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Saul Bellow: Mastery in handling humour and parody

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Humour in Bellow's prose is both rich and complex and it could not express better than it did, the author's propensity for self-analysis and self-scrutinizing heroes. The purpose of this paper is to highlight Bellow's mastery in handling his humour and presenting episodes that are both grotesque and absurd in some of his best novels, such as "Henderson, the Rain King", "Herzog", "Humboldt's Gift", "Mr. Sammler's Planet" and "The Dean's December". The association of the various types of humoristic touches of his novels to the potential effects and functions they play in them remain within the scope of the present paper.

Key-words: *parody, intellectual humour, caricature, satire*

The relationship of laughter to tears permeates almost all works of Jewish-American literature, including those of Saul Bellow's. His humour entertains. Bellow branded it as his weapon against what Herzog, one of his title characters, called the "bad habit" (Bellow 1965, 241) of suffering. His humour burned every tendency to accept the despair of the victim and of the collective memory. The Chicago writer refused to follow in the footsteps of most of American novelists, but went a different way: the one which led to the light, not the shadow; towards leafy trees, not barbed wires. His aim must have been, perhaps, the underlining of the message that although often strange, life is a blessing; that there are minor miracles in it that should be noted among the general setbacks. In 1965, in an interview with Gordon L. Harper, Bellow explained his choice of humour as the most appropriate means of expressing suffering: "I got very tired of the solemnity of complaint altogether impatient with complaint. Obliged to choose between complaint and comedy, I choose comedy as more energetic, wiser and manlier." (Bellow 1993, 56)

Although the worries and difficulties are still quite serious, many of his books, in retrospect, are widely read comedies. The comic elements in the novels

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Henderson, the Rain King, *Herzog*, *Humboldt's Gift* and even in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, stand out in comparison to his outlandish and sometimes even bitter novels of his beginnings, *The Dangling Man* or *The Victim*.

Humour in Bellow's prose is both rich and complex; there is a general belief that Bellow is mostly an intellectual humorist. This is true because irony, poignant and self-flagellant sarcasm, all hallmarks of intellectual humour, best express his propensity for self-analysis and self-scrutinizing heroes. With its picaresque liveliness and comic tone, Saul Bellow's work is reminiscent of Mark Twain's "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn". In his works, humour can be defined as a complex combination of Jewish irony and American vivacity. He is as restrained as he is loud, poignant as well as absurd. Behind Jewish ironies, he is a true American humourist who, according to Marie-Christine Pauwels de la Ronciére in "Visual and Intellectual Humour in Saul Bellow's Fiction", "...revives the riproarious days of American frontier humour with its knack for tall tale and bombast and its exuberant characters." (Pauwels de la Ronciére 2009, 241)

The purpose of this paper is to highlight Bellow's mastery of handling his humour and presenting episodes that are both grotesque and absurd. Saul Bellow's humour is inseparable from his tragic vision. It is rooted in the individual's failure, despair, alienation and suffering within the modern society. His heroes are tormented individuals who struggle to reconcile their aspirations to the real world. Failure in achieving this goal produces a tragi-comic reaction. Following are some of these episodes.

Saul Bellow is a very interesting example of a caricaturist. "Mr. Sammler's Planet" is not essentially a jolly book as we might call, for instance, "Humboldt's Gift". The former is more pessimistic. It does, however, have its own tones of humour, particularly in its caricatures. Everyone but Dr. Gruner, seems quite grotesque to Sammler. His niece, Margotte Arkin, has heavy legs; Lionel Feffer is overweight; In Sammler's eyes, no one seems to lack a funny trait. Shula, Sammler's daughter, is perhaps the most perfect example of a caricature with her wig of "mixed yak and baboon hair and synthetic fibers" (Bellow 1972, 34). In "Humboldt's Gift" we also find very prominent caricatures. Thaxter is probably the best example among them. As in Shula's case, what makes him a real caricature is his outfit: a broad-brimmed hat, "bought in a shop for black swingers" (Bellow 1996, 246), a blue velvet suit, a cape and canvas boots. Furthermore, he has an "impressive stature", "warts", "distorted nose" and "leopard eyes" (Bellow 1996, 252). This is *visual humour* as we cannot imagine Thaxter's appearance on screen without causing some kind of laughter.

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One of the most important qualities of the comic element is the impossibility of it being anticipated, its appearance when not expected. In the novel “Mr. Sammler's Planet”, the ridiculous appearance of Shula, while her father, Mr. Sammler, and Dr. V. Govinda Lal are philosophizing, is at the same time dramatic and humorous: “Then Shula-Slawa came down the stairs. Lal, who saw her first, had an expression which made Sammler immediately turn” (Bellow 1972, 206). The comedy of Lal's astonishment and Sammler's fright is followed by a description of Shula's look and outfit. She has painted her face white, put on false eyelashes and an Indian mole made with lipstick on her forehead; her saree is made of a piece of material found in a drawer and which is not properly dressed. This is *situational humour*, the typical type of humour which seems to produces a more hilarious effect in movies than in novels. The reader can easily foresee the astonishment painted on Lal's face, which frightens Sammler. However, the narrator uses a laconic style and most probably the unsaid must be completed by the readers themselves.

Despite the fact that Bellow relies largely on highly intellectual discussions, he likes to abruptly interrupt these philosophical treatises with varied comic situations. Perhaps the most important element in Shula's comic entry is her abrupt apparition amidst Dr. Lal and Mr. Sammler's intellectual discussions. It could be argued that this comic scene might have a double function. Firstly, the temporary interruption of the intellectual discussion provides some rest for the reader. Whereas, thematically speaking, this seems to imply that in today's dynamic world there is no time for philosophy. The same implication seems to be suggested by the succeeding scene in which the resumed intellectual discussion is again interrupted by the breaking of the pipes and the consequent flood caused by Sammler's nephew.

Scatological or *excremental humour* is quite popular, as we can see from the frequency of movies, television programs, and books that make vast use of it. In many of his novels, Saul Bellow, perhaps seeking to ridicule the in-depth contemplation into which some of the characters immerse, relies on this kind of humour. In “Humboldt's Gift” for example, there is a lot of scatological humour. The protagonist Charles Citrine decides not to pay the poker debt to Cantabile, a Chicago gangster. The latter in turn destroys Citrine's 280-SL Mercedes as a warning. Finding himself in a very difficult position, Charles decides to pay off his debt. He meets Cantabile in the Russian Baths. Despite the threatening weapon he was carrying, the gangster chooses to insult his victim with a biological action, as Citrine explains:

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> Of course he wanted to humiliate me. Because I was *a chevalier* of the *Légion d'honneur*? Not that he actually knew of this. But he was aware as they would say in Chicago, a Brain, a man of culture or intellectual attainments. Was this why I had to listen to him rumbling and slopping and smell his stink? Perhaps fantasies of savagery and monstrosity of beating my brains out, had loosened his bowels. (Bellow 1996, 83)

The humour in this scene is twofold. Firstly, there is the menace of the gangster who was carrying a Magnum revolver, and secondly, we have a biological function. Cantabile is expressing his opinion of Citrine's intellectual prestige, but at the same time, using the scatological humour the narrator seems to imply what he thinks of the Chicago gangsters.

Most of the comic characters in Bellow's novels do not merely embody a single vice, but are subject to some unusual impetus. The wicked and vengeful wife appears in almost each and every Bellovian novels. Such is Margaret in the novelette *Seize the Day!*, Madeleine in *Herzog* or Denise in *Humboldt's Gift*. They give the impression that they are interested not only in destroying their ex-spouses economically but also spiritually and physically. This scope is certainly not comical. However, the situation of the abused man and the abusing woman has always been a comic element in folklore. In addition, the indecent language the women characters use, presumably for the purpose of reinforcing realism, becomes frequently a source of humor. Through this language, as it is the case in real life, some of Bellow's characters try to show that they are the bold ones while other characters may have other motives. Denise, Charlie Citrine's former wife, for instance, a woman from the upper social class, uses dirty words when referring to her ex-husband's friends with the mere intention of making him angry. Citrine tells us that Denise is the daughter of a judge, but the language she uses does not match her education.

Intelligent humour is not always easily understood and is often perceived only by a part of the audience. Irony is perhaps its most important element. At its highest, this kind of humour is not intended to cause laughter, but merely a smile. In *The Dean's December*, the protagonist's brother-in-law, Zaehner, makes the following comment about the university recruitment system of the professors: "...a professor with tenure is like a woman on welfare with ten illegitimate kids. They are both set for life, never again have to work" (Bellow 1982, 274). George Swiebel's joke about the Germans and Charles Citrine's Mercedes-280 in *Humboldt's Gift*: "Murder Jews and make machines, that's what those Germans

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really know how to do" (Bellow 1996, 35) belongs to the level of intelligent humour because it was made by a Jew (the author, confessor, and joker are all three Jews). Had it been made by a non-Jewish individual, it would have been too cruel to get classified as an instance of this kind of humour.

Saul Bellow's novels are somewhat satirical. In them, Bellow satirizes the United States as a representative of the twentieth-century civilization. In addition to the typical people of this civilization, he also satirizes certain institutions such as universities and their system of lecturers' employment, theatre, advocacy and medicine. There are times when he particularly enjoys making fun of literate Americans. ''Herzog'', for example, was predestined to be a comic novel: What should he do in this moment of crisis, take Aristotle or Spinoza off the bookshelf and access pages frantically in search of advice and consolation? The dark reason to laugh here is the fact that the best efforts of intellectuals to enlighten us, the books they wrote for us, have often led us into deserts of abstraction. After many years of observant and careful study, Herzog is left with nothing more than a sense of confusion stemming from systems of thought and philosophical formulas which do nothing but hide the reality from him. His own judgment is crippled by theoretical borrowings. Are we perhaps compelled, in other words, to be skeptical of learning? Herzog's search is a serious search, and he certainly takes it very seriously. But there is always a comic tone to this seriousness. His letters are full of important thoughts and ideas, yet we find that Herzog is pompous and somewhat foolish. This kind of description certainly creates the possibility of an ironic commentary on Herzog's own approach to the thinking process, and especially on his letter writing. Although gifted, unlike Gersbach, he is also guilty of taking his thoughts too seriously and of being blinded by claims and pretense. What Bellow wants to say is that ultimately the emotionally hurt, while trying to get themselves together, must analyze their own experience, give meaning to life, and become aware of the irrationality of extreme effort.

By the many indicators the author offers: Herzog's self-oriented irony; his anger at his wife and best friend's infidelity while justifying his extramarital affairs; and most notably, the introduction of Valentine Gersbach as a comic parable of Herzog, the reader comes to realize that Bellow really sees beyond his hero's claims and pretensions. Gersbach also represents the parodied figure of an intellectual, a ridiculously absurdly talented duplicate of the hero who reads the latter lectures "a parody of the intellectual desire for meaning, higher depth and quality of thought." (Bellow 1965, 78)

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During the twentieth century parody became one of the main devices of literary prose. Modern parody does not aim the parodied text, but it uses the latter as a *weapon* to target something else. Literary theorist Simon Dentith defines parody as "... any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice" (Dentith 2000, 9). "Henderson, the Rain King", perhaps Bellow's most beloved book, features a jolly parody of Joseph Conrad and Hemingway's interpretations regarding Africa, the novel of colonial adventures, and modernist aesthetics. While exposing all Western colonialist and racist ideologies, it (the novel) portrays Bellow's only non-Jewish character, Eugene Henderson, in the form of a parody of the Hemingway hero; Henderson romantically believes that there is a curse on earth that he must absolutely lift. A violinist and pig farmer, Henderson is honest, and self-centred. He is Bellow's comic response to a generation of early modern writers plunged in anthropology, structuralism, and primitivism. With his initials E.H., uncontrolled drunkenness, rifle, fascination with the African safari and his involvement in a foreign war, Henderson also represents Bellow's attempt to parody the gigantic Hemingway myth. Since Hemingway was the main writer blocking his path to fame, with "Henderson the Rain King", Bellow probably made it known that Hemingway's time was up.

In his works, social and historical life encounters mythical and metaphysical life, a conflict that Bellow reconciles in the form of a complex, modern comedy, where in every situation or material fact there is the possibility of a tragic or comical idea. Malcolm Bradbury tries to explain the complexity of this Bellovian novel in these terms:

> The mythic intent makes it very much a book of the fifties: a decade obsessed with the hope that the imagination might generate at last the saving fable, the tale of the waste land redeemed, the desert of civilization watered by some humanist or metaphysical discovery. But the myth both asserts and mocks itself, takes on a neo-parodic form; and it is the method of comic fabulation, of expansive and pyrotechnic farce, of absurdity finding a path to human measurement, that makes Henderson the Rain King so strangely notable a novel. (Bradbury 1982, 66)

Eugene Henderson lives within the boundaries of a heroic world; even his own personality is utterly American in the sense of pragmatism and independence that characterizes him as an individual: he shuns and destroys, rescues others, and

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laughs; he is an epic character, yet all this is mocked by the voice in his head that echoes the true words of the American dream and the American hero: “I want! I want!” So, the essence of the hero and his heroic journey will be found not in the action level of the novel, but in the very rejection of that action. Henderson cannot elevate his shortcomings to a tragic level; he remains ultimately comical. He has heroic proportions, but certainly not within the bounds of the accepted American myth.

“All of Bellow's main characters are people with deep feelings and sharp intellect. The discrepancy between their hearts and minds makes them comical, but they prove their worth through unshakable faith in human dignity.” (Daiu 2000, 104) His comic vision about the state of humanity is based on the discrepancies between desire and impossibility, between aspiration and ability. Such a contradiction is often a vital source of comic temperament. The individual's failure or fall is comical in the humorous response of the person who has failed, thus turning the event into a joke. Herzog, for example, longs to have great practical virtues. This desire is a source of comedy in the novel and is not treated as a problem with a ready answer, but rather as a search for human characteristics or qualities that need no justification. There is no need to justify certain things. Rather, optimism permeated his prose. Bellow is not like many skeptical, rebellious or simply angry writers who either condemn or reject life for the fact that it does not meet their standards as philosophical intellectuals. He remains one of the greatest comic novelists in America with his ability to describe and convey life experience and its philosophical and moral implications through both formal and conversational discourse, his storytelling skill and remarkable control over literary voice, his gift for both comic and tragic portrayal, the inexhaustible verbal talent in creating sentences of great poetic resonance all testify to his artistic genius.

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