

Saul Bellow's Moral Masochists

Lene Schøtt-Kristensen

University of Copenhagen

“Now Wilhelm, I'm trying to do you some good. I want to tell you, don't marry suffering. Some people do. They get married to it, and sleep and eat together, just as husband and wife. If they go with joy they think it's adultery.”¹

In *Seize the Day* Saul Bellow's charlatan therapist Tamkin warns Tommy Wilhelm not to dedicate his life to suffering. But he speaks to deaf ears. Together with several other Bellovian heroes Tommy Wilhelm does marry suffering. In the following I want to examine four of Saul Bellow's great sufferers: Asa Leventhal (*The Victim*, 1947), Tommy Wilhelm (*Seize the Day*, 1956), Eugene Henderson (*Henderson the Rain King*, 1958), and Moses Herzog (*Herzog*, 1964). Although Henderson is not a Jew he shares a spiritual or psychological plight with Leventhal, Wilhelm and Herzog. And that plight has its origin in a Jewish heritage of suffering. Living as modern, secular Jews in modern America, they have apparently lost their faith, but their heritage still binds them.

Although the meaning of suffering is often hidden, a religious Jew believes that he suffers for God's sake, for his own or his predecessors' sins; to him suffering is not meaningless. But how can the suffering of a secular Jew be meaningful? Why does the suffering not end? Having suffering in their blood but no apparent cause to suffer for and no hope of any transcendental consummation is the plight of Bellow's heroes. But they go on looking for the hidden meaning of their pain. In Bellow himself there seems to be a conflict regarding the nature of suffering. His characters' suffering is expressed through ambiguity; through pathos

¹ Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day* (London: Penguin Books, 1976, first published 1956), p. 98.

and comedy. We are never quite sure whether the hero's suffering is ennobling and potentially redemptive or neurotic and destructive, whether it is meaningful or absurd. This split is always in Bellow, the meaningful and the absurd always compete, but whereas the view of suffering as potentially ennobling seems to have the upper hand in the early works, the opposite seems to be the case in the later novels.

Interestingly, Saul Bellow, in an interview given in 1965 informed us of his dissatisfaction with his early novels:

I got very tired of the solemnity of complaint, altogether impatient with complaint. Obligated to choose between complaint and comedy, I choose comedy, as more energetic, wiser, and manlier. This is really one reason why I dislike my own early novels. I find them plaintive, sometimes querulous. *Herzog* makes comic use of complaint.²

But let us for a moment return to Tamkin, this con-man and psychotherapist who diagnoses Tommy Wilhelm, and with him our three other protagonists, too. His words point to a Freudian understanding of Jewish suffering, they lead us into the realm of guilt and moral masochism which we are going to examine here. Accepting Tamkin's diagnosis is in a sense to oppose the author. Psychology in Bellow's work is a complex issue, but irrespective of his treatment of suffering, solemn or comic, Bellow never accepts a psychological analysis on its own. Psychoanalysts in his novels are charlatans, egotists, maniacs, their philosophies insufficient and demeaning or plainly insane. His stance is always the moralist's. A psychological analysis is reductive but hopefully it is also illuminating. And psychology can never take the life out of Saul Bellow's work. But it can help us see a pattern. We can see that Bellow's protagonists, though very different in appearance and life, are fundamentally very much like each other. Although Bellow's form changes from solemn to comic he still writes about moral masochists.

Before discussing the novels let us turn to Freud. His essays "Moses And Monotheism" offer very helpful insights into a particular Jewish psychology, into the phenomenon of moral masochism. By means of psychoanalytic theory of the individual and by explicating some important ideas and developments of Judaism Freud defines a kind of general Jewish psychological makeup. The concept of the Great Father is a cor-

2 Gordon Lloyd Harper, "Saul Bellow" in *Saul Bellow, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Earl Rovit (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall Inc. 1975), p. 12.

nerstone in Judaism. Moses, Freud relates, was the great commanding patriarch who inspired awe and fear. His monotheism demands, not only the worship of a single god, but the acknowledgment that that god is eternal and almighty. The Jews' Holy Covenant with God is a burden and a gift. It is a burden by virtue of its absolute character and because it is forced upon the Jews, but a gift because God's children are promised that they shall be cared for in return; they are God's chosen people, His favorite children. Thus a favorite child of God is bound to have a rather complex and paradoxical self-image; he is at one and the same time a low and humble creature and one of the elect.

The religion of the almighty Father is naturally enough a religion of prohibitions and commandments. As well as demanding that you worship only one god, it demands that you worship a god that is invisible, and as such highly abstract. Freud explains how this command to worship an abstract god has caused Judaism to develop into a highly intellectual religion. Intellectuality is valued above sensuality, a phenomenon which Freud interprets as a movement away from the mother and towards the father. The worship of the father and the repression of the mother are equivalent to putting the id second to the superego. On the individual level this means that the will of the father, or the will of God, is elevated into an ideal of ethical perfection. In other words, God is internalized as the individual's superego. Instinctual renunciation, then, plays an important role in Judaism. Freud explains that abstention from libidinous satisfaction is generally not pleasurable, but that obedience to the superego brings a substitutive pleasure to the ego in that it raises the individual's self-esteem. The ego takes pride in self-restraint. The serious ethical requirements and the command for self-restraint also have an emotional element which may be explained as a belief that that which is more difficult to accomplish is nobler. An absolute submission to the patriarch will throw the worshipper into a religious ecstasy. A religious ecstatic devotion may be likened to a kind of emotional regression. The worshipper regresses to a stage of blind, infantile devotion and reestablishes contact with the infant's intensity of emotions. It seems that the more demanding, and perhaps the more absurd a god is, the more extensive the submission and self-restraint, and, consequently the greater the pride and the deeper the emotional devotion.

A strict father figure will inspire admiration and love. It must however also give rise to fear and hatred. As a child's relation to its father will

always be ambivalent, so will the worshipper's relation to his god be one of complex emotions. But Judaism, it seems, leaves no room for ambivalence; it leaves no room for expressing hatred of the Great Father, no room for the sons to rebel. The inevitable antagonistic feelings must be repressed. And now we are entering the realm of moral masochism and guilt. As the hostile feelings can receive no acceptable outlet, they will turn against the subject and cause him to feel guilty, to have a guilty conscience for having sinned against God. The ego will then suffer from this sense of guilt, it will want rehabilitation. The way to repair the blemished self-esteem is extremely paradoxical. In order to raise his pride the Jewish worshipper must free from blame the very god against whom he originally felt hostility, both because it is He who makes him great and because he needs His castigation. Freud explains how the sinner is caught in a vicious circle of what we can call moral masochism:

A sense of guilt on account of their sinfulness offered a welcome means of exculpating God: they deserved no better than to be punished since they had not obeyed his commandments. And, driven by the need to satisfy this sense of guilt, which was insatiable and came from sources so much deeper, they must make those commandments grow ever stricter, more meticulous and even more trivial.³

Freud goes further in his characterization of the sublime Jewish ethical ideas and commandments, defining them as neurotic: "They possess the characteristic—uncompleted and incapable of completion—of obsessional neurotic reaction-formations; we can guess, too, that they serve the secret purposes of punishment."⁴ The renunciatory character of Judaism and the consequent suffering can then be viewed as a guilt-inspired penitential submission to the father.

It is Daniel Weiss in "Caliban On Prospero" who presents the definition of moral masochism. A moral masochist, he explains, is a victim of suffering, a person who exists only in suffering. Weiss's study works as an appropriate extension of Freud as it takes us from the relationship between worshipper and God to the relationship between child and parent. It is important to understand that moral masochists are driven by a need for punishment which has its origin in their guilt complex. On the individual level the punishment is exercised by the sadistic superego, the

³ Sigmund Freud, "Moses And Monotheism" in *The Origins of Religion* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 383.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 384.

internalized parent. The sadistic superego castigates the masochistic ego. Thus the superego will keep alive a primary relation between a potentially sadistic parent and a helpless child. The masochistic pattern will typically be sustained in the subject's relation to the world. A moral masochist may unconsciously seek suffering and humiliation, he may attach himself to a sadistic person, or he may generally seek out failure and place himself in impossible and unpleasant situations. The faith of his childhood will thus be confirmed: His life demonstrates clearly that he is unworthy of love and success but deserving of rejection and failure. He reads the signs and sees that he is receiving his just punishment. Paradoxically it is nevertheless also the fact that he suffers which to the moral masochist is a sign that he is worthy of love. The failures, the suffering, the helplessness bring him back to the original situation of his childhood: He throws himself on the mercy of an unloving parental representative, bares himself as a helpless, impossible child. With all his wounds and hurts he begs to be loved:

The deeper underlying motivation of this unhappiness is the wish to please a hating parent, or to placate or ingratiate himself with the parent by being unhappy, by failing, or, in other cases, by being helpless or stupid. It is the wish to be loved by the parent who hates or depreciates.⁵

And:

To accommodate a hating person he may make himself as unlovable as he feels that parent wants him to be. He may deny his good qualities, or his intelligence, often to pseudo-imbecility. ... He is stigmatized with unwantedness and displays his stigma as his bid for affection.⁶

Somehow, then, punishment and love are inextricably bound together in the moral masochist's emotional world. Suffering is a sign that you are worthy of being loved and it is a cry for help and love. Another aspect of suffering is that that emotional state comes to be experienced as the only authentic one. When you are not suffering, you feel, not just guilty, but unreal.

5 Daniel Weiss, "Caliban on Prospero: A Psychoanalytic Study on the Novel *Seize the Day* by Saul Bellow" in *Saul Bellow and the Critics*, ed. Irving Malin (New York: The Gotham Library, New York University Press, 1967), p. 125 (quoted from Bernhard Berliner, "On Some Psychodynamics of Machochism").

6 *Ibid.*

Saul Bellow's beautiful short novel *Seize the Day* is in many ways like a case story of moral masochism. Therefore it makes good sense to take this novel as our starting point. *Seize the Day* is the story of a moral masochist who throws himself on the mercy of his sadistic father and who fouls up his entire life in search for punishment and love. Tommy Wilhelm and his father, Dr. Adler, are perfect personifications of the masochistic son and the sadistic father. Wilhelm is middle-aged, self-conscious and alienated. He is out of place in every respect; surrounded by old age pensioners in the hotel, he has no natural home, he is divorced and out of work and money. His entire life has been a failure. He is suffering, weighed down by his misfortunes, by self-hatred and by guilt. The father is everything that the son is not. Through hard work and discipline Dr. Adler has prospered in the world. Professionally, socially and financially he is a great success. As a human being he is self-possessed, cynical and shallow. Daniel Weiss aptly labels Adler a "thrifty anal character".⁷ His character is sadistic, aggressive, controlled. His life is marked by accumulation and retention. He retains not only money from his son, but also love and understanding. In his egocentricity he seems to be incapable of empathizing with Tommy. To him, who is admittedly an old man, life has become a matter of self-preservation. As opposed to his aggressive but controlled father, then, the son is anti-aggressive and drifting. He seems to be incapable of holding on to anything and incapable of controlling his own life.

Our protagonist is a pathetic figure. To the reader he is pathetic in the sense that he excites pity and compassion, to Dr. Adler in the sense that he excites contempt. It is obvious to the reader that Tommy's repetitious attempts to gain his father's love will only increase his contempt for him. We see him as a heartless old man, but Tommy cannot see his father as he is. His guilt complex and his hunger for love make him seek his father's castigation and rejection. He needs to be punished because he feels guilty; guilty because of his unconscious hostile feelings towards his father and guilty because he obviously cannot live up to his father's expectations: "What do you want to know about my problems for, Father? So you can lay the whole responsibility on me—so that you won't have to help me? D' you want me to comfort you for having such

7 *Ibid.*, p. 134.

a son?"⁸ Tommy feels that he has to comfort his father for having him as a son. And in a sense his father is asking that of him, for in his egocentricity he experiences Tommy's misery as an offense against himself. Tommy, then, acts in accordance with the paradoxical mechanisms of moral masochism. By being miserable he is naturally angling for love but his misery is also an unconscious attempt to please his father. He is making himself the impossible and helpless child he feels his father wants him to be. But Tommy's behavior is experienced only as an offense, and naturally Dr. Adler lays the whole responsibility on his son. Tommy, however, also lays all responsibility on his father. Both men are projecting blame onto the other. They are both denying their own responsibility. In that respect they are both victims of a delusion. Another aspect of Tommy's role as the suffering victim, which Bellow is much aware of, is that of denial and repression of evil. If Tommy could see his father clearly as he is, he would see hatred and cruelty. And such an insight would damage not only his father-image but also his self-image. By acknowledging that there is evil in his father, Tommy would also be confronted with the hostility within himself. As it is he unconsciously chooses to live in a state of willed innocence.

Tommy Wilhelm's course of life is a perfect illustration of a masochist who makes a mess of his life. All through his life he has put himself in impossible and unworthy situations, he has been seeking frauds and failures, thus imposing upon himself the punishment and suffering which he feels he deserves. He has proved to himself and to his father that he is a pathetic creature. Wilhelm has always acted contrary to his sane decisions. With his sane mind he knew that going to Hollywood, marrying Margaret, and getting involved with Tamkin would result in failure, shame, and humiliation. But he faithfully followed his masochistic heart. In Hollywood he humbly let the obscure Maurice Venice lead him to failure. Venice laid everything on the table and showed Wilhelm not only his part and future in the movies, but in his life: "You are steady, faithful, you get stood up."⁹ Instead of getting the hell out of there, Wilhelm stayed on, refusing to act on the warning. His sane mind suspended, he is a slave to his bleeding heart.

8 Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day*, p. 53.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Since his own father refuses to be a father to him, Wilhelm must look elsewhere for parental love. Maurice Venice works as a kind of father substitute, but apart from him it is naturally Tamkin who is the most important father figure. He is a fraud, a liar, and a con-man who abuses Wilhelm, and he is a kind of psychoanalyst who helps heal him. Wilhelm is drawn to Tamkin both because of his notorious need to be cheated and humiliated and because Tamkin is genuinely interested in his problems. In that respect the charlatan is Wilhelm's only father. Tamkin knows about 'irrational guilt' and about the characteristic Jewish denial of aggression with which Wilhelm is afflicted. He sees Wilhelm as neurotically stuck in his victim's role and he warns him not to let it rule his life. And he sees that Wilhelm is a "profound personality with very profound creative capacities," who for the moment is letting a "pretender soul" rule over his "true soul."¹⁰ And it is that true soul rather than the diagnosis of moral masochism which Bellow is interested in. In the course of the novel he has Wilhelm speculate more and more about the purpose of his existence:

But at the same time, since there were depths in Wilhelm not unsuspected by himself, he received a suggestion from some remote elements in his thoughts that the business of life, the real business—to carry his peculiar burden, to feel shame and impotence, to taste these quelled tears—the only important business, the highest business was being done. Maybe the making of mistakes expressed the very purpose of his life and the essence of his being there. Maybe he was supposed to make them and suffer from them on this earth.¹¹

Wilhelm suffers under the alienation and basic homelessness which seem to be inherent in modern city life: "Every other man spoke a language entirely his own."¹² "The fathers were no fathers and the sons no sons."¹³ Modern life is characterized by isolation and lack of order. Each man lives his own lonely life. But: "There is a larger body, and from this you cannot be separated.... There sons and fathers are themselves, ... There truth for everybody may be found, and confusion is only—only temporary...."¹⁴ Wilhelm's feeling, which is typically Bellovian, comes from a kind of epiphany he has in the subway. Being locked up with his fellow human beings, Wilhelm felt like this: "He loved them. One and

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

all, he passionately loved them. They were his brothers and sisters."¹⁵ He feels that he belongs, that there is a mutual connection between him and his fellow beings. We all share a universal human experience. And it is this intimation of a larger body or soul which Bellow returns to again and again. He does not want to reject the possibility of transcendence. And he seems to be saying that only sufferers like Wilhelm are sensitive to this. In that respect Wilhelm's suffering is ennobling. However, Bellow does not want to commit himself completely to Wilhelm's suffering, nor to his suspicion of the larger body. He steps in and deflates his protagonist's newly-won faith: "It was only another one of those subway things. Like having a hard-on at random."¹⁶ Similarly, Wilhelm's final transcendental experience, the climax of his suspicions, is represented in ambiguous terms. Rejected and deserted by everyone, Wilhelm strays into a Jewish funeral. He breaks down in an ecstatic surrender to his quelled tears as he stands by the bier of a stranger. Daniel Weiss sees this as Wilhelm's "last, most satisfying submission to the austere, intractable father image."¹⁷ It is a kind of absolute surrender to his masochistic heart. But it is more than that. According to Weiss Wilhelm's confrontation with the dead man fulfills two unconscious wishes: The dead comes to symbolize the death of his father and thus fulfills his hostile death wish against him, but it also symbolizes the death of his pretender soul. Weiss writes, "Wilhelm gives up his death wish against the father and accepts, but without the masochistic insistence that characterized his earlier courtship of paternal cruelty, his own role as victim."¹⁸

Bellow seems to suggest that Wilhelm accepts his burden, that he has found the real business of his life. If Wilhelm's pretender soul dies, then his true soul, his old Jewish soul, Velvel, is reborn. And it is Velvel's capacity for suffering and empathy which unites him and the mourners, who are his Jewish fellow sufferers. Finding this transcendental unity in his life is Wilhelm's consummation and release. It breaks his isolation and alienation.

The end of *Seize the Day* points to the conflict between the Jew and America which is always present in Bellow. As Wilhelm becomes Velvel

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁷ Daniel Weiss, "Caliban on Prospero," p. 131.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

he relinquishes his American aspirations. He refuses to give up his Jewish heart to the process of Americanization, a process which in Bellow often implies a great deal of restraint and repression. The emotionalism, the stored energy of the immigrant must be controlled in Bellow's WASP America. Dr. Adler has stood that test, but Velvel gives it up. We can see, then, how Velvel's suffering works as a kind of homage to his Jewish heritage. His final submission may be seen as a return to his Jewish past, to God. It is not only adultery to go with joy, it is also adultery to go with America.

Tommy Wilhelm's suffering is both noble and comic. Bellow's ambivalence manifests itself in the double meanings of death and renewal in the final drowning metaphor. He does not want to resolve the ambiguity. It does however seem to me that Wilhelm comes out the noble, sympathetic hero, not so much because of what he does but because of what the world does to him. In contrast to the world Wilhelm appears to be almost as helpless and innocent as he feels. Leventhal, Henderson and Herzog never achieve the same kind of purity; Leventhal is aggressive and reticent, Henderson is a troublemaker, an impulsive man of action who wreaks havoc on the world, and Herzog is the intellectual who always observes himself with irony and detachment.

Asa Leventhal's suffering in *The Victim* is definitely not comic. The whole novel reads as a kind of nightmare. Leventhal's guilt and moral masochism manifest themselves in a kind of survival guilt. On one symbolic level *The Victim* illustrates this specific guilt that Jewish survivors of the Holocaust suffered under. Why did they deserve to live when six million of their fellow Jews were exterminated? If they had died, someone else might have lived. On a more tangible level Asa feels guilty because of his societal position, which he suspects has come to him through undeserved luck. In his most intimate moments with Mary, his wife, Asa lays bare his soul and expresses his guilty conscience:

I was lucky. I got away with it. He meant that his bad start, his mistakes, the things that might have wrecked him, had somehow combined to establish him. He had almost fallen in with that part of humanity of which he was frequently mindful (he never forgot the hotel on lower Broadway), the part that did not get away with it—the lost, the outcast, the overcome, the effaced, the ruined.¹⁹

19 Saul Bellow, *The Victim* (London: Penguin Books, 1988, first published 1947), p. 16.

Asa feels lucky, and guilty because he is lucky. That he "got away with it" means someone else did not. He feels that there must be a purpose to life, it cannot be accidental and meaningless; therefore he cannot accept that he should be favored by life. Who is he to deserve such good fortune? It is this strong sense of guilt which feeds Asa's paranoia and aggressiveness. Because he feels his position in the world, and in life altogether, is precarious, he must constantly be guarding himself. He must protect himself from other people, who may expose him as a fraud. Like Tommy Wilhelm Asa Leventhal is a very lonely and alienated man.

It is naturally Asa's guilt which allows Kirby Allbee to invade his life. The day of punishment and loss which Asa has long been fearing seems to have come with Allbee's nightmarish appearance. Allbee's appearance may be likened to a surfacing of all Leventhal's worst guilty fears. The psychopathic man represents Asa's conscience, his sadistic superego. The relationship between the two men is a kind of sado-masochistic relation. Because Asa is so enmeshed in guilt he is unable to judge Allbee's wild accusation that he has deliberately ruined his life. He lets the man torture and degrade him as he gradually begins to suspect that he may actually unconsciously have wanted to get at Allbee. Furthermore Allbee's misfortunes remind Asa of how he might have ended up himself if he had not been so unforgivably lucky. Allbee is one of the downcast, effaced, and ruined; he has the life Asa feels he deserves himself. Leventhal, then, is not capable of distinguishing between his irrational guilt and his personal responsibility. He seems to be prepared to accept the blame for a general wrong which is beyond his personal responsibility and influence. Whereas Allbee, the anti-Semite, uses Asa, the Jew, as his scapegoat to explain evil in the world, Asa projects all blame onto himself. In a Christ-like submission he is close to picking up a cross which cannot be his alone to bear.

This insistence by Leventhal to carry the sins and sorrows of the world upon his shoulders is a reflection of his moral masochism, and it illustrates the element of repression which is involved in moral masochism. As implied before Leventhal cannot accept that evil and bad luck are inherent in life as impersonal forces which may accidentally strike anybody. If there is a victim, somewhere there is also a victimizer, or, perhaps a punishing god. The moral masochist believes there is a purpose to suffering. The anti-Semite Allbee tries to teach Asa something about his particular Jewish psychology:

'If a man is down, a man like me, it's his fault. If he suffers, he's being punished. There's no evil in life itself. And do you know what? It's a Jewish point of view. You'll find it all over the Bible. God doesn't make mistakes. He's the department of weights and measures. If you're okay, he's okay, too. That's what Job's friends come and say to him. But I'll tell you something. We do get it in the neck for nothing and suffer for nothing, and there's no denying that evil is as real as sunshine.'²⁰

Allbee, then, has some psychological insight, but he is not capable of reforming. Instead he manipulates Asa. Using his role as victim to victimize and playing on Asa's guilt he stages himself; "I'm in your house, and you have certain advantages over me...."²¹ In accordance with the way of the moral masochist he throws himself on the mercy of Leventhal. So Allbee really plays the parts of both sadist and masochist in this relationship. He almost succeeds in breaking Asa, who because of his guilt complex comes close to accepting Allbee's less-than-human determinism. He also sees himself as a victim; he becomes less-than-human, in the words of Schlossberg, Bellow's ideal father figure and moral guide.

In spite of his wavering sense of responsibility Leventhal has in fact fulfilled his human responsibilities with dignity, most obviously so in relation to his brother's family. He has proved "accountable in spite of many weaknesses—at the last moment, tough enough to hold."²² When Asa eventually throws Allbee out of his home it is admittedly a delayed act of self-preservation. But Asa does act. He takes his life into his own hands. Allbee's attempted suicide demonstrates what his less-than-human determinism may lead to, and it becomes clear that Asa is not self-destructive in a pathological sense. Allbee's invasion of his life has had a kind of cathartic effect on him; he has made him realize that he must change. And Asa is capable of change. In the final scene Mary is pregnant with their child; Asa is ready to become a father, he is ready to begin a new life and take responsibility for himself and his family. It is however not only the fact that he eventually rids himself of Allbee which makes him human; it is also the fact that he allowed him to intrude. He has felt compassion or even a kind of love for Allbee. In that respect Allbee has helped break Leventhal's isolation. Asa's empathy has

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 138.

proved to be great. Although he realizes that he has no direct personal responsibility for Allbee's fate, he feels that he is existentially involved in his suffering. Thus Bellow returns to the idea that suffering has a purpose, that it is potentially redemptive. In your suffering you are lifted out of your isolation and united with the rest of mankind. In one sense Allbee was Leventhal's penance, who helped exorcise his demons of guilt, in another he was the embodiment of the innocent victim attitude, and as such a warning to Asa not to marry suffering, not to sink into the victim's role.

With *Henderson the Rain King* we get to the real comedy of suffering. This giant American, grown physically heavy with excessive sadness, seems to suffer from a guilt, which like Leventhal's, can be characterized as a kind of survival guilt. Henderson had a brother who drowned when he was young and he suspects that their father wished his other son had died instead, just as he feels that his brother deserved life more than himself. Consequently Henderson has a conviction that he fills a place in existence which should be filled properly by someone else. Like most of Bellow's heroes he feels displaced. His moral masochism manifests itself in his survival guilt, in his guilt about being a bad son and father, in his guilt about his financial and social privileges. This discrepancy between an inner sense of unworthiness and a privileged outer life, this almost directly proportional coherence between material success and moral defeat is an archetypal Jewish theme. Henderson's solution to his inner sense of being a bum is to act like a bum. This moral masochist makes himself as unlovable as he feels the world wants him to be. Henderson makes scandalous scenes in the fashionable world and literally rolls in the mud with the pigs, these un-kosher, doomed animals. He has several accidents and makes several suicide threats, but apparently he is unkillable. All his self-imposed debasement and suffering serve simultaneously as punishment and appeals for love. We recall Daniel Weiss's words about the moral masochist who is "stigmatized with unwantedness and displays his stigma as his bid for affection." Henderson needs punishment, penance, forgiveness, rehabilitation.

Having a Jewish psyche Henderson is convinced that suffering is meaningful. His wonderful wife, Lily, is aware that he suffers harder than anyone else and tries to warn him: "Nobody expects it. Least of all

God.”²³ But of course Henderson suffers for God. Suffering is the only kind of worship he knows about. And he is enormously proud of his suffering. In his soiled wellingtons and red velvet gown he is simultaneously a primitive creature of the mud and a great king. He is the king of suffering.

Henderson’s journey to Africa is a response to his craving soul that cries, “I want! I want!” and it is an act of penance. But penance does not only mean humility and submission. That he is capable of such great suffering is a sign that he was appointed to do God’s will, that after all there is a task which can only be solved by him. He, too, is included in the Holy Covenant. And this is part of Saul Bellow’s comedy, this idea that suffering is a virtue, that it makes you special, righteous, great. It is of course in the nature of the moral masochist to display his suffering as a noble value, and all our heroes, perhaps with the exception of Asa Leventhal, do exactly that, but it is only Henderson who uses his suffering actively. Whereas Leventhal, Wilhelm, and Herzog fairly passively let various “reality instructors” torment them, Henderson goes out into the world like a holy quester. And he causes much damage with his loud, impulsive idealism, his inherited service ideal. In his loudness and lack of consideration of consequences and with his desire to bring home a sample of the wisdom of life, Henderson appears more American than Jewish, if I may put it so crudely. He is a demonstration of the dangers of idealistic, righteous action. In *Herzog* Moses on his way to put a bullet through his ex-wife and her lover, thinks to himself: “It’s not everyone who gets the opportunity to kill with a clear conscience. They had opened the way to justifiable murder. They deserved to die. He had a right to kill them.”²⁴ Herzog is fired by righteous indignation. The wrongs that have been committed against him, the suffering he has endured make him the righteous one. Justice and innocence are on his side. But of course Herzog does not act. Unlike Henderson he is a thinker. Whereas the thinking Jews wait for God to reward their righteousness Henderson acts on his feeling of righteousness. In his desire to act out God’s will he transgresses the line between the human and the divine.

23 Saul Bellow, *Henderson the Rain King* (New York: Popular Library, 1963, first published 1958), p. 31.

24 Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (London: Penguin Books, 1976, first published 1964), p. 254.

This desire to be more-than-human or god-like recurs in Bellow. It is linked with the desire for innocence and immortality. Bellow's heroes are trapped in their characters and in their bodies. The unease and impatience with the body is everywhere in Bellow. Leventhal sweats and suffers in his too tight suit, Herzog finds drying himself after a shower a killing chore, and the very size of Henderson is a constant proof of the inescapable flesh. He feels that the diseases of the body occupy the place where a man's soul should be. When he says that he has had "one hell of a time" over his "external man" he speaks for many of his Bellovian fellows.²⁵ As he does when he speaks of his longing for his childhood innocence: "I had sensed from the first that I might find things here which were of old, which I saw when I was still innocent and have longed for ever since, for all my life—and without which I could not make it. My spirit was not sleeping then...."²⁶ Alfred Kazin in "The Earthly City of the Jews" writes about "the unreality of this world as opposed to God's," and he appoints that feeling to be a Jewish theme.²⁷ It certainly is a central theme in Bellow. "This world" is not only the human world as opposed to God's, it is also the adult's world as opposed to the child's. Kazin shows how the desire to be with God is like a desire to return to childhood and in agreement with Kazin we can see that this desire is what drives the moral masochist. In his religious ecstasy the worshipper regresses to a stage of infantile devotion and reestablishes contact with the infant's intensity of emotions. He regresses to a world which absorbs him completely, to a world which does not know of guilt.

To Moses Herzog his own suffering is a "humiliating comedy of heartache."²⁸ It imprisons him in his self, is shameful. The notion of suffering as ennobling and redemptive seems to have been almost dispelled from *Herzog*. But naturally that does not prevent Bellow's hero from suffering greatly. Like Tommy Wilhelm Herzog lives with a feeling of guilt about his Jewish heritage. Dressed in his pleasure-seeker and fool's outfit, his candy-striped coat, Italian shoes, and straw hat, he is guiltily aware that his forefathers wore black gabardine down to the ground. Moses, the vain, narcissistic intellectual has yielded to the temptations of

25 Saul Bellow, *Henderson the Rain King*, p. 211.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

27 Alfred Kazin, *Bright Book of Life* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), pp. 132-33.

28 Saul Bellow, *Herzog*, p. 166.

hedonistic America, and although he does by no means feel at home in that world, he feels guilty and disgraced by his own useless life. "Is this really possible?" Moses thinks to himself when with Sono, one of his many mistresses. "Have all the traditions, passions, renunciations, virtues, gems, and masterpieces of Hebrew discipline and all the rest of it—rhetoric, a lot of it, but containing true facts—brought me to these untidy green sheets, and this rippled mattress?"²⁹ The eternal "quack", the "sexual reflex that had nothing to do with age or subtlety, wisdom, experience, history, *Wissenschaft, Bildung, Wahrheit*" has driven Moses, has sidetracked and debased his life, which was meant for something greater.³⁰ His desire to lead a moral, useful, and active life, this service ideal which he shares with Henderson, has led to nothing much but suffering, longing and self-reproach. As husband, father and son he feels he has failed. And it is particularly his failure as a son which causes him pain. The relationship between father Herzog and son is a repetition of the relationship in *Seize the Day*, although Dr. Adler is a success in America and Jonah Herzog a failure. But whereas Bellow sympathizes with the suffering son in *Seize the Day*, father Herzog seems to have the sympathy of both Bellow and Moses himself. That he takes up arms to protect himself and his manliness against this emasculated, decadent son with the "Christianized smirk" is a perfectly sound reaction. Herzog knows perfectly well how despicable, how pathetic and pompous he is when he displays his stigma; when he appeals to the world with his noble passivity, his innocent suffering, his elitist victim's role. "Moses refused to know evil. But he could not refuse to experience it. And therefore others were appointed to do it to him, and then to be accused (by him) of wickedness."³¹

Herzog's self-knowledge does however not prevent him from following the beaten path of the moral masochist. He throws himself on the mercy of the cruel world. The most sophisticated punishment he imposes on himself is of course his marriage with Madeleine. As her victim, and as the victim of his maniacal friends, these reality instructors who want to punish you with the lessons of the real, and who are everywhere in Bellow's work, Herzog receives the punishment he craves for, and he is confirmed in his self-image as the noble innocent man who

29 *Ibid.*, p. 170.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 245.

bows out. Through his suffering he proves to himself that he is one of the chosen; his task, the burden and gift of his life, involves the intellectual's responsibility to lead America. Herzog cannot fulfill his obligation to his Jewish heritage in terms of piety, but perhaps in terms of right thinking. This, too, however he knows only too well is an impossibility: "But can thought wake you from the dream of existence? Not if it becomes a second realm of confusion, another more complicated dream, the dream of intellect, the delusion of total explanations!"³²

Herzog tells the story of many second generation immigrants. It is possible to see Moses's background as the son of immigrant parents as *the* formative condition of his life and suffering. The characteristic situation of parents sacrificing their own lives for their children's future as Americans certainly prepares the soil for a guilt complex. Moses was the family's prince. As he was destined to fulfill the family's nobler aspirations he had to be protected from the brutal world. So while father Herzog was slogging to make a living and while his mother was slowly dying, Moses at sixteen, closed his eyes to the world and let himself be engrossed in intellectual pursuits. Now that his parents are dead Moses feels the burden of his obligation. The only way he can repay them, the only way he can honor them, is to remember and to keep alive the heritage of suffering. He remembers his family, his street, his religious education, and he knows that "Here was a wider range of human feelings than he had ever again been able to find."—"All he ever wanted was there."³³ And he asks himself, "Whom did I ever love as I loved them?"³⁴ The answer of course is "no one". Nothing, or nobody can ever come up to Herzog's childhood. America is still strange to this professor. When he is arrested with his father's revolver and his grandfather's Czarist rubles he looks and feels like a newly arrived immigrant. His attempt to relive and understand his past is an act of penance and homage, and since it is *Herzog*, it is comic, too.

Herzog's life, then, follows the neurotic pattern of moral masochism. And as we have already observed there seems to be little redemptive about suffering in this novel. However, this does not mean that Saul Bellow eventually accepts the psychologist's analysis and view of suffering. Herzog does in a sense end where the moral masochist desires to

32 *Ibid.*, p. 166.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 140.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 147.

be. His accident breaks several months of isolation from his sister and brothers and although he does not accept their offer to take care of him, he does return emotionally to his family. Just as he tentatively returns to God. Herzog seems to be approaching a state of serenity and acceptance. And acceptance, of your strange heart and character, seems to be a crucial concept in Bellow. He is impatient with definitions of the human character. Such definitions are basically the work of reality instructors and Bellow has it very much at heart to save the world from these lunatics. There are differences between Tommy Wilhelm's potentially redemptive suffering and Herzog's shameful, comic suffering. But *Herzog* does not end in comedy. The end of this novel is remarkably like the end of *Seize the Day*. Like Wilhelm Herzog may find his redemption in accepting his suffering. As a reader you may want to ask whether Bellow is not making a virtue of necessity. Is there any real difference between compulsive or neurotic suffering and submission to suffering by choice? Bellow seems to think there is. Herzog's suffering may not be meaningful in a religious sense but it is meaningful in the sense that it is his. Herzog, it seems, can only be wholly human if he does not deny his suffering. It is his personal pain and he has no choice but to be himself. What he needs to learn is to be that self with dignity.