

“Weirdly Tranquil” Vision: The Point of View of Moses Herzog

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The consensus among Bellovian scholars and critics is that, all things considered, *Herzog* remains Bellow's best novel. Here artistic vision finds its appropriate concretions; meaning is achieved through form. Point of view is complicated and directly reflective of the emotional and intellectual condition of the protagonist. The end of the novel grows organically out of the exposition and resolves the initial conflict without making larger claims than the condition of the central intelligence can support. The theme is significant and presented with intensity. Views opposite to those of Herzog are given more than ample play in the characterizations of a large cast of antagonists and in the fundamental ambivalence in Herzog himself. The conflict in Herzog between his intellect and his sensibilities provides the integrating principle in the novel, setting up the complex point of view, inviting the “lessons” of the reality instructors, intensifying Herzog's anguish, and leading him, finally, to his transcendental affirmation, in which he frees himself from the compulsion of intellectual systematizing and relaxes in the freedom of an emotional/intuitional synthesis. “*The intellectual has been a Separatist,*” says Herzog as he approaches clarity. “*And what kind of synthesis is a Separatist likely to come up with?*” (322).

What passes for plot in the novel is a narrative strategy that moves Herzog from a state of agitation to a state of rest, from a frantic search for direction to a discovery of that direction. The events that attend Herzog's transformation, though, are presented mainly through Herzog's own perceptions as the central intelligence in a sophisticated and often convoluted narration. Thus, point of view is central to the assessment of Bellow's achievement in *Herzog*, yet most critics have settled for summary statements rather than detailed examinations of narrative technique. Earl Rovit, for example, observes that Bellow “reshuffles

time sequences expertly, shifts Herzog's point of view from first- to third-person, employs the device of the fragmentary 'mental' letters as a masterly bridge between solipsism and communication, and casts an ambience of irony over his entire construction" (24). According to Peter Bischoff,

Der Roman ist zum wesentlichen Teil im Bewußtsein der Hauptfigur abgesiedelt. In einer technisch sehr ausgefeilten Verschachtelung von beschreibenden und szenischen Rückblenden sowie im Geiste konzipierten, mitunter aufgezeichneten, jedoch nie abgesandten Briefen spielt sich das "Psychodrama" Herzogs ab. Durch den Kunstgriff der wechselnden Perspektivierung verleiht Bellow der solipsistischen Selbstanalyse seines Protagonisten eine psychische Dynamik, die die beschreibenden und szenischen Erzählelemente in einer Mischung verschiedener Zeitebenen verbindet. Die Erzählperspektive wechselt zwischen figürlicher, figürlich- auktorialer, und auktorialer Erzählweise, wobei die figürliche Perspektive des Protagonisten ständig zwischen "I," "you," und "he" variiert. Ein solcher Wechsel innerhalb der Figurenperspektive wird dadurch ermöglicht, daß sich Herzog seines Bewußtseins stets bewußt ist. Indem Herzog sich nicht nur als Subjekt, sondern auch als Objekt betrachtet, entfremdet er sich von sich selbst. (96)¹

In a similar vein, Eusebio L. Rodrigues writes that "the narrative angle jumps around shifting wildly from one mode to another without warning and often within the same paragraph, creating an illusion of constant rapid nervous motion and a continuity of tempo that offsets the tortoise pace of the action and the cramping time schedule" (162). And Malcolm Bradbury comments that "this is a book set primarily *within* consciousness, and there is a parallel formlessness or oblique design in the novel's structure—until, finally, both Herzog and the book transfigure the plurality of words and explanations into significant silence" (138).

These remarks are all thoughtful and perceptive but remain, as far as