, for the typical Bellovian protagonist, if there is such a thing as a "typical" Bellovian character—and desperately attempt to establish a sense of personal and social definition while imbedded in this dislocation. Both Tommy Wilhelm of *Seize*

the Day, and Harry Trellman of *The Actual* struggle with their very lives and existence, and diligently strive to resolve the plethora of mistakes and bad decisions they have made throughout the course of their lives. Tommy Wilhelm, however, is devoured by his choices and his behavior and emotionally and physically collapses at the closing of *Seize the Day*, whereas Harry Trellman actualizes his self, love, happiness, and his relationship with Amy, and at the end of the novella is on the verge of marrying the woman who completes his life. Therefore, the underlying question I address is why and how does Bellow alter his redemptive strategies in his later work, and what methods does he employ to accomplish the affirmation and reconciliation of his characters.

Gloria L. Cronin, in one of the earliest treatments of Bellow as postmodernist (1983), makes several statements that are critical to the vision of this thesis. She writes in “The Seduction of Tommy Wilhelm: A Postmodernist appraisal of *Seize the Day*”:

In this novel [*Seize the Day*], and others, Bellow, perhaps more than any other living American novelist, has shown his anger with what he has called the stifling orthodoxies of Modernism, orthodoxies which have demonstrated in twentieth-century literature the quotidian fall of the defeated individual into humiliating private experience, and the seeming logic of nihilistic estimates of life. (25)

Cronin’s assertion is the focus of my argument. By examining Bellow’s postmodern stance and commentary, his treatment of a performance culture that adamantly refuses to identify and partake in the actualization of the inner-self and to be relatively genuine, and his reliance on a reader who will decipher and understand his message, another dimension of his work becomes apparent, thus placing that work in the canon of not only the twentieth century, but also of the twenty-first century.

In her 1973 book entitled *Saul Bellow*, Brigitte Scheer-Schazler closes her study with the statement: “It is difficult to imagine where Bellow will go from here” (126). My purpose, and the ultimate goal of this thesis, is to report on the results of Bellow’s journey—to illustrate where he *has gone* philosophically and stylistically since the early 1970’s. Consequently, I examine and demonstrate how Bellow has moved from the staunch realism he formally practiced into the ambiguity and indeterminacy of postmodernism, and how he still has the focus and uncanny ability to implement a kind of humanism into this formula. This study not only examines an issue that has been widely overlooked by Bellow’s critical community—the function of postmodernism in his work—but also establishes Bellow as an artist who continues to be moved by current issues and to react with his original, yet collective, form of puissant work.

CHAPTER II

AN INTRODUCTION INTO

POSTMODERNISM, PERFORMANCE THEORY,

AND THE CONTEMPORARY READER:

A STUDY OF THE FOUNDATION OF

SAUL BELLOW'S RECENT WORK

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.

William Butler Yeats ("The Second Coming")

Living in a borderland between the modern and the postmodern creates tension, insecurity, confusion, and even panic, as well as excitement and exhilaration, thus producing a cultural and social environment of shifting moods and an open but troubling future.

Steven Best and Douglas Kellner (*The Postmodern Turn*)

When there is too much going on, more than you can bear, you may choose to assume that nothing in particular is happening, that your life is going round and round like a turntable. Then one day you are aware that what you took to be a turntable, smooth, flat, and even, was in fact a whirlpool, a *vortex*.

Louie of "Something to Remember Me By."

The majority of Saul Bellow scholars categorically refuse to entertain the notion that there is an element of the postmodern in Bellow's philosophical base and work. The overriding consensus of the scholarship up to the 1990s predominantly associates Bellow

with humanistic and traditional American realist literary patterns. In some instances, any other theoretical approach besides the humanistic is considered reckless and quixotic. Granted, the humanistic vein within Bellow's fiction which asserts that humanity can ultimately achieve selfhood and self-realization through reason and other human sensibilities cannot be denied—it exists and runs throughout his vast canon. Bellow's principal concern with the condition of the contemporary human is the optimal force behind his work. Nevertheless, I propose an alternate view, one that encompasses the humanistic method, but also treats society's current situation with a theory of postmodern humanism that is more capable of delineating the forces behind human interaction and behavior.

Many Bellow scholars view his work as an extension and expansion on the nineteenth-century American transcendentalists—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman. M. Gilbert Porter in "Is the Going Up Worth the Coming Down: Transcendental Dualism in Bellow's Fiction" argues precisely for this point, while also claiming that Bellow supplements his transcendental view with the less than optimistic transcendentalists, Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne, creating a "dualistic" (19) form of American transcendentalism. Porter writes:

That Saul Bellow is steeped in the writings of the American transcendentalists is evident from the many allusions to and quotations from their writings in his own work and from his tendency to be drawn as they were into a philosophical vacillation between the schools of affirmation and negation. Bellow's fiction can in fact be classified according to the dominance of one or the other of these visions, both in the Bellow canon and within individual novels. (22)

This statement demonstrates the critical opinion of about one-fourth of the scholarly conversation on Bellow. The bulk of the remaining percentage comes from the critics who regard Bellow as the humanist and traditional American realist.

Two such critics, among this vast majority, who treat Bellow's work in this manner are Stanley Trachtenberg and John Jacob Clayton. In his Introduction to *Critical Essays on Saul Bellow*, Trachtenberg describes Bellow and his work with the declaration:

Bellow's resistance to alienation has for the most part taken the form of an individual's struggle to define those qualities which identify him as human, qualities which, for Bellow, emerge sometimes in opposition to, sometimes as a function of, the belief that goodness can be achieved only in the company of other men. In exploring these alternatives, Bellow has demonstrated an overriding concern for the ordinary circumstances of daily reality. (xiii)

Trachtenberg examines and ultimately focuses on Bellow's form of humanism that desires to reestablish each individual's connection to the human world, to counter the alienation with human interaction and self-actualization. Trachtenberg's stance is definitely the common thread in Bellow scholarship, and something that Clayton further elaborates on in *Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man*. Clayton's book is probably the most comprehensive individual piece of Bellow scholarship currently in publication. He, unlike many other Bellow scholars, focuses on multiple issues in Bellow and takes numerous approaches to these issues. However, the core of his platform essentially measures Bellow as a humanist and late-realist, something that connects him to Bellow's critical oeuvre. Clayton argues that Bellow's "interests are the interests of this culture—he knows *where we're at*" (3), and that his form is in the mold of Whitman and the

“champion of the individual,” something considered unique to American literature—the “glorification of the individual” and the “magnificent individualists of his (Bellow’s) novels” (41) prove this, according to Clayton.

Strangely enough, the most stringent supporter of Bellow as an artist in the realist tradition is not even a traditional Bellow scholar: literary and social critic Charles Newman. In *The Post-Modern Aura: The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation*, Charles Newman attacks the entire concept of postmodernism, and utilizes Bellow’s fiction to expound on the ability of someone remaining devoted to the realistic tradition in an age of chaotic theoretical strategies that are “too weak to marshall the centrifugal forces [they have] released” (5). Newman severely heightens the common view of Bellow as realist by declaring that “Bellow’s poignancy is characteristic of the Realist Revivalist in an officially Modernist culture” (75). Newman’s pronouncement may in fact be the bravest, and the most confining for that matter, statement in the immense scope of Bellow commentary for he doggedly refuses to consider Bellow’s writing as anything other than neo-realism.

One more view concerning Bellow as American realist is voiced in an article which, perhaps unintentionally, documents Bellow’s break from the humanistic and realistic form of literature, and conveys a point that is crucial to the crux of my argument. In “Fathers and Sons: “Papa” Hemingway and Saul Bellow,” Allan Chavkin demonstrates the conscious break that Bellow made with mid-twentieth-century American realism, and his absolute refusal to practice the nihilism that Hemingway and other American realists had founded. Chavkin calls Hemingway “an oppressive influence which the younger writer had to repudiate in order to forge his own art” (449), and insists that Bellow

deliberately “rejects” Hemingway’s “rigid code and victimizing determinism” (460) for a more imaginative design. Although Hemingway’s variegated form of realism differs from Bellow’s or any other approach previously mentioned, what is of critical importance is Bellow’s cognizant break from a formulaic pattern. Chavkin’s article supplies an interesting perspective into the mind of a young Bellow who refuses to be another American moralizing and victimizing realist: an act that further indicates his ability to practice postmodernism in such a subtle manner that it is overlooked and often dismissed as improbable. I will examine Bellow’s more recent break with modernism, and discuss how a postmodern reading of his latest fiction is imperative and demands a critical avenue that is not supplied by mainstream Bellow critics.

Before any attempt to argue and defend the assertion that Saul Bellow engages in postmodernism and can at times be read as a postmodernist, a working theoretical approach should be defined so as to avoid, or simply lessen, the confusion of the methodology I will be proposing. In general, Bellow critics ignore the possibility of postmodern elements in Bellow’s fiction because they firmly believe that his stable and humanly-grounded form of fiction defies any current definition of postmodernism. Moreover, their position has a certain amount of validity considering the vagueness and constant vacillation, to use an oxy-moron to describe an oxy-moronic movement, of postmodernism. In Bellow’s case, however, I suggest that the reader and critic alike should consider Daniel Bell’s view of postmodernism in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, in which he states that “the inability to define [postmodernism] . . . is understandable, for if one could define it, it would not be postmodernism, since it would then have an identifiable referent” (297). We currently live in this period of instability

with the indefinable aspect of postmodernism being the only definition we have. Therefore I contend that, while considering traditional Bellow scholarship and implementing many of its assertions into my argument, a view which examines Bellow's version of the postmodern and the current vision of his prose technique is heavily advantageous to the whole of Bellow commentary because it will one day be the "referent" for future scholarship—postmodernism, while confusing and ambiguous, is where Bellow presently resides.

The various approaches to postmodernism and its effect on contemporary society are often diametrically opposed to each other, and at times extraordinarily confusing and ambiguous. Many postmodern critics begin their discussion of postmodernism with a disclaimer stating that a concrete and stable definition does not and never will exist. Linda Hutcheon, in "Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism," starts her essay with a discussion on the lack of stability that is inherent in postmodernism rhetoric:

Of all the terms bandied about in both current cultural theory and contemporary writing on the arts, postmodernism must be the most over- and under-defined. It is usually accompanied by a grand flourish of negativized rhetoric: we hear of discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentering, indeterminacy and anti-totalization. What all of these words literally do (by their disavowing prefixes, *dis-*, *de-*, *in*, *anti-*) is incorporate that which they aim to contest—as does, arguably, the term *postmodernism* itself. (243)

Hutcheon eventually limits the confines of her definition of postmodernism, and contends that its primary reservoir is "fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical and inescapably political" (244). This notion is at loggerheads with the view of postmodern

Marxist critic Fredric Jameson in *The Cultural Turn*, who begins many of his discussions with a similar disclaimer but at length associates postmodernism with the pattern of schizoid behavior under high-capitalism and with the prominent feature of pastiche, “the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask . . . a blank parody” (5).

An alternate vision is supplied by Steven Best and Douglas Kellner—a vision that links both Hutcheon’s and Jameson’s appeals to society, while uncovering a few of the progenitors of postmodern thought and divulging their importance to contemporary postmodernism. Best and Kellner demonstrate the significance of three instrumental figures whose ideas have furnished the infrastructure of postmodernism: Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Soren Kierkegaard. Best and Kellner understand the vagueness of postmodern theory, and therefore provide ample background and significant events to their discussion. A number of their positions are closely related to those of Bellow, and thus are useful for examining his work and considering its postmodern elements. Their work on the society of the spectacle analyzes a theme that is similar to Bellow’s current perspective. They argue that “alienation [has been] generalized and made comfortable” (85) in the postmodern world, something that Bellow references many times in his recent material. Best and Kellner also investigate the mass commodity consumption that is such a prominent feature of today’s culture, and suggest that it has destroyed any chance of the creation of “new forms of life and consciousness” (227). These positions are extremely relevant to the core of Bellow’s latest work and help to clarify and elaborate how Bellow’s characters struggle to find themselves while outside culture and life does the same.

For a writer with such an immense and critically successful canon, very few scholars have treated Bellow's work as postmodern. At this juncture in history it is incredibly important to emphasize not only the postmodern aspects of Bellow's work, but also note the contemporary reader's position and how the pervasiveness of postmodern attributes radically influence the reading process as a whole. Best and Kellner write that "in this society, individuals consume a world fabricated by others rather than producing one of their own" (82), a statement that closely resembles Bellow's attitude and something that is readily accessible in his work—especially the work he has produced over the last ten years. Ultimately, I will use the term postmodernism almost exclusively as a conglomerate of both social and literary postmodern theory (resembling those mentioned previously) in order to comment on the contemporary condition of the individual, and to present what I perceive as Bellow's postmodernist practices and views.

Bellow resolutely understands the deflation of the individual under the high-capitalist postmodern system of contemporary society. Consequently, Bellow employs previous modes of literature, chiefly English and American Romanticism, to emphatically challenge the version of modernism which he perceives as blatantly putrescent—that view which preaches nihilism as a valid ideology. Bellow's work, notably his post-1950's material, is often regarded as romantic and humanistic because of its affirmation of the average individual who is being and has been displaced by mechanized society. Allan Chavkin, in "Bellow and English Romanticism," defines and explains Bellow's dependence on English Romanticism, and clarifies Bellow's intention:

Bellow turns instinctively to the traditions of comedy and romanticism because of his dislike of what he considers to be the facile pessimism of modern literature, a

pessimism which has become, he suggests, a literary convention in itself . . . In this tradition (the French realism that challenges the “human significance in things”) the romantic concept of the individual and the worth of everyday life become obsolete . . . Bellow rejects this view of human nature; unlike the modernists, he does not desire to challenge the human significance of things but to affirm it . . . Bellow believes that his faith in the imagination is not shared by contemporary society, which is materialistic and hostile to those who suggest ways of knowing that cannot be scientifically explained. (8-9)

Chavkin’s assertion that Bellow has devoted the crux of his message to commenting on the inherent problems in modern life is definitely the consensus in Bellow scholarship. Bellow, like so many of his American predecessors and contemporaries—Melville, Hawthorne and Faulkner—is not comfortable in the contemporary world and believes that humankind has placed itself in this predicament and therefore has no reason to feel comfortable: the quintessence of the postmodern argument. The specific literary and sociological methods practiced by Bellow are postmodern in nature, and the evolution of his work has moved from transcendental realism to a newly-fashioned brand of postmodern humanism—something he has accomplished while remaining adamantly focused on and dedicated to the individual person.

Any procedure to ascertain Bellow’s narrative technique, however, would certainly conclude with the pronouncement that it is not postmodern in nature. Being a realist, Bellow does not implicitly attempt to construct his own synthetic realms or versions of reality, but instead operates under the romantic assumption that literature should attest to the social conditions of the modern world. Consequently, Bellow does not practice in

fragmentary and minimalist forms of narrative that announce the end of creativity and proclaim the reversal and exhaustion of intellectual and imaginative progress—as many postmodern texts do. Nor does he explode the boundaries of discursive practices and play word-games for the purpose of creating meta-fiction or the anti-story. Instead, Bellow believes in universal conditions that can either force an individual to collapse and implode, or else lead him or her to redemption through the act of experience.

However, I strongly contend that Bellow's commentary and theoretical stances are immersed in stylistic postmodernism and postmodern culture, and can definitely be linked to this specific, yet paradoxically broad, mode of thought. In *Postmodernism and Its Critics*, John McGowan begins his book with a definition of postmodernism that epitomizes Bellow's perspective. McGowan argues:

The various themes, postures, and stylistic hallmarks of postmodernism can, I believe, be traced to a heightened anxiety about what impact intellectuals have on a world that appears increasingly inimical to the values promoted in the arts and in intellectual work. Of course, humanistic intellectuals since the time of the romantics have thought of themselves as distanced from and in opposition to the prevailing mores of commercial society, and have envisioned various schemes for that society's transformation. Postmodernism marks a particular despair about the possible success of these schemes along with a far-reaching search for new strategies of intervention in the dominant order. I believe that postmodernism can best be defined as a particular, if admittedly diminished, version of *romantic dreams of transformation*. (1; emphasis added)

In this sense, Bellow is the humanist that so many of his critics have made him out to be, but also the postmodernist who understands the ambiguity that is innate in society and treats it with strategies of ambivalence and distrust—both the romantic view that Chavkin speaks of and the postmodern notion of McGowan. Bellow unquestionably holds the dominant order, “reality instructors,” as he labels them in *Herzog*, of modern culture in contempt and in his early and middle work seldom offers redemptive plans for mankind. In his more recent work Bellow continues to maintain his ambivalent attitude about contemporary culture and behavior but proffers a wider variety of relief for his characters, while still heavily participating in his own unique humanistic method of postmodern polemic.

A term that characterizes Bellow’s awareness of postmodernity and the disunity and discordance it commonly casts is “moronic inferno.” This phrase expresses the moral vision of 1975’s *Humboldt’s Gift* as a whole, and acts as a catalyst for the absurd events that the protagonist of the novel, Charlie Citrine, encounters. Bellow also attaches this brilliantly designed characterization of contemporary life to *The Actual*, and has the narrator, Harry Trellman, mention it directly after his condemnation of “mass democracy” and the “threadbare ideas” (42) that have produced it—essentially tying the two together. With this one term Bellow announces his place in postmodern literature and criticism, and thereafter indiscriminately questions the very nature of society and culture that thrives within the “moronic inferno.”

Bellow’s view of the postmodern closely resembles that of Marxist-postmodern literary and social critic Jameson’s. Jameson, like Bellow, firmly believes that consumerist contemporary society has blended reality into the hodgepodge of shapes and

sounds projected from television and theater. This erasure of reality and cogent living has also leveled experience, traditions, history, and as Marx and Nietzsche prophesized, ideology and passionate consciousness—the “moronic inferno” is the lulling of society out of human consciousness and ultimately into a streamlined version of reality that purges *humanity* of the *human* element. Bellow’s vision is harmonic with many of Jameson’s views, especially those expressed in his 1994 collection of critical essays *The Seeds of Time*. In a section entitled “The Antinomies of Postmodernism,” Jameson writes:

What then dawns is the realization that no society has ever been so standardized as this one, and that the stream of human, social, and historical temporality has never flowed quite so homogeneously. Even the great boredom or ennui of classical modernism required some vantage point or fantasy subject position outside the system; yet our reasons are of the post-natural and postastronomical television or media variety, triumphantly artificial by way of the power of their National Geographic or Weather Channel images. (17)

Jameson’s view of our standardized world community is the message that Bellow attempts to convey in his fiction and the view of postmodernity from which he operates. Although there is evidence that Bellow has commented on the postmodern condition in his fiction for the past two decades, a 1975 essay entitled “A Matter of the Soul” confirms that he was cognizant of the shift to postmodernity much earlier—a world he describes as barren and merely a shadow of previous civilization. He writes:

In our world it seems that as soon as a clear need appears, it is met falsely. It becomes a new occasion for exploitation. We know this to be true at all levels.

To begin with trivial instances, we are not sold real apples or real ice cream, we are sold the idea of an apple, the memory of ice cream. Most people, for their fifteen cents, buy the idea of a newspaper. On other levels still, they hear the idea of music in elevators. In politics they are presented with ideas of honor, patriotism; in law, the shadows of justice. The media offer flimsy ideas of human attachment, the films produce the spooks of passion and of love. Then there are impresarios, performers, painters, and writers who offer in various packages the thinnest recollection, the phantom of art. Many contemporary artists appear to feel that it is sufficient to cast artificial pearls before real swine. This is how the modern world meets the deepest of human needs—by fraud, demagoguery, opportunism, and profiteering. (77-78)

What Bellow speaks of is at the height of postmodern theory and criticism and something that has been widely ignored by Bellow scholarship. Jean Baudrillard, a leading postmodern theorist, supports Bellow's comments and fears and interprets society as the frivolous and shallow enterprise that Bellow believes it to be. Baudrillard's most famous work is actually entitled *Simulacra and Simulation*, and in it he adamantly argues, much like Bellow, that reality has disappeared and has left only images to fill the void—widespread simulation conquering what centuries of Western civilization founded. With this study I conclude that this is precisely the postmodern factor in Bellow's work: he clearly examines what we consider as reality and ultimately concludes that it has vanished or at the very least been hidden by the version and semblance of reality that television and mass media so gratuitously proliferates. All of his characters either participate in, comment upon, or experience this simulation first hand.

What makes Saul Bellow so interesting to a postmodern reader like myself is his perception of and commentary on contemporary society. Saul Bellow's writing clings to the modern, romantic, and realist tradition, while expounding on the contemporary state of events and the dilemma that they inherently propose. Bellow not only invites the reader into his discourse, but also essentially forces him or her to contemplate the issues and ideas he is disclosing. Therefore, the reader's position and responsibility within this system/process is to educate him- or herself on the concepts, and after contemplating the message, come to a decision. As Terry Eagleton asserts in *Literary Theory*, "literary texts do not exist on bookshelves: they are processes of signification materialized only in the practice of reading. For literature to happen, the reader is quite as vital as the author" (64-5). This practice is imperative for all texts, but a Bellow work takes this to a higher level where the reader is forced to think—to make a judgment with a passion similar to that of the authors.

Jon Thiem examines the role of the reader in "Textualization of the Reader in Magical Realist Fiction," while strictly focusing on postmodern theory and writing and how the reader is integral to this new interpretive practice. Thiem's definition helps to explain the importance of the reader in postmodern theory, and while doing so discusses certain themes that resemble Bellow's intentions for his work. Thiem writes:

More than ever before, literary studies are concerned with the transformative powers of the consciousness of readers and of communities of readers, and with the bearing these powers have on defining, evaluating, misreading, and interpreting texts . . . the whole spectrum of reader response criticism . . . [has] taught us to be more aware of how the reader constitutes or activates the literary

text . . . Postmodern theorists and writers also focus on the reader, but there is another, little acknowledged, reason that writers in particular do so. They tend to identify with the reader. This strong identification arises out of the fact that postmodern writers and readers in general share the same condition. This is the condition of belatedness. A sharp, sometimes painful feeling of belatedness is one of the defining features of the postmodern outlook, as the term “postmodern” itself suggests. (240-41).

Bellow’s awareness of the reader’s importance and role in his work is implicit throughout his writing, but in a 1975 essay entitled “An Interview with Myself” Bellow purposefully indicates this notion, he states:

An influential book appears to create its own public. When *Herzog* was published, I became aware that there were some fifty thousand people in the United States who had evidently been waiting for something like it . . . But such a public is a temporary one. There is no stable culture that permanently contains all these readers. Remarkably steady and intelligent people emerge somehow, like confident swimmers from the heaving waters, the wastes of the American educational system. They survive by strength, luck, and cunning. (82)

Bellow stresses the importance of interpretive communities in this quotation and conveys the absolute significance of these “steady and intelligent” people to his work. He seems to intimate that they are just as important to his work as he is; moreover, implied in this statement is his identification with these intelligent readers, these critical communities—something stressed in Thiem’s view of the unspoken contract between the postmodern writer and reader and their reliance upon one another.

It is not only vital to partake in joint-communication of a Bellow novel, but also to expose the infrastructure that the work is built upon—in the specific case of this thesis, the postmodern concepts conveyed by Bellow. This is an example of the progression of postmodern reception theory, and although the entire thesis will not be examined according to this technique, a large part of Chapter Four is devoted to the reader's point-of-view in relation to Bellow's ideas, and explicates the pervasive influence of postmodern theory on society at large and the impact it has on the reading and critical thinking process.

The final focus of this thesis examines the notion of performance theory and the tremendous importance it affords Bellow's vision in *The Bellarosa Connection* and *The Actual*. There are two pivotal points in both novellas where the narrators/protagonists fully realize that they either must make preparations in order to act and perform or that they have already and these preparations are ultimately inadequate and miscalculated. During both of these scenes the protagonists mention Constantin Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares*, a work that takes the reader through the gamut of professional acting exercises and eventually demonstrates the rules of conduct behind acting and the proper manner in which it should be approached and handled, and are utterly self-conscious of the role they are currently playing or are preparing to play. Needless to say, the allusions and direct references to role-playing and theatrical performance in these two works do not cease with the reference to Stanislavski's 1936 groundbreaking work—these novellas are submersed in performance theory, and the commentary essentially addresses the pervasiveness of pure theatrical and social acting, and the pseudo-reality that is subsequently presented.

Herbert Blau, in “Letting Be Be Finale of Seem: The Future of an Illusion,” explores contemporary society’s dependence on the illusions of the theater and how that dependence has become manifest in mundane behavior. He argues that,

Some new modes of performance, in theater and the other arts, have put illusion up for grabs: either it’s nothing but or not at all. Both attitudes, oddly, seem to intensify the Renaissance conceit inherent in Shakespeare’s Globe and expressed by John Donne, that “the whole frame of the world is theater.” We have seen through the sixties a passage from concern with the psychopathology of everyday life to the conscious theatricalization of everyday life. (61)

The frame that Donne, and now Blau, speak of is the very frame that Bellow covers in all of his works, especially the two texts I examine. Bellow argues that every facet of everyday life is a conscious dramatic event: love affairs, business transactions, friendly conversations, horrific war crimes, dinner parties, etc. Bellow seems to be examining the loss of self and character that has occurred under the contemporary tenets of shallow materialism and democracy and arguing that behavior has been corrupted by these systems because performance is now mandated by social norms and mores. Some social scientific work has been produced on this concept during the latter half of this century, but none resemble Bellow’s feelings, tone, and general disposition more than the seminal work of Erving Goffman.

Erving Goffman and Saul Bellow were both born in Canada in the first quarter of this century, Goffman in 1922 and Bellow in 1915. Both men immigrated to the United States, and both attended college in Chicago: Goffman received his M.A. and Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Chicago and Bellow his B.Sc. in anthropology from

Northwestern University. Both men have attempted to reach to the heart of human behavior and social interaction, Bellow through his fiction and Goffman through his numerous immeasurably important books on performance theory, and although no extensive evidence exists linking Bellow to Goffman, other than some obscure comments by Bellow, the times that both lived through and experienced seems to have formed a connection between these two men and their intellectual philosophies. No other social scientific work unlocks the subtle motivations behind Bellow's characters, and ultimately Bellow, better than Goffman's corpus. And in the more recent works that I examine, Goffman's concepts add a dimension of clarity to Bellow's search for the postmodern self and the operation of presenting that self in everyday interaction—Goffman's specialty. Both Goffman and Bellow share similar ideas about the notion of performance in contemporary life, and how it has been further established and mandated by high-capitalism and mass democracy—how our homogenous society has essentially demanded certain performance routines from individuals, something Goffman calls “role-sectors” (86) in *Encounters*, and has basically regulated the social campaign of role-acting. A characteristic found in Bellow's work, and something that Bellow is obviously very concerned about, is the loss of human nature and the manner in which it has been conquered by artificial conduct and political correctness.

Bellow's recent work demonstrates that he is firmly aware of the new period of consciousness we now dwell in, and the condition of collective humankind within it. This thesis is a study of this awareness. Chapter Three explores Bellow's latest view of redemption, and compares *Seize The Day*, a 1956 novella, to *The Actual*, 1997. The contention of this chapter is that Bellow has only recently provided his characters with

happy and relatively stable endings, as opposed to the ambivalence of his early and middle material, because he as a writer—after exploring both the soul and the self in his fiction—now understands what it means to achieve true selfhood. Chapter Four deals exclusively with the postmodern elements in *The Bellarosa Connection*, and how Bellow succeeds in creating a lively and new version of postmodern literature that is constructed on a humanistic hinge. Finally, Chapter Five examines *The Bellarosa Connection* and *The Actual*, arguably Bellow's two best works from the past ten years, and Bellow's concern with the performance of roles and the disappearance of selfhood and reality. The yearning for the ultimate human essence continues to be Bellow's overriding concern and goal; hence, in this thesis I will further advance the study of Bellow's crusading spirit, and show how it has embraced postmodernism if only to create a new humanistic design.

CHAPTER III

AFFIRMATION AND RECONCILIATION IN

SEIZE THE DAY AND THE ACTUAL:

BELLOW'S REDEMPTIVE STRATEGIES FOR THE ABSURDITY OF EXISTENCE

In the greatest confusion there is still an open channel to the soul. It may be difficult to find, because by midlife it is overgrown . . . But the channel is always there, and it is our business to keep it open, to have access to the deepest part of ourselves—to that part of us which is conscious of a higher consciousness, by means of which we make final judgements and put everything together. The independence of this consciousness, which has the strength to be immune to the noise of history and the distractions of our immediate surroundings, is what the life struggle is all about. The soul has to find and hold its ground against hostile forces, sometimes embodied in ideas which frequently deny its very existence, and which indeed often seem to be trying to annul it altogether.

Saul Bellow

My contention for this thesis is that Saul Bellow, for the most part, is severely dissatisfied with contemporary society and culture and how the average individual has been lost and abandoned amid this distressful system. However, there are several factors that Bellow perceives as integral in allowing the individual to reach affirmation and reconciliation of society, self, and others, and I will begin this study by covering these factors. The opening epigraph of this chapter denotes Bellow's firm belief in redemption for postmodern mankind, and suggests that the awakening and following of the soul is the

precise method which should be practiced if one wishes to obtain an amount of harmony between the soul and the corporeal world. Bellow presents his method of redemption through his work, and often has his characters actualize their true soul for better or for worse.

The terms catharsis and epiphany arise in almost any piece of scholarship that seeks to examine Bellow's redemptive strategies. The views and the stances taken differ from critic to critic, but the general consensus among these scholars is that Bellow is deliberately doing something—usually taking his protagonists through an existential hell and then allowing them some form of relief, whether it be a spiritual epiphany or an emotional breakdown that sinks them “deeper than sorrow” (128), the particular case of *Seize the Day*'s Tommy Wilhelm. Regardless of the approach, Bellow definitely has his characters confront both the meaning and absurdity of existence, often simultaneously and head-on, usually as the work closes—adding to the ambiguity and ambivalence of the piece as a whole.

Daniel Walden, in “Saul Bellow's Paradox,” argues that throughout his great corpus “Saul Bellow has repeatedly examined the dehumanized, despiritualized, and deathridden state of modern man . . . emphasiz[ing] a moral crisis that he believes is responsible for the ongoing dichotomy, disunity and dismemberment of the twentieth century consciousness”(65). This current state of contemporary mankind is the exact point where Bellow begins his works and establishes his characters—*in medias res*—in the middle of the “dehumanized” postmodern melee. In this chapter I examine Bellow's redemptive strategies for his 1956 novella *Seize the Day*, and his latest novella (1997), *The Actual*. The focus is on each of the novella's protagonists, Tommy Wilhelm of *Seize the Day* and

Harry Trellman of *The Actual*, and the relief Bellow offers after each “undergoes a shattering experience of shame which temporarily strips [them] of [their] identity and [their] understanding of [their] world” (54), the condition that occurs to virtually all of Bellow’s protagonists, as Andrew Gordon describes in his article “Shame and Bellow.” My purpose is to account for and measure the similarities, differences, and redemptive strategies of each novella, and then to present the change that has taken place in Bellow’s more recent fiction.

Bildungsroman stories are a primary feature in the bulk of Saul Bellow’s work. Bellow is fascinated by the journey of the individual and has taken the traditional *bildungsroman* story that recounts the development of an adolescent boy and shifted its emphasis to modern men of various ages—especially that of the middle-aged American in a period of transition. Bellow then adds a profound dimension to this tradition by having his main characters struggle with their reason for existence—usually after a traumatic event has threatened the nature of their being. Bellow’s two most critically successful novellas of the 1950’s and 1990’s, *Seize the Day* and *The Actual* respectively, delve thoroughly into both the absurdity and profundity of existence, and treat it in similar fashions. Both *Seize the Day* and *The Actual* are commentaries on the position of mankind within the sordid realm of high capitalism and mass democracy. These novellas emphasize the dramatic abatement in the welfare of humanity under these systems, and portray characters disillusioned by the opportunities they currently have and the past that has formed them. *Seize the Day*’s Tommy Wilhelm is a character who Bellow portrays as disintegrating under both a code he has written and accepted for himself and the unwritten code created by his family and friends. Wilhelm firmly believes that the social

world is submerged in business affairs and money-making, something he describes as “too much falsity” (21), and projects his problems on the world as a whole when he states, “things were chaotic all over” (37). Harry Trellman, the narrator and main character of *The Actual*, although differing in age from Wilhelm—Trellman is in the twilight of his life—also specifically ponders the nature of his life, and is critically self-effacing when considering his complete inability to actualize anything fulfilling in his early life because of his shady business dealings and isolating persona. He accredits his long separation from his love-interest Amy to this, “my theorizing had from the beginning come between us” (60). On that account, the similarities between the novellas and their main characters, Wilhelm and Trellman, are subtle, but they exist.

There are, however, major differences between both characters and their predicaments, and this is essentially attributed to the transition that has occurred between the early and more recent Bellow. Two distinguishing characteristics of Bellow’s work are ambiguity and ambivalence. Bellow’s message is not the didactic certitude found in many modern writers, but that of the fragmentary and decentered postmodernist—a view that Bellow scholars often refuse to entertain. Because of this, the notion of redemption and actualization of self in Bellow is indeterminate. The early and middle Bellow goes as far as showing the collapse of individual man and mankind that is possible if not inevitable. Without the elaborate postmodernist techniques, the early Bellow investigates and reports on the mechanized modern society, and ultimately condemns, praises, and embraces its numerous practitioners. This is the setting and atmosphere of *Seize the Day*—the conclusion results in the utter mental and emotional collapse of Tommy Wilhelm. The later Bellow of *The Actual* offers access to redemption with far less

complication, and even has the main character divine his design to the reader.

Furthermore, the distinction between the notion of redemption in the two pieces is immense and overt. Ambiguity, ambivalence, cynicism, and empathetic detachment continue to thrive in the Bellow of the 1990's, but the road to redemption and fulfillment that he provides Harry Trellman at the end of *The Actual* is not even an option for his earlier characters. Trellman actualizes his sense of self and love with incredible, for a Bellow character at least, faith and certainty.

In *Seize the Day* the reader follows Tommy Wilhelm through a journey that begins in early morning and ends in the late afternoon of a single day. The only education that Wilhelm receives during this journey, however, is that of the capitalistic structure of modern society constricting him until he inevitably implodes. The time frame of *The Actual* is not much longer than *Seize the Day*'s, minus the constant flashbacks and cerebral ruminations on Trellman's behalf; yet, Bellow allows Trellman to complete his social, spiritual, and human education during this short time. Past mistakes and misunderstandings are rectified, and because of this Trellman actualizes a complete understanding of his life and love for Amy. This notion of overt redemption is the facilitating factor of transition between the Bellow of the 1950's and Bellow of the late 1990's. Nevertheless, the general commentary and tone of both novellas are strikingly similar and display Bellow's life-long struggle with specific concepts that define the human being in the modern world. In this chapter I will examine *Seize the Day* and *The Actual* according to four factors that elucidate the Bellovian concern with modern man, those being: the characters' (Trellman and Wilhelm) position under the canopy of

capitalism and mass democracy, their impression of themselves, others' impression of them, and the redemptive strategies, or lack thereof, that conclude the works.

Bellow has always been hard on any structure that leaves the human heavily alienated and isolated from him- or herself—meaning the loss of connection with the soul and conscience—and others. *Seize the Day* and *The Actual* are two works in which Bellow examines this dilemma. In *Seize the Day* Tommy Wilhelm has lost his job, his wife, his girlfriend, his father's love and loyalty, and the totality of all of these, his self-respect. Wilhelm blames several social institutions for his losses throughout his narrative, but he is most critical of capitalism and democracy. He firmly believes that these institutions breed guilt and shame, and ultimately claims that the common man is crushed, drowned in the symbolism of this novella, under these burdensome structures. One such moment occurs during breakfast with his father as Wilhelm explains how the courts, and subsequent laws, work to destroy the middle-class working man:

A husband like me is a slave . . . The churches go up in Albany and supervise the law. They won't have divorces. The court says, 'You want to be free. Then you have to work twice as hard—twice, at least! Work! You bum.' So then guys kill each other for the buck . . . The company knows a guy has got to have his salary, and takes full advantage of him . . . a fellow in my position has to sweat it out until he drops dead. (55)

To compound his viewpoint, Wilhelm at another point focuses on the modern adoration of money, and uses a familiar term to label his version of the postmodern condition.

Wilhelm states:

Uch! How they love money, thought Wilhelm. They adore money! Holy money! Beautiful money! It was getting so that people were feeble-minded about everything except money. While if you didn't have it you were a dummy, a dummy! You had to excuse yourself from the face of the earth. *Chicken!* That's what it was. The world's business. If he could only find a way out of it.

(41; emphasis added)

Chicken is an awkward word to describe the world's condition, but Wilhelm seems to be using it in relation to himself and his inability to realize the modern world's demands. Chavkin discusses this feature of Wilhelm's character in "'The Hollywood Thread,'" and argues that "the self-absorbed Wilhelm is very much a product of society. He defines himself in the social terms of 'success' and 'failure,' and he is clearly a failure according to this definition" (89). Furthermore, by accepting the societal definitions of success and failure, and all of the subtle nuances and overt meanings that accompany them, Wilhelm forfeits any other view that could possibly supply him with a positive identity. Hence, he is slowly disintegrating because he can no longer meet the requirements of capitalism and free-money-making, and this disintegration eventually affects his view of himself and the view others form about him.

Wilhelm constantly refers to himself as a hippopotamus. This self-imposed view is not directly the result of a deteriorating physical appearance, but the derogatory impression he has of himself that has escalated as his fruitless struggle to succeed in life has progressed. He desires to change his appearance and attitude towards life, but incessantly discards these thoughts due to the modern inertia that is consuming him. This

modern inertia is best described by Gaye McCollum Simmons in “Atonement in Bellow’s *Seize the Day*.” Simmons states:

Let us begin with Tommy Wilhelm’s condition. Standing in the mezzanine of the Hotel Gloriana, Tommy is introduced in the lengthy first episode as a perfect example of modern alienation. He is completely cut off in space and time. There is no community of which he is part, and he is so unsynchronized as to be in some sense living *in* borrowed time. (34)

Hence, his social and spiritual alienation is essentially another manifestation of the view he holds of himself. This attitude is displayed as Wilhelm is on the brink of meeting his mental demise, he states: “A person can become tired of looking himself over and trying to fix himself up. You can spend the entire second half of your life recovering from the mistakes of the first half” (100). This is conclusive evidence that Wilhelm is completely dissatisfied with not only his position within the capitalistic world, but also with the personage he presents and the energy it requires to remedy any unsatisfactory characteristics—the energy that Wilhelm no longer possesses. The negative impression he has of himself also manifests itself in the attitude of others addressed to him. He not only believes that he is “not the right type of son” (61) and that his father “looks down on [him]” (18), but Wilhelm’s father further substantiates his insecurities and psychoses by telling him that he continues making “the same mistakes over and over” (118): an overwhelming factor in Wilhelm’s fall. Wilhelm develops a fatalistic attitude toward life not only because he has failed under capitalism, but decidedly because he cannot reconcile the view he has of himself and the one directed at him by others.

Wilhelm's view of himself is an aspect that Gordon explores in "Shame and Bellow." According to Gordon, Bellow's "heroes are typically vain, proud, and stubborn men who feel they are different, unique, and above the common fate. Events conspire to prove them wrong about themselves: they are not exempt from ordinary reality; they are in fact laughable schlemiels" (52). S. Lillian Kremer agrees with this characterization in "An Intertextual Reading of *Seize the Day*: Absorption and Revision," and designedly points to Wilhelm as the epitome of this trait:

His long career of errors, Tommy believes, expresses the very purpose of his life and the essence of his being. College dropout, failed actor, unemployed salesman, unsuccessful husband and father, and frustrated lover, Tommy's life has epitomized the *schlemiel* character as he repeatedly sabotages his chances for success and happiness. (47)

Wilhelm is, as Gordon and Kremer suggest, a schlemiel character who cannot avoid destroying even the slightest chances of succeeding in the business and social world he so highly esteems. However, Wilhelm is not simply haunted by the wrong decisions he has made and continues to make, but also by the distorted and uncomplimentary view of himself that has developed and evolved with age—further facilitated by his father's, wife's, and lover's view of him. Consequently, salvation is irrevocably annihilated when his father confirms that he perceives Tommy as bungling schlemiel, and refuses him monetary, and ultimately spiritual, help.

Despite Harry Trellman's age, business success, intelligence, and the apathetic attitude he directs toward most people and things, he and Wilhelm share many similarities—they both comment on and suffer through conceptual problems which they believe haunt

mankind. Capitalism is one such concept that Trellman, although making his living by exploiting the free-market importation and exportation of goods that exists primarily because of capitalism, treats with ambivalence. Trellman is a firm believer in mankind's ability to ascertain and actualize a higher self—a characteristic he shares with Wilhelm—a self that can transcend the mundane drudgery of humanity. Trellman mentions his lack of faith in capitalism, and his belief in the higher purpose of the human when discussing his background. He states:

These were all commonplace persons . . . I looked down on them. They were lacking in higher motives. They were run-of-the-mill products of our mass democracy . . . satisfied to pile up money . . . and living . . . on threadbare ideas, without beauty, without virtue, without the slightest independence of spirit—privileged in the way of money and goods. (42)

Later, Trellman describes the American dependency on money-making ideas, a notion he believes has perverted civilization because it excludes all “higher motives” of the individual by default, and declares to Amy: “in our country something good is most usually a business idea—the imagination of a profitable enterprise. In other words, ‘How would it be if . . . ?’ Or, here’s a million-dollar idea!’” (91). Trellman may not be as vehement as Wilhelm, but the basic distrust of a society based solely on profitable business ventures and money-hoarding is apparent.

Differing from, but not unlike, Wilhelm's incessant obsession with his appearance, Harry Trellman also believes that his appearance, especially his facial expression, is an ambiguous one that leaves an awkward impression on the other communicant. Trellman mentions his “Chinese look” (2) throughout his narrative, and relates it to his years in an

orphanage—a bizarre experience being that both of his parents were alive. His appearance leads others to expect something from him (he mentions that he was invited to cocktail parties because of his presumed knowledge of the Orient (4)), and also presents a mysterious aura around him that eventually leads him to doubt his own sincerity. This mystery eventually manifests itself into Trellman's soul, and he forges a character that exhibits the internal qualities of a mysterious person. He trains his voice to be “low but coherent” (80) and admits that he “would be reluctant to trust a man who spoke as [he] did” (80-1). Trellman's traits are clearly comparable to those of Wilhelm, traits that are the quintessence of a Bellovian character—ambiguity linked with the vortex of modern neuroses.

Although there are numerous similarities among both works and characters, a critical point of variance exists in the theme of redemption. Bellow is relentless in *Seize the Day*, demonstrating a chaotic ambience that offers no escape from the fetters of the modern world for Tommy Wilhelm. At the end of the novella Wilhelm is swindled out of his last seven-hundred dollars by a pseudo-psychologist-philosopher named Dr. Tamkin, essentially abandoned and disowned by his father, forced to succumb to the wrath of his wife (who refuses to free him from the bond of marriage), and shattered by the thought of failure that has haunted him throughout his life. While entering the final hours leading up to his complete collapse, Wilhelm begins contemplating the notion of redemption, and links it to the afterlife—a place where he believes he may finally escape the tortures of his life. A few days prior to his breakdown, Wilhelm feels a form of peace with himself and others while in the subway, and attributes it to a “larger body” beyond the corporeal world where “truth for everybody may be found, and confusion is only—only temporary”

(92). This allows Wilhelm a transitory instant of hope and a brief reprieve from his inevitable fall, along with the thought that in the “life to come,” something he qualifies with the statement “if there was a life to come,” “everybody would have to answer . . . the chickens themselves would be all right” (94). Nevertheless, these insights prove fruitless as his life utterly unravels in the span of forty-five minutes and he enters an “oblivion of tears” (128), which he may not recover from. Wilhelm epitomizes the early Bellovian character that never receives, as well as refuses, the comforts of life—a character charged with the heroic virtues of truth, honor, and loyalty, but never actualizes his place in the modern world because the internal and external problems are overwhelming.

Contrary to Wilhelm’s position, redemption is a plausibility for Harry Trellman in *The Actual*; moreover, this redemption is raised to a higher power due to the love that is realized by Trellman and Amy. Bellow recounts the story of a man that, like Wilhelm, is uncomfortable with modern American life—to the point of being anachronistic. Yet, in direct opposition to Wilhelm’s situation, Trellman circumvents the totalizing vortex of modern society, and succeeds in coming to terms with the person he is—the fruit of this success is the “actual affinity” (101) he achieves with Amy. Trellman opens himself to life and takes the necessary steps in order to consummate his love with Amy. At the closing of the novella Trellman states that he “sat exposed” and “his usual resources had left him” (102). Therefore, Bellow portrays Trellman as sacrificing those same resources that built his personal identity, those same traits that eventually destroyed Wilhelm, and this openness is the key to his reconciliation with himself and Amy. Trellman’s exposed and unguarded self is a trait that Elmer Borklund, in “How it All Adds Up for Saul Bellow,” discerns as the most important element of Bellow’s fiction. Borklund states:

This laying bare of the protagonist is the first step needed for what Bellow sometimes calls “transcendence” of the deluded and betrayed old self and the chance to embrace those values that he has always considered fundamental: “goodness, duty, courage”—virtues that seem to have “disappeared everywhere” but are really “just in hiding.” (438)

By allowing Trellman to “lay bare” his true self, Bellow provides an adequate avenue of relief and salvation for Trellman that Wilhelm never receives. Ultimately, the reader learns that Trellman’s specialty in his old-age is “human matters” (38), the compilation of the negative and positive attributes that make people part of the human species. This is the crucial presence that leads Trellman to redemption, while the same aspect is responsible for sealing Wilhelm’s fate.

Trellman’s newly-found openness is linked directly to the love he has and shares with Amy. Very few of Bellow’s early protagonists are allotted this option—Wilhelm being an example who suffers the stiffest existential penalty from this lack of love. Richard Hollinger, in “Him With His World Intact,” suggests that love is the attribute that “helps the protagonist keep his world intact, whether that love be expressed in an amorous, carnal, familial, friendly, or even an obligatory way. Love is seldom perfect in Bellow’s fiction; if perfect, love ‘means that ego-emphasis is removed’” (31). As Trellman sits “exposed” with Amy at the end of *The Actual*, he is able to understand the strength and utter importance of his love for her, and thinks while looking at her: “This *was* the most amazing thing in the life of the world” (104). The reader is therefore cognizant of the removal of Trellman’s ego from his relationship with Amy, an ego that is the basis of his character throughout the novella. Inversely, Wilhelm never reaches this level of

actualization; moreover, as Allan Chavkin notes in “The Hollywood Thread,” “the source of Wilhelm’s periodic rage and self-hatred is his lack of love” (90). Bellow is extremely careful not to offer Wilhelm any form of love that could save him from collapse. His purpose for Wilhelm is entirely different than that of Trellman’s. The reader is often reminded that Wilhelm’s wife detests him not only as a husband but also as a human being, his lover refuses to marry him until he stabilizes his embroiled life, his father wishes that he were someone and something else and actually treats and presents him as such, and his other father-figure, Tamkin, sells him out and ruins him financially and subsequently emotionally. In short, a major distinguishing characteristic between early and late Bellow is his use of love in character development and the differences between his recent protagonists finding equilibrium in life while the earlier protagonists are often devoured by the vortex of cultural chaos.

Bellow is predominantly a novelist of ideas. There are specific concepts and ideas, such as those mentioned and elaborated upon in this study, that permeate his work and add numerous dimensions and frames to the basic, modern structure they are founded on. A strategy that Bellow holds in ambivalence and at times completely disregards is that of redemption—relieving the character’s despondent behavior and outlook. The Bellovian character is thrust into the mass confusion and complexity of the modern world and is forced to either accept and embrace his burden, be it psychological or physical, in order to actualize and affirm his life, or deny life and submit to modern inertia. Trellman is fully capable of accomplishing this. Bellow is aware that the journey through life is usually painful and frequently tumultuous, Wilhelm and Trellman both experience these characteristics, and he does not believe that fairy-tale endings are the standard; therefore,

his characters suffer through several phases of turmoil in hopes of realizing what it means to be human. The early and middle Bellow creates characters that symbolize this massive struggle and refuses to offer easily accessible escape, but the Bellow of the 1990's decreases the ambiguity and ambivalence of redemption and salvation and allows love and humanity to succeed.

Consequently, in his recent fiction Bellow moves away from some elements of postmodernism by offering his characters and humankind redemption and reconciliation from the malady of contemporary culture and often from themselves. Yet he is simply rejecting the intellectual and spiritual nihilism that postmodernism often propagates, which also happens to be another facet of his repudiation of Hemingway and the other American realists that he was weaned on. The shift in Bellow's redemptive strategies, particularly the conclusions of his recent fiction, does not necessarily further his unshakable humanistic reputation. Instead, Bellow now utilizes the body of his fiction to tackle and at times practice postmodernism. As I suggest in this chapter, the Bellowian character is constantly searching for his or her identity. In Bellow's more recent fiction, however, he implements many attributes, two of which I discuss in the following chapter, of postmodernism into his technique—the self-reflexive and intersubjective perspective of his narrators—to slightly alter and shift his style. Also, the emergence of performance theory into Bellow's recent prose is another example of his changing literary and philosophical foundation. An example of this actually appears in this chapter. Wilhelm's schlemiel character is obviously a form of a performance role, but the early Bellow is cautious not to comment on this trait as a whole—this character performance is confined to Wilhelm, along with Tamkin at times. In other words, the novella is not established on

the premise that the social world functions entirely on the performance of roles and characters. Bellow changes this position in his recent fiction, and devotes a large portion of his work to the discussion and examination of individual and socially-collective performance and role-playing and the consequences of such behavior. However subtle this shift may be, it exists and is a primary distinguishing characteristic between his early and middle work and his latest material. This chapter may seem to merely probe the changes that have occurred between Bellow's earlier and more recent endings and Bellow's subsequent reaction to contemporary culture, but it also demonstrates the modification of his sensibilities and ultimately helps to introduce the other areas he has only recently begun to explore.

CHAPTER IV

POSTMODERNISM IN *THE BELLAROSA CONNECTION*

Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible.

Jean Baudrillard

Mine is a New World version of reality—granting me the presumption that there is anything real about it.

Anonymous Narrator, *The Bellarosa Connection*

In *The Bellarosa Connection* Saul Bellow takes the reader on a journey through the memory of a nameless narrator. This tale is based on all of the advantages and disadvantages of the memory, and discusses how the narrator has circumvented and neglected several crucial elements in his life because of his remarkable hyper-memory. This idea is elaborated upon by Kremer in “Memoir and History,” in which she states that “the pervasive irony of the novella is that its narrator recognizes at the end of a long career devoted to the mechanics of memory retention, that he has been blind to the relevance of personal and collective memory” (50). Additionally, it is a tale almost exclusively recounted in flashback by the common Bellovian narrator on a quest. However, this narrator’s quest is strikingly different from that of the majority of Bellow’s

protagonists/narrators, and the field that Bellow engages and the strategies therein also differ from his previous work.

As mentioned in the Introduction and Chapter Two, the core of Saul Bellow's work is widely regarded as humanistic. Above all other elements of existence, Bellow's primary interest resides in humanity's and the individual's ability to conquer the contemporary void. *The Bellarosa Connection* is no exception; however, with this novella Bellow subtly alters his technique as well as his interaction with the reader, and this chapter will discuss these changes in accordance to postmodern theory.

Most of the criticism on *The Bellarosa Connection* up to now has focused on the major theme of memory in the novella, and how it supplies the narrator with a traditional and reflexive view of historical events. This analysis will confront these issues, among others, but will also investigate the role postmodernism plays in the novella and what Bellow is attempting to accomplish with its employment. By examining the manner in which the narrator's identity is developed, the way this very identity presents and exposes the condition of the outside contemporary world, and the postmodern technique of pastiche, this chapter unfolds a critical position that appears in Bellow's more recent fiction and has thus far been widely ignored. This position is Bellow's humanistic postmodern view of our current view of the world and its reality. While Bellow does not condone the destruction of reality that has taken place under postmodern theory and art, he does maintain that humanity has to come to terms with this phenomenon if it wishes to understand the current environment. And it is in this avenue that Bellow makes his stand—by reacting to, commenting on, and ultimately practicing postmodernism. What Bellow has achieved with this superb novella has long been overlooked because of the

critical community's adherence to traditional views on Bellow; therefore, my extensive discussion of these characteristics unlocks another dimension—a dimension capable of creating another viable reading of Bellow's vast canon as a whole.

Regardless of the immense number of Bellow scholars who refuse to address the issue of postmodernity in Saul Bellow's work, the characteristics yet remain. There are two crucial aspects of postmodernism in *The Bellarosa Connection*. First, Bellow's participation in postmodern narrative and the deliberate direction of his form, and secondly, the attitude of his narrator and the signs that Bellow wants the reader to recognize. With his new form he is able to enter postmodernism stylistically and maneuver the narrator in a manner that is conducive to most patterns of postmodernism—the narrator's self-reflexive search for identity and the intrasubjective foundation it is constructed upon. The narrator's attitude also lends itself to postmodern theory, in that it is most definitely a reaction to and commentary on the current situation of our culture. This argument is not an attempt to proclaim Bellow as the quintessential postmodern writer, if one actually exists in the first place, but to comment on the dialectic that has pervaded the Western world and influenced our reading strategies, and the postmodern methods and designs that Bellow acknowledges and implements into his work.

Bellow's foreward for the 1991 Signet edition of *Three Tales: Something to Remember Me By, A Theft, and The Bellarosa Connection* is, among other things, a commentary on the contemporary condition of humankind. Many of his pronouncements in the foreward can be directly linked to postmodernism, and the bridge from modernism to postmodernism seems to have been crossed by Bellow with the issuance of these tales and especially this foreward. The majority of his comments are postmodern in nature,

and set the stage for the prose works compiled in this edition. In his explanation on the purpose of short stories and novellas, and why he has abandoned the traditional novel, he states:

There is a modern taste for brevity and condensation. Kafka, Beckett, and Borges wrote short. People of course do write long, and write successfully, but to write short is felt by a growing public to be a very good thing—perhaps the best. At once a multitude of possible reasons for this feeling comes to mind: This is the end of the millennium. *We have heard it all. We have no time.* We have more significant fish to fry. *We require a wider understanding, new terms, a deeper penetration.* (viii; emphasis added)

The focus of this statement addresses the need, primarily Bellow's need, to engage in a new form of writing—to accommodate the movement of society with the movement and transformation of his prose. However, this is not his only statement directly acknowledging the postmodern condition. He includes many other comments that define our contemporary lifestyle, and testifies to their importance, I quote at random: "Public life in the United States is a mass of distraction" (xi),

What I do say is that we (we writers, I mean) must cope with a plethora of attractions and excitements—world crises, hot and cold wars, threats to survival, famines, unspeakable crimes. To conceive of these as "rivals" would be absurd—even monstrous. I say no more than that these crises produce states of mind and attitudes toward existence that artists must take into account. (ix)

and,

Vast organizations exist to get our attention. They make cunning plans. They bite us with their ten-second bites. Our consciousness is their staple; they live on it. Think of consciousness as a territory just opening to settlement and exploitation, something like the Oklahoma land rush. Put it in color, set it to music, frame it in images—but even this fails to do justice to the vision.

Obviously consciousness is infinitely bigger than Oklahoma. (xi)

These comments are not only conducive to postmodern theory, they are describing the difficulties of humanity and the urgency and trouble that Bellow feels in the face of this enormity. These remarks are pertinent to this chapter and thesis as a whole because they capture the essence of the type of postmodernity that Bellow is highly aware of and demonstrate that Bellow believes that he has to engage in the postmodern system if he is to adequately extend his message to the present-day individual. I suspect that Bellow's current form of postmodernism is just as important to his recent work as realistic-humanism was to his earlier fiction.

Two prevalent themes in postmodern fiction are the character's search for identity and the internal foundation of the character reflecting the position of the current worldview—Saul Bellow enlists both of these traits in *The Bellarosa Connection*. The narrator of the novella, who happens to remain nameless throughout, hankers after an identity that will permit him to interpret his multitude of errors in such a way as to promote forgiveness and understanding. Although the narrator seems to be unfolding an important story in the history of the world using actors, settings, and plot-motivation, he instead opens up his identity to the reader and by conscious default on Bellow's behalf we find out more about the narrator than about the story. Understandably, P. Shiv Kumar alerts the reader to this

important aspect of the novella is his article “Memory Sans Understanding: A Perspective on *The Bellarosa Connection*” by stating, “strangely enough, his “insights” (the narrator’s) are generally self-reflexive, revealing more about himself than the object of reflection. Consequently, the novel’s strategy appears to reveal more about the anonymous narrator than about his subjects” (34). What Kumar refuses to mention is that this narrative element is common in postmodern writing—a detail that separates my contention from other Bellow scholarship. Nevertheless, Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz does address this postmodern trait in her book *Science Fiction and Postmodern Fiction*, and develops some extremely important insights that are relative to Bellow’s novella.

In her discussion of postmodern fiction, Puschmann-Nalenz examines the postmodern trademark of “quest for the self” (90), and ultimately traces this design back to work written in the middle of the century, and even mentions Bellow’s *Herzog* as an early model of this form. She writes:

The way of the nameless protagonist through the different stations of his biography is the story of a sorrowful process of development and growth. The central question of the book, “Who am I?” does not receive a positive answer, but instead is again and again revised, and in the end the narrator has to come to the conclusion that all the different roles and characters do not correspond to his own self. He arrives at the conclusion that for a long period of time he has confused a role forced upon him by others with his identity and his own self with the image others had drawn of him. (90)

It is easy to see that this is an impeccable and quite accurate description of Bellow's nameless narrator—a deliberate intention on Bellow's part—and the identity he is so desperately searching for.

The Bellarosa Connection distinguishes itself from the bulk of Bellow's other fiction because of its extremely subtle employment of the quest motif. Unlike *Herzog's* Moses Herzog, *Seize the Day's* Tommy Wilhelm, or *The Victim's* Asa Leventhal, the narrator never openly pronounces his search for himself or his lost soul, but instead presents a relatively stable emotional and psychological system with only occasional demonstrations of deficiency. It is only while reading an enthralling and often darkly comical story about the Fonsteins and the narrator's relationship with them, that the reader learns about the inner identity of the narrator through the very story he is presenting—a conventional postmodern approach. The identity of the narrator is essentially as circuitous as the story he is disclosing, and this marks a substantially new chapter in Saul Bellow's venerable corpus.

Agreeing with my central thesis that the transition in Bellow's work over the past fifteen years has been progressively powerful and even experimental at times, and not the final blossoming period of a tremendous career as many critics have labeled it, Gerhard Bach in "Saul Bellow and the Dialectic of Being Contemporary" suggests that "Bellow does not tire in projecting ever new passageways to reach down to the core of life, to cut away the surface and expose the center" (10). Moreover, the center he wishes to expose in *The Bellarosa Connection* has manifold proportions to its pattern. In this novella Bellow establishes a narrator who not only exposes and presents a story about the problems inherent in assimilation, the Americanization of Jews, and the terrors of the

Holocaust, but a narrator who also incautiously presents himself and his motivations within that story.

The specific structure of the narrator's inner-identity is exposed through comments concerning his background and history, and the difficulties he faces due to his chronic assimilation. A theme that concerns Bellow is how culture and heritage are lost as generation passes to generation in America. Bellow heightens this theme in *The Bellarosa Connection* in the form of a narrator who strictly adheres to pure American culture and indirectly denounces his father's old-world views and beliefs. It is ultimately through this postmodern narrative practice, self made manifest through narrative and self-conscious monologue, that the true identity of the narrator is revealed and illuminated—a cleverly charged Bellovian technique.

It is only in the final quarter of the novella that Bellow informs the reader of his covert design. After waking from a dream in which he was trapped in a “dark . . . pit” (86), the narrator has a revelation concerning “a lifelong mistake” he has made that is “now fully manifest” (87). This dream is essentially the climax of the novella, and moreover, the critical point where both the reader and the narrator himself become aware of his inner-identity. The narrator notes that death is not his ultimate fear, as the dark pit of the dream might suggest, but rather the disclosure of his true character. He states, “I wasn’t what I thought I was” (88) immediately after confronting the breakdown in his heritage and actions pertaining to them while waking up in his “fifty-fifty bed—half Jewish, half Wasp” (88). And although numerous clues are given by Bellow throughout the novella, the reader only then comprehends that this work is more about the “quest for self,” as Puschmann-Nalenz’s theory suggests, than anything else. The narrator explains early in

the work that he “was not [his] father, [he] was his spoiled American son” (19) who believed himself “an enlightened bohemian . . . steeped in the exciting sophistication” (20) of the middle-class American experience; furthermore, this, along with his exceptional memory and his marketing plan for it, is the manner by which he justifies his existence.

Hans Bertens, in “The Postmodern *Weltanschauung* and its Relation to Modernism: An Introductory Survey,” discusses several models of postmodern literature that can conclusively be linked to Bellow’s technique in *The Bellarosa Connection*. Bertens, while commenting on the fiction of Jorge Luis Borges and the criticism of Gerald Graff, argues that even though “the fiction of Borges may be self-reflexive, it still manages to explain things in recognizable terms; it implicitly offers a “‘realistic’ comment” on the reasons of its own existence” (56). When applied to Bellow, the relationship between this theory and his recent fiction becomes obvious. Toward the point of the reader’s discovery of the narrator’s true identity and the narrator’s discovery of himself, the narrator declares that homogenized and assimilated America tacitly offers individuals a choice about their pasts. He states that “your history, too, bec[omes] one of your options. Whether or not having a history [is] a “consideration” entirely up to you” (72). This statement epitomizes the goal of self-reflexive literature because the narrator, while allegedly commenting on the New-American condition, reflects his own inner turmoil. In “recognizable terms,” Bellow defines his narrator with this technique and consequently alters the means of his fiction writing.

Bertens further elaborates on this postmodern technique by stating that self-reflexive literature “even in its most radically alienated forms, [still] presents the loss of meaning

as a distortion” (56). This is precisely the postmodernism that Bellow practices in this novella—the narrator’s existence is not only corrupted by acting according to his own volition, but it is also distorted in terms of holistic stability. This distortion is documented linearly by Bellow as he decides to bare the camouflaged selfhood of his narrator as his imploding self-identity becomes manifest in the narrative. The narrator begins to awaken as he learns that he has certainly “paid a price for being a child of the New World” (89) and his “go American” philosophy. Juxtaposed with these views are his semi-enlightened comments on the status of humankind. He is totally aware of the empathy and chaos that capitalism and contemporary society has fashioned, the statement “very few of us . . . bother about accountability or keep spread sheets of conscience” (50) wholly indicates this sentiment; however, he believes that he can still “keep up [his] struggle for existence” because of his theory, “memory is life and forgetting death” (72), on the convoluted outlook of the world. In spite of that, the narrator is brought “face to face with the real conditions of existence” (100) at the close of the novella and only then apprehends that his memory has not only failed to justify his existence, but it has essentially propagated his current fragmented conception of his existence. Through this realistic convention of self-reflexive narrative, Bellow presents a story of great importance to him, and creates a narrator who unconsciously unveils his identity through the very narrative fabric.

This narrative fabric, however, holds another angle within its pattern—the *intrasubjective* perspective of Bellow’s narrator. As discussed, the narrator’s identity is presented through his very narrative, but his character and comments also enter the realm of intrasubjectivity, and ultimately reveals the condition of the social world and the

problems implicit in that world. Puschmann-Nalenz's review of this postmodern trait helps to assist the reader's understanding of Bellow's intention:

Postmodern fiction often leads to a mingling of 'fiction' and 'reality'. This is achieved—among other methods—by breaking through the conventional conception of time and replacing it by a subjective and psychologically “realistic” time. What counts is the intrasubjective time; it is the only significant experience of time. It becomes an integral part of the constitution of a text, either by the development of the individual, or by the individual's crisis. *The insight into the interior of a character is intended to reveal an interpretation of the present reality to the reader.* (106; emphasis added)

The reader not only recognizes the narrator's arguments as commentary on the postmodern condition, but the narrator through his very comments “*reveals*” this reality. Once again, Bellow is operating on a dual level.

One of the narrator's most sublime statements in the novella comes at the very end. After concluding his conversation with the young man who informs him of the Fonsteins' untimely death in a traffic accident, the narrator focuses on the innate understanding of both himself and the young man, and observes that the individual and collective “mental structures” (102) within society are diverse and somewhat unfathomable. He states, “You can never dismantle all these modern mental structures. There are so many of them that they face you like an interminable vast city” (102). This comment, compounded with other statements strikingly similar in content, informs the reader of the unreliable condition of contemporary culture, essentially American culture, and the depletion of any coherence that society may have accumulated through the years. I quote at random:

“New York is a collective fantasy of millions. There’s just so much a single mind can do with it” (17), “But the strangeness of souls is certainly no news in this day and age” (48), “We were, moreover, less restricted, we had wider liberties. We grew up under a larger range of influences and thoughts—we were the children of a great democracy, bred to equality, living it up with no pales to confine us” (24)—describing once again the difference in generations and the gap that modern society has bred—and, “Out of sight isn’t necessarily out of mind. People withdraw into themselves, and then they work up imaginary affection. It’s a common American condition” (94). These are all comments either strictly directed at the reader’s awareness of contemporary life, or subtly merged into the narrator by Bellow in order to reveal this condition through his character.

Bellow seems to have combined Steven Mailloux’s contention that “the existence of literature depends as much on readers reading as it does on authors writing” (66) and Leslie Fiedler’s comment in “The New Mutants” noting that “literature has a contemporary as well as a traditional function. That is to say, it may be dedicated to illuminating the present and the meaning of the present, which is, after all, no more given to the past” (380). Bellow formulates this multiform conglomerate and attaches the postmodern condition via his deliberate participation in postmodern narrative and his theories on humankind at present—directed by the narrator’s observations. Because Bellow has been writing since the 1930’s he is capable of noticing the shift that has occurred in Western society over the past thirty or forty years.

The manner in which Bellow describes this turn is conducive to the position Andreas Huyssen takes in his book, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Huyssen essentially maps the postmodern and its progression, and states

that “in an important sector of our culture there is a noticeable shift in sensibility, practices, and discourse formations which distinguishes a postmodern set of assumptions, experiences, and propositions from that of a preceding period” (181). Huyssen’s account is directly allied in *The Bellarosa Connection* to the narrator’s vision of the impenetrable “mental structures” that control contemporary life. This new form of discursive practice is also critiqued by Bellow’s narrator as he describes his melancholy at the beginning of the work. The narrator realizes that his emotional and spiritual state is difficult to articulate in the postmodern context of the present world, so he resolves to incorporate scientific and economic discursive forms into his description: “These are not data from the memory bank of a computer. I am preoccupied with feelings and longings, and emotional memory is nothing like rocketry or gross national products” (3). The shift in sensibility is documented with this comment, and the reader is indoctrinated into the new framework of Saul Bellow.

Upon recognizing the lack of originality and effectual living in contemporary society, the narrator understands the importance of people who are capable of transcending the postmodern condition. Several times he mentions “higher types,” those beyond the hegemonic conformity of mass democracy, and in Sorella Fonstein he finds exactly that. One specific statement addressed to Sorella by the narrator notes not only her successful achievement as a higher type, but also embodies a large part of Bellow’s criticism on contemporary culture. The Narrator says of Sorella,

She was a woman with great powers of intelligence, and in these democratic times, whether you are conscious of it or not, you are continually in quest for higher types . . . Everybody knows what standard products and interchangeable

parts signify, understand the operation of glaciers on the social landscape, planing of the hills, scrubbing away the irregularities. (66)

Later in the novella the narrator mentions this topic again, and once more he connects the inability of individuals to actualize anything other than the common characteristics of modern life to the scarcity of higher types, he states: "Searching, still, for the higher type. I didn't want to talk about medicare or social security checks or hearing aids or pacemakers or bypass surgery" (71). The narrator thoroughly digests this present deficiency and is extremely disappointed in humankind's lackluster aspirations—a major point of contention for Bellow.

Bertens' position on this topic is relative to Bellow's Narrator's. Bertens explains that

The postmodern self is no longer a coherent entity that has the power to impose (admittedly subjective) order upon its environment. It has become decentered . . .

The radical indeterminacy of Postmodernism has entered the individual ego and has drastically affected its former (supposed) stability. Identity has become as uncertain as everything else. (65)

This is precisely Bellow's subject matter. Bellow's narrator is disappointed and often incensed by things such as an individual's defects being "converted to seed money for enterprises" (25), equality and democracy used as implements of ruin against innate human imagination and innovation, and the collapse of Western culture in general. Therefore, at this juncture, we need to ascertain the influences on Bellow in order to define his interpretation of "higher types."

Bellow has mentioned numerous writers and thinkers who have substantially influenced his writing: Whitman, the English Romantics, Eliot, etc. But arguably the

most influential of these is the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Bellow was quoted in an interview as saying he “prefer[ed] Nietzsche” because he is “much more strengthening to the soul—the soul of a Jew, I should add” (251). Most postmodern theory would agree with Bellow, and in fact Nietzsche is pronounced by the bulk of these theorists as the progenitor to postmodern thought and studies in general. Best and Kellner, in *The Postmodern Turn*, provide a very informative glimpse into the inauguration of postmodernism and the pivotal role Nietzsche plays:

Nietzsche believed that modern society had become so chaotic, fragmented, and devoid of “*creative force*” that it had lost the resources to create a vital culture and that ultimately, modern society greatly advanced the decline of the human species that had already begun early in Western history. In Nietzsche’s view, two trends were evident that were producing contradictory processes of massification and fragmentation—whose extreme consequences would be a central theme of postmodern theory. On the one hand, modern society was fragmenting into warring groups, factions, and individuals without any overriding purpose of shared goals. On the other hand, it was leveling individuals into a herd, bereft of individuality, spontaneity, passion, or creativity. Both trends were harmful to the development of the sort of free, creative, and strong individuality championed by Nietzsche, and he was sharply critical of each. (57)

Bellow’s notion of the “higher type” is drawn directly from the Nietzschean notion of “Will to Power” and his *ubermensch* human type of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Bellow is fully aware of the pervasive practice of standardized products that high capitalism and mass democracy produces, and the manner in which it has circumvented inanimate

objects and crossed over to disseminate itself onto flesh and blood human beings. The narrator longs for an individual who has the ingenuity, passion, and “creative force” of Nietzsche’s overman, but fails to find anyone, besides Sorella, above the pedestrian standards of present-day life. Bellow, being quite familiar with Nietzsche’s platform, casts this theme into his narrative because “whether [we] are conscious of it or not,” as the narrator of *The Bellarosa Connection* stresses, the reader will on some level grasp this postmodern characteristic.

The final postmodern feature I will discuss in this chapter is pastiche. Pastiche, a free-floating network of ideas, views, and styles that are leagued together and function as a postmodern form of parody and mimesis, is commonly married to John Barth’s depiction of postmodern literature as the “literature of exhaustion” because many postmodern writers practice this technique in light of the alleged death of innovation. Since literature of exhaustion is not Bellow’s style, nor has it ever been, he does not formally engage in pastiche. Bellow does, however, comment throughout his work on the manner in which pastiche has permeated society, and specifically uses *The Bellarosa Connection* to delve meticulously into this postmodern phenomenon—an element that Bellow scholarship has never considered.

Jameson has contributed some of the seminal work on the issue of pastiche in contemporary art, and his perspective on this development can deepen the reader’s understanding of Bellow’s plan in *The Bellarosa Connection*. In *The Cultural Turn*, Jameson writes:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such

mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared with which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humour. (5)

The most important element of this working definition to Bellow's fiction is the function of pastiche as the "wearing of a stylistic mask." A rendering of Bellow's attitude on pastiche is delivered by Sorella's viewpoint of the concentration camps of World War II. The narrator describes Sorella's take on the black and slapstick humor involved in the operation of these camps, and explains how this dimension is not only practiced by the participants (camp administrators and soldiers), but also interpreted by the reader. The narrator says of Sorella, "Being a French teacher, she was familiar with Jarry and *Ubu Roi*, Pataphysics, Absurdism, Dada, Surrealism. Some camps were run in a burlesque style that forced you to make these connections" (28). Hence, the narrator describes the pro-active role of pastiche, and how certain styles were appropriated by the Nazi leaders and soldiers. Thus, the stylistic mask is worn, and the very interpretation that essentially forces the reader to connect these artistic styles to the most horrific event of the twentieth century is developed. The Nazi leadership was practicing these styles in the blank parody mode that epitomizes pastiche, without the "ulterior motive" of satire, but through a seriousness that defies interpretation. However, Bellow recognizes the ironic and extremely dark humor of the structure and participants involved in this atrocity and is able to relay this effect to the reader. In this sense Bellow is treating pastiche differently from Jameson—by embellishing the meaning with a humor of sorts, an element of concord between Bellow and postmodern theorist Linda Hutcheon. Hutcheon argues that

Jameson ignores the “subversive potential of irony, parody, and humor” (303) interwoven in pastiche—an approach uncannily similar to Bellow’s. Margaret Mahoney, one of a minority of Bellow critics who have written on postmodern aspects in his work, acknowledges Bellow’s use of postmodern humor in “Aspects of Postmodernism in *More Die of Heartbreak*,” and believes that “Bellow’s postmodernism is rooted in humor and comedy. In his novels, Bellow uses both the comedy of character and the comedy of situation” (83). The technique can definitely be viewed as postmodernist, but what makes it work is Bellow’s blending of the recognized artistic styles with the unequaled spirit of evil chartered in these camps. The juxtaposition of art and horror used to create a scene of incomprehensible dark-humor—Bellow at his best.

Another excellent interpretation of postmodern pastiche is presented by Stanley J. Grenz in *A Primer on Postmodernism*. Grenz treats pastiche according to visual imagery, but his principle position closely resembles Jameson’s, and its employment closely parallels another of Bellow’s comments. Grenz describes pastiche as art

pressed to its limits, artistic juxtaposition becomes what is sometimes termed *pastiche*. The goal of this tactic, which has been employed in both high-culture and pop-culture contexts, is to barrage the viewer with incongruous, even clashing images that call into question any sense of objective meaning. This disjointed, unharmonious design of pastiche with its gaudy color schemes, discordant typography, and the like, has moved beyond the world of avant-garde art into the everyday realm of book jackets, magazine covers, and mass advertising. (26-7)

The embodiment of this view is the character of Wolfe, one of Billy Rose’s ghost-writers from the Village and the narrator’s acquaintance, and his eagerness

to go forward, meaning that he was prepared to take abuse—and they had plenty of it to give—from the top wise-guy theoreticians, the heavyweight pundits, in order to get an education in modern life—which meant you could combine Kierkegaard and Birdland in the same breath. (36)

These seemingly unharmonious images and personalities, one known for his attack of massification and the individual's displacement beneath such a system (and considered as an early predecessor of postmodernism), while the other presents these problems in a pedestrian manner—a musical form—and ultimately lacks the seriousness of the religious-thinker Kierkegaard, are at the heart of pastiche and postmodernism. Consider this quintessential Bellow—strategizing on the penetrating strangeness of contemporary life in such a way as to narrow the focus. Bellow understands the huge conglomerate of ideas that the present world has become, and perhaps wonders if traditional juxtaposition had been eclipsed by this incessant bombardment of pastiche lifestyle. Bellow ambivalently comments on a society that practices pastiche so freely and loosely as to render it mundane, while in effect forcing the reader to participate in this tedious practice.

“All the world was dark and dreary. Fucking-A right! A chip, a plug, had gone dead in the mental apparatus” (71). This is ultimately one of the narrator's final positions in *The Bellarosa Connection*, and of immense importance is the terminology he uses to describe his mental malfunction—in the form of a mechanical or computer failure. The postmodern elements in *The Bellarosa Connection* point to this very, for Bellow at least, distressing colonization that has taken place in our highly mechanized and computerized society. Not only the lack of human ideas, but the misplacement of human feeling, community, and understanding. The narrator has one of the most extraordinary memory

systems in the world, and he still falters on the human level because of not only the times he is living in, but also the incredible influence that these times have on him. In a 1977 essay entitled “The Jefferson Lectures,” Bellow states that “the ideas around us are apt to produce more confusion than order” (129), and this is precisely one of his focuses in writing *The Bellarosa Connection*—to discuss Nazi concentration camps of World War II and one man’s remarkable campaign to avoid these tortures, but to also develop a narrator who not only presents this story but also divines his inner-self and the conditions of the contemporary world as well. Granz argues that “postmoderns no longer accept the validity of a single integral world” (49), and although Bellow does not completely support this vision, in this novella he discusses his discomforts in such a world, and consciously and unconsciously creates a work that enters postmodernism without denying the validity of humanity’s aspirations to understand and report on this condition.

CHAPTER V

SAUL BELLOW AND PERFORMANCE CULTURE:

THE BELLAROSA CONNECTION AND THE ACTUAL

Universal human nature is not a very human thing.

Erving Goffman

Many times in Bellow's novels we are reminded that 'being human' isn't the automatic condition of every human being.

Martin Amis

Now, it's performance that matters, not only in everyday life, but in areas of culture which one seldom associates with it. Poems and art "events" are performance, to be sure, but criticism itself, no longer content to gesticulate in the margins of texts, also takes hold of a part of the stage, and plays. Free play, or simply play as a Nietzschean affirmation occupying the void left by the death of god, is the common link between most of our means of "extrication."

Michel Benamou

I am a performer and speak as a performer. But for about two centuries, performers have also felt it necessary to vindicate themselves while performing . . . In these modern centuries, the writer becomes the embattled artist at war with society, with the power of money, with tyranny, etc. . . But when I think back on my life as a performer, I often recall a sentence from one of Samuel Butler's essays: "Life is like playing a violin solo in public and learning the instrument as one goes on," and then I add that there is a drunken riot in the concert hall, and nobody at all is minding the music.

Saul Bellow

Lived the same life with the rest, the same old laughing, gnawing, sleeping,

Play'd the part that still looks back on the actor and actress,

The same old role, the role that is what we make it, as great as we like,

Or as small as we like, or both great and small.

These four lines are from Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," and add a certain amount of credence to this chapter about Bellow's notion of performance. Walt Whitman, a huge influence on Bellow, understood modern society's reliance on acting and playing "roles." Moreover, there may in fact be no larger character/persona in American literature than the Whitman of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman found the entire theater practice quite enthralling, and as David S. Reynolds states, in *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*, "by far the most important aspect of the theater experience for Whitman was the interaction between audience and performers" (157). And this is where Saul Bellow comes in—as a keen observer and presenter of the performance involved in the contemporary world, and the implicit theatricality of the writer's role and the audience's subsequent response.

Of course, Bellow has company in this position. American literature is saturated with writers who have not only understood role-playing and performance and treated it according to their own style, but also those whose characters/protagonists play the part of the writer's alter-ego and are thinly disguised as such—Hemingway's Nick Adams or Philip Roth's Nathan Zuckerman for example. Even a 1997 book-length study by Lothar Honnighausen entitled *Faulkner: Masks and Metaphors* examines this phenomenon in Faulkner's works, and discovers that Faulkner adopted a masking process in which "the elusive master employed not one but a multitude of masks to transform himself" (4). Yet, Bellow treats masks, performance, acting in the social theater, and role-playing quite differently from these or any other American authors. Many scholars have fervently argued that the majority of Bellow's protagonists are simply Bellow himself, or at least a version of Bellow. And although sufficient evidence exists supporting this contention, it

has never been proven and even Bellow refuses to answer these claims. Bellow recognizes the role of performer innate in writing or any form of artistic endeavor, but his works display an alternate treatment of performance-at-large. Being a trained anthropologist, Bellow is capable of thoroughly examining the pervasiveness of theater on social interaction, and his works are often explorations into this exercise.

In “‘The Hollywood Thread’ and the First Draft of Saul Bellow’s *Seize the Day*,” Chavkin interprets arguably Bellow’s greatest work, *Seize the Day*, according to thirteen sections of the early versions of the novella that are housed at the Humanities Research Center on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin. In one of these manuscripts Chavkin locates a note written on the margins by Bellow that indicates his awareness of the role of the actor in society, and the pro-active position he takes in presenting this characteristic throughout the work:

On the back cover of the second notebook of “One of Those Days,” (an early title of *Seize the Day*) Bellow jotted down some notes to himself for subsequent revision of his novel. Most of these notes indicate minor changes to be made in the plot, but one phrase is particularly revealing—“Hollywood thread throughout.” Bellow’s reference to Hollywood here is not merely a note to himself to develop the story of Wilhelm’s pathetic attempt to become a Hollywood star, which is only alluded to in the first draft. The Hollywood thread is a catchall phrase under which the main themes of the novel can be subsumed, themes often associated with Hollywood dreaming, narcissism, self-deception, role-playing, hedonism, greedy materialism, cynicism, and the futile pursuit of youth and beauty. (84-5)

With his research and subsequent article, Chavkin essentially uncovers one of the most poignant themes in the entirety of Bellow's canon—performance, acting, and role-playing in the social theater. I will show that this “Hollywood thread” can be used on numerous Bellow works, but especially on his most recent critically successful novellas—*The Bellarosa Connection* and *The Actual*. The imagery conducted around this “Hollywood thread” in both of these works is ingenious, but extraordinarily extensive; therefore, I will concentrate on what I consider the most important element in each, and the issues that seem to correspond to Bellow's strongest intentions.

In *The Bellarosa Connection* the narrator's perspective is of immeasurable importance because he presents the story as if it were a piece of theater: with a cast of characters, a Broadway star, and a story more about himself as character than about Harry Fonstein's amazing escape from Nazi Europe and what would have definitely been his certain death in a concentration camp. The perspective of the narrator and his friend of “higher type,” Sorella, is directed solely at the theater and the performance of individuals and collective agencies in modern society. *The Actual* takes a different approach to performance, but the general statement remains the same. Bellow treats every character in *The Actual* as theatrical. Jay Wustrin, the ex-husband of the love of the narrator's (Harry Trellman) life, is treated by Bellow as a deplorable individual heavily influenced by the technique of T. S. Eliot, and he is presented by Bellow as pure performer—with no basic groundwork of what is commonly referred to as human. In *The Actual* Bellow is also profoundly concerned with how an individual presents him- or herself in social interaction, and the greater portion of the terminology used can be linked to sociologist Erving Goffman's study of this exact topic. In a sense, Goffman's theories are the

adhesive materials that actively supplement Bellow's original thoughts and work. Goffman's work in and of itself resists the postmodern classification; however, like Nietzsche and Marx, he is essentially another important predecessor and prophet of our current postmodern culture. Goffman's meticulous examination of identity and the manner in which the self is presented can unquestionably be linked to postmodern studies. Postmodernism contends that the ambivalence of identity is the one factor that has emerged as the common trait of the contemporary individual—something Goffman notes as early as the 1950's—and associates this element with modern humankind's predisposition to role-playing and mingling fantasy and reality. Therefore, the same can be said of Goffman as it has for Bellow: both comment on, and at times practice, postmodernism without technically being postmodernists.

Bellow seemingly presents more questions than answers in his treatment of Hollywoodized and performance culture. Some of these questions include: Where does reality subsist in a world based entirely on the presentation of masked selves and the pervasiveness of Hollywood-marketed culture? Where is the true "self" or "soul" in a world constantly dedicated to fluctuating self-images and pseudo-self-improvement? Has the theater and its mechanics pervaded Western culture to the extent that its separation from reality is no longer possible, or is life nothing but a grand theater? Bellow focuses on these questions and many more in his work, and *The Bellarosa Connection* and *The Actual* are the fruition of this work and these questions; however, as always with Bellow, straightforward answers are replaced by ambiguity and ambivalence, and his ultimate message lies in the connecting of the vacillating positions he takes in both works.

The performance foundation in *The Bellarosa Connection* is established by the narrator's presentation of the Fonsteins' story. Throughout the work he mentions the story's connection to an episodic Hollywood or Broadway type adventure, and even stipulates that he himself received the story in this fashion: "I came to know it too. I got it in episodes, like a Hollywood serial—the Saturday thriller, featuring Harry Fonstein and Billy Rose, or Bellarosa" (11). Moreover, the individuals directly and indirectly involved in the story become a "permanent cast of characters" (67) that are "handsomely installed in [the narrator's] consciousness" (72). At this juncture the narrator is creating a fictional abstract stage for these characters in order to narrate a story that is theatrical and somewhat surreal in and of itself. The Hollywood vein is first and foremost secured by Broadway Billy Rose, the man responsible for saving Harry Fonstein from certain death in a concentration camp; however, Bellow's narrator adds another dimension to this theatrical plot, and tends to describe everything in terms of the theater and staged, social acting.

Brigitte Scheer-Schaezler describes Bellow's protagonists and characters as a whole as "striving to become more human, to penetrate the layers of deception in search of a higher reality" (7). The narrator and Sorella personify this conviction. Bellow employs these characters in order to investigate human identity, and how the tearing away and adding to societal masks seems ultimately to form identity. As discussed, the narrator hankers after a cast of characters who furnish him with an identity and essentially supplement his life with a certain amount of validity. This is evident at the conclusion of the novella when, much to the narrator's piercing chagrin, he realizes that all of the primary players involved in his story are dead. The narrator finds himself "making a list

of names: Billy is dead, Mrs. Hamet, dead; Sorella, dead; Harry, dead. All the principles, dead” (96). His *stage* is virtually empty and this has a devastating effect on the narrator’s identity. This bears a striking resemblance to Erving Goffman’s theory of self presentation, a characteristic that has gone unnoticed by Bellow scholarship. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman delivers many assessments that are conducive to the narrator’s position, but one in particular epitomizes one of his roles. Goffman writes: “He (the individual as character) often manifests a gregarious desire for teammates and audiences, a tactful considerateness for their concerns; and he has a capacity for deeply felt shame, leading him to minimize the chances he takes of exposure” (24). The immense importance of this statement is twofold. First, the narrator’s refusal to expose himself is another avenue into the postmodern technique of revealing the character through his comments and actions, and not through deliberate and intimate unmasking (discussed in Chapter Four). Second, this team that Goffman speaks of is the narrator’s key to survival; without this team he has come to depend on so fervently, his life has no tangible meaning. An explanation of how the narrator reaches this precarious position is now in order, and I intend on showing how both Sorella’s and the narrator’s societal masks are created and ultimately torn off by Bellow.

Another of Goffman’s statements that can be directly linked to the narrator’s behavior and identity concerns the “emergence of character,” and the designated roles for those partaking in the production. Goffman writes,

There will be a back region with its tools for shaping the body, and a front region with its fixed props. There will be a team of persons whose activity on stage in conjunction with available props will constitute the scene from which the

performed character's self will emerge, and another team, the audience, whose interpretive activity will be necessary for this emergence. The self is a product of all of these arrangements, and in all of its parts bears the marks of this genesis.

(24)

Very early in the novella the reader is aware that either a change will take place in the narrator through the course of his story, or that this change has already occurred and the story will simply be recounted in flashback. Ultimately, both of these presumptions are true. At the beginning of his monologue the narrator declares, "a walking memory file like me can't trash his beginnings or distort his early history. Sure, in the universal process of self-revision anybody can be carried away from the true facts . . . So whenever I was tempted to fake it, I asked myself, 'And how are things out in New Jersey?' (2-3)

The narrator is speaking of the issues that have haunted him throughout his life: the abandonment of his father's values and culture, his departure from his roots in New Jersey and the antebellum Philadelphia mansion in which he presently resides, and his incapacity to distinguish his true self and exactly what it means to his life. Since the story is reported in flashback, with a thirty year difference between the narrator's present and the period he is recalling (1959-1989), the reader could possibly perceive the revision that has taken place in the narrator's self, but this never comes to fruition. At the conclusion of the novella even the narrator is uncertain on what his true self is, "whatever I was (and that, at this late stage, still remained to be seen)" (85), and is somewhat disconcerted about his mastery of multiple selves and his uncanny ability to adapt and perform.

Concerning the belief in the specific part an individual is performing, Goffman delineates two versions of self and performance that are commonly associated with the act. Goffman writes, “At one extreme, one finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality” (96)—referred to by Goffman as the “sincere” performance. The reverse of this is true as well, the “cynical” performance, where Goffman finds that “the performer may not be taken in at all by his own routine” (96). The narrator’s self is manifest in both of these definitions. The early portrait of the narrator presents him fully aware of his “routine,” and subsequently convinced that his version of reality, and his ensuing performance, is authentic. However, the reader is shocked by the version he or she receives at the closing of the novella because of the innate incongruities in the narrator’s performance, and begins to wonder if it all is simply a sham. His internal and social masks are removed at this point, and the narrator’s self emerges within his very inability to reveal it. He proffers a story about a famous Broadway celebrity in serialized Hollywood fashion, uses the terminology of the theater and popular dramatized jargon, doubts his own self and is skeptical about his and others’ performances, and closes by admitting that this mainstream form of self-revision is not only a hoax played on society, but is nugatory and superfluous because it is already implicit in society.

Ann Branaman, in her introductory essay in *The Goffman Reader*, asserts that Goffman’s “self-as-performer is not the same as the self as such, but rather is the basic motivational core which motivates us to engage in the performances with which we achieve selfhood” (xlix). This is exactly what Bellow attempts to portray with Sorella Fonstein. The narrator takes the reader through the progression of Sorella’s identity, and

discloses the manner in which she achieves selfhood through both wanton and unintentional performance. When describing the woman that Harry Fonstein married, the quintessential American from New Jersey, the narrator notes her deliberate performance aids, but is fully aware that she understands her true self. The narrator's early description is as follows:

She was very heavy and she wore makeup. Her cheeks were downy. Her hair was done up in a beehive. A pince-nez, highly unusual, a deliberate disguise, gave her a theatrical air. She was still a novice then, trying on these props. Her aim was to achieve an authoritative, declarative manner. However, she was no fool. (6)

Later the narrator mentions that "the Sorella [he] saw was not constructed but revealed" (33). The narrator is not merely unfolding a "sincere" self, in Goffman's terms, who manages to perfect and firmly believe in the presentation of their act, but rather a person who achieves selfhood through fabricated and real acts. Sorella's internal core is unconditionally stable throughout the novella, and the fact that she "did dead sober what delirious sopranos put over on us in a state of false Wagnerian intoxication" (49), as the narrator describes it, only further establishes her role as the true self that Bellow is attempting to present—as a direct contrast to the narrator's self.

Bellow heightens and essentially explains his message when he has the narrator describe the confrontation between Billy Rose and Sorella. Her performance and true self attributes are consummated during this event, and the narrator once again recognizes that Sorella is definitely of a higher type because she is capable of marrying the theatrical self-as-performer to her actual self. The narrator states: "What it signified was that in a

time when disguise and deception are practiced so extensively as to numb the powers of awareness, only a major force of personality could produce such admissions” (55). The narrator is overtly careful not to mislead the reader into believing that Sorella’s ability reclines in a type of “true-self” which she completely possesses, but rather emerges through the personality of her performance. This is an extension of Bellow’s exploration of the performance and role-playing phenomenon. He cleverly compares the two characters and conveys to the reader the advantages and disadvantages of performance, and how, as Goffman painstakingly discovers and presents, performance elicits the self through the props and stages of modern social life and the acting thereupon.

The most intriguing performance element in *The Bellarosa Connection* is the very manner in which the story is portrayed, and the connections made by the narrator of the fictionalized Hollywood version of the world and the ostensible real historical events. Harry Fonstein is compared numerous times to Douglas Fairbanks, and divulged as a person who could have never emulated Fairbanks’ Hollywood feats in Nazi Europe because of his bad leg. Then there is also Harry’s indirect connection to Broadway Billy Rose—the huge Broadway star who saved his life with his covert campaign of smuggling Jews out of Europe. The narrator and Sorella both speak of the “Hollywood-style” (28) of Harry’s rescue, and the “Hollywood-style” (59) mourning that the American Jews partook in at Madison Square Garden. These are all important building-blocks for the foundation that Bellow constructs with this Hollywood message, but he reserves his sharpest, as well as wittiest and darkest, criticism for his surreptitious commentary on contemporary performance culture.

Another of Goffman's points establishes the importance of not only the role that the performer is playing, but of his or her accountability and believability. Goffman makes two important statements in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* that are valuable corollaries for Bellow's intention in *The Bellarosa Connection*:

When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be. (17)

This statement is important because rarely is anything what it appears to be in the Bellovian universe. This statement can also be used in conjunction with Daniel Walden's edict concerning Bellow's resolute dedication to detailing society's "relationship to [their] environment" (64). Walden writes:

What has almost universally been passed over in Bellow's novels is the extraordinary way in which this massive accumulation of material fact and concrete detail purposely tends to undermine itself—subverting the realist's traditional faith in material circumstance and the world of appearance. As Bellow's novels demonstrate, his fiction increasingly challenges the authority of culture itself. (64)

Bellow is undermining culture's and the reader's perception of the world by conscientiously writing a work of fiction that cast aspersions on our view of society and the tendency of individuals to believe what is being demonstrated without question. A perfect example of this is the narrator's comment about Las Vegas at the close of the

novella. He calls Las Vegas “the biggest showplace in the world—the heart of the American entertainment industry . . . nothing to compare to it in the history of the world” (100). Through the narrator, Bellow is in essence challenging our entire Western worldview on performance and the supposed separation of the real self and life from that of the theatrical version. If we accept the narrator’s view of popular performance culture, and conclude that he is sincere in his approach, then one would have to submit to his view of Las Vegas and take it to be a microcosm of everything we hold dear. He implicitly links Las Vegas to his views on Broadway and Hollywood in order to display the complete human dependence on not only performing, but on having things explained to them in terms of performance.

Bellow uses the Goffman termed “individual” to portray the collective whole—the unit that composes Western society and culture. He undermines our view of what “appears to be real” with a discussion of performance in general, and specifically the narrator’s presentation. The culmination of this tactic appears at the pinnacle of Sorella’s and the narrator’s discussion of the concentration camps, and how they required a performed act just as much as any Broadway musical. The narrator comments to Sorella, “All right, Billy Rose wasn’t the only one in show biz. So the Germans did it too, and what they staged in Nuremberg was bigger than Billy’s rally in Madison Square Garden—the ‘We Will Never Die’ pageant” (28). This is Bellow’s primary message—to force the reader to think about and consciously contend with the thin or non-existent lines between fact and fiction, reality and fantasy, Hollywood-joviality versus realistic-horror. Does the reader believe in the sincerity of both performances (Billy’s celebration and the Nazis’ death-camps), and how should the reader view the reality of each one? Herbert Blau, in

To All Appearances: Ideology and Performance, examines the motif of Shakespeare's "world as a stage" motif, and ultimately concludes that there is an implied danger in this presumption, especially as the postmodern social paradigm gains precedence—a notion that closely resembles Bellow's position. Blau writes,

Over the course of history there has been more or less anxiety, more or less philosophical, about the possibility that life might be a dream or all the world a stage. That has been the curious substance at the troubled heart of the drama, its essential distrust of the appearances of theater. What complicates the matter is that the theater, which always needs to be watched, appears to have never trusted itself . . . If it now appears that the theater is the delirious symptom of the postmodern condition, anxiety more or less dispersed in the plentitude of appearance, what was engrafted in history by the canonical drama is an image of theater fearful of its own presence . . . We still think of the theater as the site of otherness, but there is the periodic evidence (in this anthropomorphic view) that it has always wanted to be something other than theater, if not the symbolist spirit of music, then specifically more like life, though even in the spirit of realism it encounters life as a dream. (38)

Bellow's notion compounds Blau's view and seems to say that we should be fretful about our willingness to accept the theatrical performance elements that have overlapped their boundary and colonized Western culture, lest we submit to the role of pure actor—something that he discusses in *The Actual* with the character as pure actor, Jay Wustrin.

In Saul Bellow's *The Actual* one cannot help but to notice the relationship drawn between the acting involved in the drama of the staged, formal theater, and that of the

unstaged social theater of everyday interaction. The title of this novella can be read in two strikingly different but similar ways. By the end of the text the reader should realize that Harry Trellman firmly believes that his love for Amy Wustrin is “an actual affinity” (100) that has existed between the two throughout their lives (even within their imaginations, especially Harry’s). An alternate interpretation involves the role of the social actor with definite motivations becoming an *actual* person. Although Harry and Amy are both actors in the social sense, they are aware of their role-playing and attempt to reach a level of actuality that transcends the theatricality of the schizoid postmodern personality.

Borklund, in “How it All Adds Up for Saul Bellow,” recognizes Bellow’s success in capturing the essence of human performance, and argues that Bellow “returns compulsively to powerful dramatizations of what he considers the basic human problem—the construction of the authentic self” (438). Not unlike his intentions for *The Bellarosa Connection*, Bellow seems obsessed over the issue of social performance and role-playing, and how it negates the core of human nature—how it is inevitable, but in most cases corruptive to the soul/self. These notions of the self, the “real” self and the “presented” self, correspond to Bellow’s philosophy of the soul. Bellow believes every person has a true soul that has the potential to override any other emotion involved in human existence, and that the direct conflict between the various masks we present is a byproduct of the inability to follow the true soul. *The Actual* is not the scathing indictment of capitalism, and the isolation of modern man within it, that exists in early and middle Bellow, but an indictment of the players that stage the play of capitalism and subsequently lose and neglect their souls. His commentary is not strictly limited to the

affluent high-society members and their performances, but also focuses on the masquerade of the middle-class. The most heavily criticized of all the characters in *The Actual* is Jay Wustrin, the former friend and husband of Harry and Amy respectively, who specializes in presenting multiple characters for the purpose of fulfilling both his financial and theatrical requirements. Bellow is fully aware that television, cinema, and the theater have utterly invaded and pervaded every form of human existence and behavior, and *The Actual* elicits the difficulties of being a “real” person in the staged, modern world.

The Actual can possibly be read as Bellow’s personal crusade to deftly analyze and comment on the positive and negative factors that shape and build the “authentic” and “inauthentic” self. Most of Bellow’s criticism in this novella is directed at Jay Wustrin and others that employ his social-acting method. Yet, Bellow reserves many of his pronouncements for the performances that the majority of the high-capitalist Western world engage in. He portrays the middle-, upper-middle, and affluent classes of American society as languid and phony and presents, and ultimately laments, the complete loss of authentic self that has taken place in these sordid social circles and classes. He discusses the implicit performances of each class, and how participation in these performances is not simply discretionary, but rather presumed and consequently mandatory. Along with his commentary on pure actors like Jay Wustrin and the various social circles they inhabit, Bellow creates two characters who have the organic ability to achieve selfhood—to actualize their *selves* even amidst the smoldering quagmire of contemporary performance. These characters are Harry Trellman, the narrator and protagonist, and the love of his life, Amy Wustrin. Together these two provide a

stunning contrast to those Bellow views as the parasites of the social landscape, and given the fact that they are actors as well, an element made clear to the reader by Bellow's narrator, they still succeed in being true to their individual self and soul. And once again, Bellow's positions reflect an uncanny resemblance to Goffman's theories.

Bellow's *dramatis personae* have often displayed the tendency to act out a part, or play a role that eventually destroys them. Moses Herzog is the quintessential example of this form of behavior; however, in Jay Wustrin he creates a character who relishes the theater of life and revels in the production of the dramatic personality. Jay Wustrin is an actor in the strictest sense, and he makes the others around him his supporting actors while his stage criteria is met with each human interaction. According to Trellman and Amy, Wustrin's every intention is in the formation of his performance. To be sure, Wustrin is definitely not interested in literature for its ability to enlighten or the enrichment of the "true" self that it can provide, but he simply memorizes various fragments, excerpts, and lines to embellish his theatrical personality. One of his favorite poets is T. S. Eliot, pronounced "*El-yat*" (23) by Wustrin, whom he often quoted to Amy (95). There is a line in Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" that is instrumental to Bellow's notion of the fabricated self, and that can be used to describe not only Jay's character, but also other minor characters in the novella, Adletsky and Bodo for example, that practice method acting in order to obtain their goals. Eliot writes, "There will be time, there will be time/ To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" (26-7). Eliot's message describes the falsity that is inherent in the presentation of the self—the acting in which everyone participates, especially those characters like Jay Wustrin who are foils of the dejected actor, Prufrock. Bellow, who has explored Eliot and his

“Wasteland outlook” several times early in his career, makes Wustrin in the mold of a Prufrock character in order to demonstrate the pervasiveness of Eliot’s work and the people it has influenced, quite negatively in Wustrin’s case, all while creating Trellman’s negative-*Doppelgänger* to show how the cycle is possibly broken.

An exacting review of Wustrin’s character reveals the many similarities he shares with Eliot’s Prufrock, a speculation the reader can logically make due to the numerous Eliot allusions in the text itself and Bellow’s familiarity with Eliot’s work—widely discussed by Bellow and critics alike. George Williamson, in *A Reader’s Guide to T. S. Eliot*, argues that Prufrock’s “self-conscious accommodation to the social scene suggests the same thing in others” (61), and Grover Smith embellishes this notion in his book, *T. S. Eliot’s Poetry and Plays*, claiming that Prufrock “dare not risk the disappointment of seeking *actual love*, which, if he found it and had energy enough for it, still could not satisfy him” (15). Both of these statements reach to the heart of Wustrin’s character, and are diametrically opposed to Trellman’s—the reader can assume that this is deliberately plotted by Bellow. Trellman perfunctorily describes Wustrin’s illicit affairs and the image he has of himself, which is subsequently projected into his behavior and onto others. Early in the novella Trellman depicts Jay as “lik[ing] to think of himself and to see himself as a swinger. He chased women . . . he was a *homme à femmes*. Women were his principle interest. Amy Wustrin was his second wife” (23-4). Hence, both Prufrock and Wustrin have the unappeasable fear of love—of *actual* love more importantly—yet partake in it nevertheless, regardless of how superficial the action may be. Also, they both presume that their behavior is the norm, and that their social acting and behavior is the same in others. While pondering Jay and his bizarre behavior,

Trellman recalls a conversation they once had concerning a book Trellman had written on Walter Lippman. During this conversation Wustrin asks Trellman why he chose “Walter Lippman to do a number on,” and insists that Trellman should have taken him instead as “representing free sexuality” and “a vanguard figure of the emancipated present age” (64). Furthermore, this establishes Wustrin’s connection to the philosophy of Prufrock and presents him as an individual completely oblivious to any other form of reality other than the one he represents—primarily with social-performance—and is dismayed when he learns that his perspective is severely flawed. Like Prufrock, Wustrin perceives his social scene as the only possible one, as the scene of society as a whole.

Jay Wustrin’s construction from Eliot’s Prufrock design can best be defined by Erving Goffman’s definition of performance in *Frame Analysis*. Goffman writes:

A performance is that arrangement which transforms an individual into a stage performer, the latter, in turn, being an object that can be looked at in the round and at length without offense, and looked to for engaging behavior, by persons in an ‘audience’ role. (124)

Bellow meticulously sets up the reader so that they will be able to recognize the pure performance implicit in almost every action and interaction Wustrin engages in. Wustrin epitomizes this definition—he is the quintessence of a “stage performer,” and he definitely delivers the most “engaging behavior” in the novella. Through Trellman, Bellow is able to capitalize on his fervid uneasiness with personalities like Wustrin’s, and present him in the Eliot literary image which he believes portrays the individual as a victim of self and society.

Trellman's description of Wustrin throughout the novella demonstrates that he was a producer, director, and starring actor in every facet of his social life. Every piece of information about Wustrin delivered by Trellman portrays him as the social performer. Trellman states, "Jay did like to be publicly seen performing, entertaining, innovating . . . At school he used to do Dr. Jekyll turning into Mr. Hyde . . . Just like the movies" (32). This is one of the early descriptions of Wustrin and essentially the reader's inauguration into Bellow's design. Wustrin is also the producer and director of the shower scene he shares with Trellman and Amy (24), a scene that formulates and stabilizes his performance as a sexual being with complete faith in his sexual abilities. The mere fact that Wustrin would sacrifice the moral obligation and significance of his marriage and allow Trellman to shower with him and Amy is a constant thought of discomfort for Trellman. With this scene the reader begins to understand that the role of performer is Wustrin's main concern—it prevails over every other aspect of his human behavior. Moreover, this is the image of Wustrin that Trellman methodically dwells upon in retrospection: the image of the performer in every facet of life.

Amy's narrative also supports the notion of Wustrin as social actor. According to Amy, Wustrin was adamant about the view of the "self" that he wanted others to affirm and accept. During one particularly revealing episode when Amy and Trellman are discussing Wustrin, she states that "[he] tried to teach me his own view—the correct view—of himself" (64). Amy elaborates and further substantiates this statement when she describes the cocktail parties that Wustrin produced at New Year's Eve: "It was his big annual production—he loved it" (65). In *Interaction Ritual*, Goffman speaks of this

particular pattern of performance, and argues that the performer is attempting to evaluate him- or herself through the act:

Every person lives in a world of social encounters, involving him either in face-to-face or mediated contact with other participants. In each of these contacts, he tends to act out what is sometimes called a line—that is, a pattern of verbal or nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation, and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself. (5)

By evaluating the entire cast of performers, the specific stage they inhabit, and the collective performance being presented, Wustrin is able to teach others how he himself should be viewed, and, consequently, evaluate his own performance in relation to the other acts. Jay's productions are not only the manifestation of his social self, but also byproducts of his evaluation of his prior performances and the character(s) they have created.

Trellman defines this character trait by claiming that “people like Jay Wustrin present themselves so as to dramatize or to advertise—they put forth an image. Their idea of themselves is a public idea” (68). Trellman also deliberately characterizes Wustrin as “theatrical” (72), and that “it was Jay Wustrin's theatrical will to come back from the grave” (96). Bellow, via Trellman and Amy, is commenting on a person's ability to form a public self, and the all-consuming consequences innate in upholding that self—even going as far as forcing people to deal with you after death. Wustrin's strategies are strictly dramatic in content, and his will to perform leads to his untimely death. Bellow seems apprehensive about praising or denouncing these types of personalities; however, he does seem to believe that it is an impossibility to actualize anything real while

participating in constant performance because the player is ultimately constricted by the guidelines of theater, and subsequently is always mimetically role-playing.

Another of Bellow's invaluable messages on performance and role-playing is delivered through his commentary on large-scale social interaction and group performances. Although there are numerous discussions of this comportment in the novella, there are two specific sections that lucidly render Bellow's purpose. These scenes are specifically Frances Jellicoe's dinner party at the beginning of the novella, and the "appraisal" scene in the middle of the novella where Amy is confronted by an actor on her late husband's level, Madge Heisinger. Moreover, these two scenes exemplify the elements that Bellow seems to find repulsive, yet all too prominent, in society—a show beyond any performance of the traditional theater—the necessary steps and performances of the bourgeois and the motivations behind them.

Addressing the social sphere, Goffman comments on the performances of groups and the collaboration between the participants that basically constitutes the framework of any social interaction. This theory is crucial to the Jellicoe dinner party scene that essentially opens the novella, and illustrates the situation that Bellow finds amusing, appalling, and ever-too-common. Goffman posits that "in many interaction settings some of the participants co-operate together as a team or are in a position where they are dependent upon this co-operation in order to maintain a particular definition of the situation" (91). Evidence of Goffman's positions exists in Trellman's comment about why he was invited to the party in the first place, being of a social-class far inferior to most of the diners. Since Trellman has a self-proclaimed and natural "Chinese look" (2), and due to his business travel in the Orient and the extended periods he has spent there, he claims that

he was invited “as a man who knew a lot about the Orient. At least, hostesses believed I did—I made no claim. One didn’t have to say much” (4). Trellman is essentially describing the performance that is expected from him, and how it is decided upon without his consent—a small element that comprises the whole of the social performance.

The scene itself is not depicted in the present-tense but revealed through a conversation between Trellman and his newly “superrich” (8) acquaintance, Sigmund Adletsky. This conversation explores the circumscribed intention of the dinner party, and expounds on the various reasons Frances Jellicoe is forced to produce it. Adletsky and Trellman jointly conclude that the sole “purpose of the dinner party was to rehabilitate Rourke *socially*” (11). Rourke is Jellicoe’s ex-husband who is described as a “loser, an obvious no-good” (9) by Adletsky, whom Jellicoe is socially compelled to rehabilitate in order to establish their children with the business leaders of Chicago. The party was deliberately staged and the actors were invited for what they represented. As Goffman observes:

An action staged in a theater is a relatively contrived illusion and an admitted one; unlike ordinary life, nothing real or actual can happen to the performed character—although at another level of course something real and actual can happen to the reputation of performers qua professionals whose everyday job is to put on theatrical performances. (25)

In *The Actual* the guests are all used as professional performers by Jellicoe, and, according to Trellman and Adletsky, their precise job was to put on a theatrical performance. Most of the guests were hugely-successful and hyperrich business people who were of the greatest importance, but others included judges, marketing-executives,

and specialized types such as Trellman. Each guest was chosen by the performance they could elicit based on the field they were representing. Trellman understands that Adletsky's performance was to "increase the gravity of the occasion," while he was invited as a "represent[ative] [of] the arts" (12). Bellow, although utilizing some negative and unfavorable terms to describe the scene and toying with the notion of real versus staged performances, as shown with Goffman's last quote, places this scene at the opening of the work in order to establish a persuasive foundation for the scathing remarks about group-performance he will eventually express.

These remarks occur in the poignant "appraisal" scene where Sigmund Adletsky, Dame Siggy Adletsky, and Amy Wustrin travel to the upper-class apartment of the inferior Madge and Bodo Heisinger in order to appraise and barter for the furniture that the Adletsky's are unwillingly purchasing. This scene consists of three distinct, yet interconnected, scenes and three separate isolated performances happening simultaneously. Goffman writes that "in thinking about unstaged, actual social life, theatrical imagery seems to guide us toward a distinction between an individual or person and a capacity, namely, a specialized function which the person may perform during a given series of occasions" (128). Furthermore, in this scene each character performs a specialized function which is not only expected of them, but described by Bellow to be predominantly compulsory.

The first of these series of interdependent scenes within the major scene is fairly minor and involves Dame Siggy playing the part of the kindly matron. Siggy only deals with the entire spectacle of appraising furniture she and Adletsky deem rather worthless because she wants the apartment so desperately, and is willing to buy the Heisingers'

useless furniture to accomplish this effect. She is simply playing a role. The second scene is significant because of the overt language and character-motivation Bellow uses. Adletsky, in the role for his wife's sake, feels the same as Siggy about the furniture but allows "Bodo [to] play the great capitalist" (35) only to achieve his purpose—to secure the apartment and content his wife. The reader learns that Bodo's wife has previously plotted to kill him, only to be thwarted by the incompetent boyfriend who failed miserably in his role as the murderer, and that he "presents himself publicly to declare that he's not afraid to marry her again, and he sets aside the old morality and the old expectations and old rules" (39). He is also described as "show[ing], or try[ing] to show, that he was not worried about the jailbird boyfriend" (40). So thus far, all the characters are following their pre-scripted roles.

The two pivotal roles, however, come from Amy Wustrin and Madge Heisinger. Other than the treatment of Jay Wustrin, Bellow reserves a large amount of his comments on pure performance for Madge Heisinger. She has recently been released from prison, because of her husband's willingness to reconcile and take her back, after spending over three years in a penitentiary for attempted murder. Therefore, not unlike Frances Jellicoe, she is attempting to rehabilitate her image—her *self*. And selling the apartment and furniture, and presenting herself as an expert business dealer, is just the situation, stage, she requires. Before the poignant scene, Trellman, through Amy's mindset, sets up the stage by informing the reader about the inherent performer within Madge Heisinger's character. Trellman states, "in jail for forty months, she had probably worn dungarees or smocks. But now there wasn't a shadow of prison anywhere. *Merely a change of scene and costume*" (45). This fascinating scene transpires in the bathroom after Heisinger

deliberately pours hot-tea on Amy's lap, a plan designed to get her alone and perform for her in order to procure a higher price for her furniture. The hot-tea scene, in Goffman terms, is a completely staged scene that demands complete attention from the participants and has a definite consequence. He writes of such scenes:

A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation—this self—is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited. (24)

As the reader finds out directly after the event and later during a discussion between Trellman and Amy, her act, though purely perceived by both as such, and a major one at that, was discredited by both—it was a failure. Trellman delivers this verdict by saying that “Madge belongs to the Jay Wustrin school of real-life fantasy” (88), and there is no worse way for Bellow to destroy a character than to compare her to his highly detestable Jay Wustrin.

Finally, Harry Trellman's performances are also integral to the novella. Trellman, like most Bellow protagonists, according to David A. Anderson in “Saul Bellow and the Midwestern Myth of the Search,” provides a absorbing perspective “as he dangles between competing realities, contemplat[ing] the changing nature of his life as it relates to the changing nature of the city, the nation, the world around him” (19). Trellman is caught in the crossfire of Adletsky's, Jay Wustrin's, and his own version of reality, yet,

although he admittedly “ascribes to others a power to judge, [and] grants them the possession of standards that may be nonexistent” (8), he still manages to embrace a life and performance that proffers him some happiness and understanding. Like the other characters in the novella, Trellman partakes in behavior that contradicts his seemingly overall vision. At the beginning of the novella he claims “to have decided that to be busy about one’s self-image, to adjust, revise, to tamper with it, was a waste of time” (3); however, once Adletsky convinces him that he looks more Japanese than his self-applied Chinese, he begins “to revise [his] image accordingly” (16). Trellman vastly resembles Bellow scholar M.A. Klug’s interpretation of the common Bellovian hero in “Saul Bellow: The Hero in the Middle.” Klug describes these heroes as:

Periodically forced and attracted towards the society around them. Just as their interior lives become a kind of drama with the divided self as actor and audience, their public lives degenerate into theater. Here again they are cast as actor and audience. The actor’s main job is to put together a convincing disguise. This becomes a parody of their own desire to create an ideal self and of the heroic quest for self-perfection undertaken by the central characters in the fiction of the naturalists and realists. Over and over Bellow’s heroes struggle to keep up appearances in order to hide what they consider their “real” but inferior selves. (186-187)

However, Bellow seems to alter his heroes in his later fiction, and Trellman, like the narrator of *The Bellarosa Connection*, recognizes the tragedy involved in Klug’s definition and begins questing for higher types. The characters of Jay Wustrin and others like him were “commonplace persons” to Trellman whom he “looked down” (42) upon.

Trellman argues that these types of characters and personalities “were lacking in higher motives” (42), motives that he “couldn’t rid [him]self of the habit of watching for glimpses of higher capacities and incipient powerful forces in” (43). Unlike the multitude of Trellman’s opponents and opposites, he does seek others of “higher types” perhaps in order to found his own stage and present an alternate performance—one that transcends the pervasive “advanced countercultural lifestyle” (93) that, in these characters terms, will eventually corrode the social world.

Amy and Trellman are not exempt from social performance, an aspect that Bellow makes certain the reader comprehends. Amy and Trellman, however, are different actors. Bellow presents them as completing a journey and bringing it to complete consummation and fruition. Trellman is obsessed with his appearance, and often describes himself as having “a Chinese look” (2), or at least Asian, someone he would “be reluctant to [completely] trust” (80). Trellman also makes the reader cognizant of his “masked character” (71), his “lifelong training in articulate but deferential speech” (80), and the “new readings” (88) he takes on Amy. Trellman’s descriptions of Amy’s character also suggests that she is very much the actor also, though much more on the unconscious level. The reader learns through the narrator that Amy has been taught to believe and act a certain way, but Trellman’s comment on her presentation of her self suggests another element involved in her character performance. After he and Amy run in to each other after numerous years, Amy is extremely upset by Trellman’s inability to recognize her. Trellman describes this in both economical and theatrical language: “Meaning that if I didn’t recognize her, she was no longer herself. She too, still *presenting* or, as we say, ‘selling’ herself-as-she-used-to-be, was caught out in a falsehood” (18). Madge

Heisinger also perceives Amy's presented image and states, "'You're one of those ladies who maintain a heavy honest image'" (54). Furthermore, Trellman recognizes that Amy still has the power to perform socially when he states that "it was plain that she was still in control of her appearance" (35). Yet, through all of their acting and performances, Trellman and Amy are capable of reaching the true self. Trellman recognizes the theatrical traits involved in his and Amy's behavior, "together we make a double bill" (58), but this is the platform that allows them to fulfill their journey to love and their completion of self. Trellman defines their love as "'an actual affinity'" (100), and this is true for all intents and purposes; however, their mere ability to reach the "actual affinity" of love places them beyond the mundane acting of the modern world, and secures them a place in Plato's ideal forms—a thought that Trellman has always held in regard to Amy. Trellman is brought to awareness by his late friend's wonderfully absurd performance ability, and comes to terms with his own masks and role-playing, "Jay *thought* he was open; I *thought* I was closed" (72). The paradox, according to Bellow at least, is that both men were both things; one simply became aware of it while the other refused to.

One of the first statements made by the narrator concerning public performances and manifold selves is his comment about his favorite Picassos, ones with "multiple noses and eyes" (5). This statement epitomizes Bellow's purpose of saturating this novella with theatrical images, terminology, and scriptings. What is implied in the Picasso painting is the ever-changing structure of acting—the face and its expressions conforming to the specific role—and the multiplicity of roles and acts each person can perform. This is not simply another critique of modern society, although it is apparent that that plays a role is the framework of the novella, but the circumstances, consequences, and results involved

in being human in the social sphere. Bellow seems to be suggesting that acting is inevitable, but awareness in the “true” self and soul will ultimately counter and conquer this modern dilemma. Although the novella concludes with Trellman proposing marriage to Amy after they have actualized their “selves,” Bellow’s language still suggests that the theatrical performance still lives on. Indeed Trellman’s mask is finally removed as he is “vulnerably visible” (102) and sits “exposed” (102), but Bellow’s words insinuate that the drama of performance continues when he describes Wustrin’s mother’s face as seeming to express the circus’ Master of Ceremonies position of “come one, come all” (103). This is also a situation that further establishes Wustrin’s theatrical roots, and supports his incredulous need to perform even from beyond the dead.

Perhaps Bellow is only now elaborating on a comment he made in 1965 with the publication of the essay “Where Do We Go From here: The Future of Fiction.” In this essay Bellow is adamant about the lack of lucid and efficacious points of view and matters of imagination, and states that “this is the way things stand; only this remains to be added, that we have barely begun to comprehend what a human being is” (219). Both of these powerfully intriguing novellas are founded on this question: what is a human being? Bellow, however, is extremely careful about avoiding didacticism—he does not wish to promote one view over the other; therefore, these novellas effect an ambivalent exploration of the human interaction and the subsequent performances it proliferates. Bellow works from a long-standing tradition of American writers who have not only emphasized the performance of the American, but pro-actively participated in it as well. He uses Eliot’s Prufrock to display the inherent impotence of performance involved in characters like Jay Wustrin’s behavior, and to provide a startling contrast to Trellman’s

character—one, who unlike Prufrock and Wustrin, does not try “to master the world by rejecting it” (76), as Eric Sigg writes in *The American T. S. Eliot*. Bellow is capable of capturing this essence with such striking precision that one begins to question whether his works are not sociology essays and treatises, but his beautiful and profound prose style shatters this consideration and bridges these disciplines with a sublimity and strength that no other American writer has ever duplicated or even achieved.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: THE VALUE OF SAUL BELLOW'S HUMANISTIC POSTMODERNISM AS WE FATHOM THE NEXT CENTURY

Americans believe in facts, but not in fasticity. They do not know that facts are factitious, as their name suggests. It is in this belief in facts, in the total credibility of what is done or seen, in this pragmatic evidence of things and an accompanying contempt for what may be called appearances or the play of appearances—a face does not deceive, behaviour does not deceive, a scientific process does not deceive, nothing deceives, nothing is ambivalent (and at bottom this is true: nothing deceives, there are no lies, *there is only simulation*, which is precisely the fasticity of facts)—that the Americans are a true utopian society, in their religion of the *fait accompli*, in the naivety of their deductions, in their ignorance of the evil genius of things. You have to be utopian to think that in a human order, of whatever nature, things can be as plain and straightforward as that. All other societies contain within them some heresy or other, some dissidence, some kind of suspicion of reality, the superstitious belief in a force of evil and the possible control of that force by magic, a belief in the powers of appearances. Here, there is no dissidence, no suspicion.

Jean Baudrillard, *America*

It seems hard for the American people to believe that anything could be more exciting than the times themselves. What we read daily and view on the TV has thrust imagined forms into the shadow. We are staggeringly rich in facts, in things, and perhaps, like the nouveau riche of other ages, we want our wealth faithfully reproduced by the artist.

Saul Bellow, "Facts That Put Fancy To Flight"

Reality. This rather malleable word has immensely interested Bellow from the earliest beginnings of his writing career to the present day. In his middle work Bellow used the label "reality instructors" to essentially define those individuals he saw as attempting to teach and announce the *true* reality of the world to those with whom they interact. These

“reality instructors” attempt to vanquish the importance of the imagination in order to further establish their brutal form of humanity based on a social-Darwinist doctrine of fending for your self at all times, regardless of the direct and indirect consequences. And although Bellow has his protagonists struggle against these nihilistic types, especially Moses Herzog in *Herzog* in his middle fiction, and ultimately fall victim to some form of it, through these characters Bellow is able to deliver his reprehensible view of such human types.

In his recent work, however, particularly that of *The Bellarosa Connection* and *The Actual*, Bellow seems to have rethought and restructured this premise, and instead of portraying individual “reality instructors,” he contemplates the notion of reality itself and the manner in which it is conveyed through various modes of human interaction. Whereas once Bellow attempted to present characters living through and by imagination—and the difficulties they encountered in “The Real World”—now Bellow is questioning the current version of imagination and the way media has turned imagination into a model of the real—a situation that has left the individual without a center and subsequently unbalanced. Jean Baudrillard discusses this shift in sensibilities in *Simulacra and Simulation*, and writes:

The imaginary was the alibi of the real, in a world dominated by the reality principle. Today, it is the real that has become the alibi of the model, in a world controlled by the principle of simulation. And, paradoxically, it is the real that has become our true utopia—but a utopia that is no longer in the realm of the possible, that can only be dreamt of as one would dream of a lost object. (122-23)

This is one aspect of postmodern life that Bellow discusses in his more recent work. The question Bellow asks is, with individuals partaking in theatrical performance and the socially-accepted presentation of multiple selves, television and cinema communicating and creating its own appearance and version of reality, world events and conflicts mimicking and being mimicked by a fictional realm, and capitalism and mass-democracy distorting reality via the language of money, success, affluence, etc, where is reality amongst this model of life? This is Bellow's new topic, and this is precisely a postmodern topic—the redefinition of a model of reality that was originally the model of imagination, as Baudrillard so effectively characterizes it.

Consequently, this brings me back to the epigraphs that open this chapter and to this thesis as a whole. Bellow, not unlike Baudrillard, acknowledges the victory of supposed objective facts over imagination, and argues that this system has perverted and stunted all conventions of human individuality and creativity. Bellow understands the falsity that is promoted and accepted by virtually all humanity at large, and this is his subject matter for his recent work. As I have demonstrated throughout this study, Bellow stylistically partakes in and comments theoretically on postmodernism in order to actively address the current situation. He also structures his newer work on the notion of social performance and interaction so that he can discuss, not didactically but solely through his characters, how appearances have moved beyond any human comprehension of reality. These concepts are the heart and soul of Bellow's recent work.

Yet, one must never neglect the urgency of optimism that is intrinsically built into Bellow's fiction. Bellow, through his stylistic foundation—the *Bildungsroman* convention—forces the reader to run the gamut of possible outcomes in life not only for

his characters, but precisely for the reader and society. Bellow is explicit about this in his many interviews—as the ones I have quoted suggest. One must also realize that one of the major components in postmodern theories, and in most theories in general, is humanism, and Bellow's version of postmodernism has managed to mingle these two seemingly contradictory positions together successfully—in the sense that he refuses to completely abandon one for the other. His recent works can be considered postmodern for numerous reasons, one such reason being the element of meta-fiction. In *The Bellarosa Connection* and *The Actual* Bellow adds these meta-fictional layers to his traditional realistic form and therefore creates pieces that become “histories of their own developments” (Puschmann-Nalenz; 89). Yet, they are heavily humanistic in that they are founded on the *bildungsroman* genre, and in this the character's search for self-identity manages to ground the postmodern elements and keep them from dominating the work and the message. He uses postmodernism in its conventional sense to attack objective knowledge and all allegedly stable forms of reality; however, his ultimate goal is to have his characters, usually the protagonists, actualize their soul and internal self while discarding all corporeal substance that obstructs their awareness. Bellow's work is not a product of any one, two, or even twenty theoretical stances or literary conventions, but rather a confluence of several, in this case postmodernism and traditional humanism, that accurately comment and substantiate the condition of the present, yet still provide hope for the enduring spirit of the individual human being and the collective human race amongst this conceptual agitation. Bellow, although disappointed by contemporary culture and society, refuses to divest himself of the optimistic humanism that permeates throughout the bulk of his work, and therefore molds a postmodern approach that speaks

for and to the dilemma that humankind now faces with a boldness and directness that most postmodern rhetoric lacks. Something that I find truly amazing is that even in the postmodern world Bellow continues to treat human life, although obviously effected by its current hallow and despondent nature, as miraculous and precious—a vestigial element that he refuses to abolish—and something that contemporary and future readers should greatly appreciate.

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