

THE PARADIGM OF EXILE AND RETURN IN SAUL BELLOW'S *HERZOG*

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Abstract

The paradigm of exile and return is one of the most cherished themes of world literature, from older to more modern times, as it captures an unavoidable conflict between the protagonist (intellectual), on the one hand, and the political sphere and the masses, on the other hand. Beside its romanticized nature, it performs an extremely important function, namely that of varying the status quo of a particular society frozen in a certain moment in time, once the wanderer returns from his/her exilic experience and mirrors onto society the new perspectives on reality.

Keywords: exile, physical exile, mental exile, restlessness, estrangement

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*The exilic intellectual does not respond
to the logic of the conventional but to the audacity of daring,
and to representing change, to moving on, not standing still*²

The trauma of exile stands for one of the greatest recurrent themes in world literature. The exile is one of the fundamental fears, one of the capital punishments from an intellectual point of view. For the “zoon politikon”, exile is the force that pulls the man out of this status of communion with society and throws him into the unknown. As a universal conflicting human condition, exile takes place in varying temporal degrees and under a variety of spatial circumstances. However, many forms of exile tend to share a lot in common. On the epistemological level, exile is formally and substantially connected with conflicts arising from the irreconcilability in the social organization of the concept of “time” and “space”, within and across identities and localities. That is, conflicts exist in the form of a spatio-temporal transformation or distortion, where the self is progressively forced to move from a state of autonomy to a situation of oppression or tyranny. Any form of exile involves, therefore, a minimum of three elements: the *self* belonging to a certain *space* at a given *time*. Exile may occur on the more personal level as a form of loneliness, where the self is temporally and spatially separated from others; it may be forced or self-imposed; it may have political connotations or only social aspects. Regardless of the severity and duration, exile has always been connected with powerful psychological developments. In the ancient Greek world, to wander away from the city-state (home) was to be totally exposed, deprived of the protection of the government (political support) or of friends and family (psychological support), which accounted for a fate worse than death. Over the years, exile has somewhat been romanticized, and it has come to be viewed as a liberating, illuminating and enriching experience, often by willingly ignoring the violence, displacement, pain and severance that accompany it, which is to say the “catastrophe” of exilic experience. The challenge of the modern mind is to fully explore the complexities and paradoxes produced by exile and exploit the tension between exile as catastrophic and exile as empowering. What matters in the end is the adventure in itself, as the modern hero lives not one, but two or more separate lives and this transcendence stimulates the imagination and generates a sort of perverse satisfaction (perverse in the sense that even if exile has constantly failed to solve the fundamental problems that forced the expatriation, the mind is nevertheless lured by the violently powerful feelings of sufferance and rootlessness associated with the experience).

It is commonly accepted that the modern self has to struggle with some strange cultural developments: the contemporary spirit is exhausted, imperialism and urbanization lead to dissolution, the very concept of reality is being challenged, the modern intellectual sees a diminishing of his power to effect change and his role seems to be in steady decline. Withdrawal from public life, withdrawal from the

² Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*. The 1993 Reith Lectures, Vintage Books, 1994, p. 64

world comes as no great surprise. Ihab Hassan, in his influential *Radical Innocence*, argues that the modern self is consciously distancing from society: “the contemporary self recoils, *from* the world, *against* himself. It has discovered absurdity”.³ However, this social isolation or self exile is seen by the same author as a resource of awareness, a strategy of the self. Faced with outrage, unimaginable injustice and suffering, the self is pushed to a psychological limit that is represented by madness or schizophrenia, which, Hassan considers, is the ultimate form of recoil. Exile becomes thus an indispensable tool for the modern self, one that allows distance and a high degree of lucidity. It is a measure of last resort, a conscious assuming of the pain and suffering associated with severance from what constitutes “home”, in an attempt to escape madness or to gain time in order to put together the shattered bits and pieces of the soul.

Exile performs more than the function of a steam valve on the path to potential insanity. The spatial displacement often involves a temporal one, as frequently two distinct societies are not on the same level of development. It allows the exiled a diachronic perspective, an understanding not of why things are the way they are, but of how they came to be or how they could turn out to be. Even places within the same social organization may offer a completely different perspective and thus exile to the rural part of a country, for instance, may provide valuable insights for the city dweller. The violent rupture from what is familiar also triggers a rethinking and a reinterpretation of one’s self, forced to reevaluate the conditions of his communal estrangement. The process of dislocation itself is powerful enough to determine a catharsis and an improvement of the mental and emotional stability, exile having thus a predominantly therapeutic effect. The motivating force behind the exile is to work out an accommodation with the political or social status quo, on the one hand, and with one’s own nightmares, fears and insecurity, on the other hand.

Physical exile is evidently not a characteristic of all modern intellectuals. In his essay dedicated to the theme of exile, called *Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals*, Edward W. Said makes an important distinction between the *actual* and the *metaphorical* condition of exile. An intellectual is, by definition, in opposition with the mainstream. The “yea-sayers”, as he calls them, are those who flourish in society without an overwhelming sense of dissonance and dissent. The “nay-sayers”, on the contrary, are metaphorically doomed to exile, and it is in opposition to the current mass perspective that progress lies. The intellectual as outsider is best exemplified, Said argues, by the condition of exile, “the state of never being fully adjusted, always feeling outside the chatty, familiar world inhabited by natives [...], tending to avoid and even dislike the trappings of accommodation and national well-being. Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled and unsettling others”.⁴ Moreover, intellectuals who move between cultures, languages, civilizations and various configurations of power possess what Chela Sandoval calls “oppositional

³ Ihab Hassan, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁴ Edward W. Said, *op. cit.*, p. 52-3.

consciousness”⁵, that allows them a better understanding of the world system of cultures, thus filtering and mediating world imports and recreating local meanings, producing hybrid cultural artifacts.

A world in which people, information, institutions and cultural habits are brought together and unified across enormous distances at rapid speeds destabilizes the conventions of individual and societal identity. With regards to the literary realm, a modern term for exile was coined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, that of “deterritorialization”, referring to the displacement of identities, persons and meanings that is endemic to the postmodern world system. The authors use the term “deterritorialization” to locate this moment of alienation and exile in language and literature and argue that defamiliarization, while alienating, enables imagination “to express another potential community, to force the means for another consciousness and another sensibility”⁶ Exile performs therefore another function, that of dismantling notions of value, genre, canon, as the self moves freely through various cultural establishments. The value of this conception is that it captures the postmodernist refusal to admit everything as final and static. The system of reference being constantly altered, the postmodernist self (as we shall see in a practical approach on Bellow’s and Baldwin’s heroes) can no longer be interpreted as evolving in a linear fashion from a stable place of origin onwards, but only in relation to shifting tensions and competing issues.

Exile is a transformative and innovative experience. The dual nature of the exiled, “looking forward by always looking back”⁷, the being in-between and occupying more than one cultural space gives universality to the modern intellectual and provides a certain authority in the public space. Speaking of Salman Rushdie, Said argued that he is “really part of something much bigger than just one individual. He can write in a world language and turn that language against its own sources of authority and consolidation”⁸. The return from exile enables cultural change, because the exiled introduce whole new worlds and adds a new perspective to a rigid construction of reality. The complexity of the modern mind increases when one embraces this philosophy of rootlessness and metaphorically gives up the comfort of what’s known and familiar to him to plunge into the unknown: “to explain why we become attached to our birthplace we pretend that we are trees and speak of roots. Look under your feet. You will not find gnarled growths spouting

⁵ Chela Sandoval, “Women Respond to Racism: A Report on the National Women’s Studies Association Conference, Storrs, Connecticut”, *Occasional paper Series: The Struggle Within*, Oakland, California, 2001.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. “What is Minor Literature?” in *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 17.

⁷ Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*. quote available online at: <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/show/242309>

⁸ Edward Said, “Criticism and the Art of Politics”, in *Power, Politics and Culture: Interviews with Edward Said*, ed. Gauri Viswanathan, New York: Pantheon Books, 2001, p. 148.

through the soles. Roots, I sometimes think, are a conservative myth, designed to keep us in our places”.⁹

Exiles are therefore suspended between two places, much like in a Purgatorium. In one place, they are denied, either by threat of violence or by some other insufferable condition; in the other place, they are conditionally accepted. As a common feature of all exiles is that they all seem to have some unfinished business between them and the place of origin and that they seem to launch themselves into some sort of long term project. Being at odds with the others or with themselves, exiles struggle with existential dilemmas and, without exception, are in the process of self formation. Susceptible to conflict and change, exiles - mostly willing and not coerced - often fail in their quest (somewhat similarly to Hawthorne’s hero, Ethan Brand, from *The Unpardonable Sin*) because the problem lies within rather than on the outside. From this point of view, exile is often overrated, as “wrong life cannot be lived rightly”¹⁰, as Theodor Adorno observed, half a century ago.

Similar to Said’s distinction between an actual and a metaphorical exile, David Kettler speaks of exile as both a person or as a *condition*. It is in this last interpretation that exile seems most beneficial for intellectuals and it accounts for the high esteem exile holds among contemporary writers: “In recent years, in fact, the trope of exile has stood high. To judge by some recent writings in literary criticism and cultural studies, exile appears as a transcendent status, beyond the ambiguous supports of historical circumstance, and beyond even the painful sense of its loss. Exile appears as an enabler of the most profound thought, art, and literature – an empowerment”.¹¹ The notion of exile is thus extended beyond the realm of politics and becomes a metaphor for isolation; it comes to be associated with an opening to cultural achievements not available to those who remain inside a certain given context, a transfiguration of one’s social and mental condition. “What is this enigmatic impulse that does not allow one to settle down in the achieved, the finished?” wondered Czeslav Milosz in his Nobel Prize lecture. “I think it is a quest for reality”.¹² He goes on by arguing that the language of a close community develops certain long lasting habits, while entire portions of reality are simply denied existence because they aren’t given a name and that is the reason why a poet, or intellectual, chooses internal or external exile: “He may also desire to free himself from it and elsewhere, in other countries, on other shores, to recover, at least for short moments, his true vocation - which is to contemplate Being”.¹³

⁹ Salman Rushdie. “Rushdie on Roots, Rootlessness, Migration, on being Between”, *The Literature and Culture of Pakistan in the Postcolonial Web*, New York: Aventura/Vintage, 1984, p. 90-91.

¹⁰ Theodor Adorno. *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. London: New Left Books, 1951, p. 38.

¹¹ David Kettler, *The Liquidation of Exile: Studies in the Intellectual Emigration of the 1930’s*. London and New York: Anthem Press, 2011, p. 3.

¹² From *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1968-1980*, Editor-in-Charge Tore Frängsmyr, Editor Sture Allén, World Scientific Publishing Co., Singapore, 1993, Part II, also available at: http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1980/milosz-lecture.html

¹³ *Ibid.*, Part III.

While it is true that exile ensures a whole new and fresh perspective, there also exists an inherent danger of becoming stuck in this in-between condition and of making no progress at all. More aware of the terrible sense of pain, suffering and loss associated with the tragedy of exile, Said argues that even if dislocation might seem empowering, the exile is nevertheless doomed because of the dual nature of exile itself: “there is no real escape [...] since that state of in-betweenness can itself become a rigid ideological position, a sort of dwelling whose falseness is covered only in time, and to which one can all too easily become accustomed”.¹⁴ However, exile is, for Said, a genuine possibility to cross borders, to break barriers of thought and experience and that is why for an intellectual who is not satisfied with “doing well”, the exilic displacement becomes a liberating experience.

As we shall see in the pages below, Saul Bellow consciously adopts the marginality that a conceptual exile ensures, both as a retreat from the disappointingly low moral norms of contemporary society and as a mental exercise, a relentless dissatisfaction with the “yea-saying” and an attempt to fight the rewards of intellectual comfort and the conventional. Exile, as an exercise of identity progress, is fully mastered by Bellow, who never settled in with the status quo and who was always unusually responsive to the slight changes of the social environment, as Milosz humorously pointed out in his speech when talking about the modern intellectual writer: “When adapting himself, he hears an internal voice that warns him against mask and disguise. But when rebelling, he falls in turn into dependence upon his contemporaries, various movements of the avant-garde. [...] The only way to counter an obscure remorse is to continue searching and to publish a new book, but then everything repeats itself, so there is no end to that chase. And it may happen that leaving books behind as if they were dry snake skins, in a constant escape forward from what has been done in the past, he receives the Nobel Prize”.¹⁵

Saul Bellow, himself a Nobel Prize winner, approaches the alleged inability of the great mass of American citizens to understand reality as it is, in a larger context and to exercise their own wits that also throws Herzog, the hero of Bellow’s sixth novel, in a self-imposed exile. His letter-writing habit (he writes letters to newspapers, to presidents, to himself, to the great dead, etc.) is an indication that all communication bridges with the community have collapsed for this man of ideas. The plot of the novel is simple; the novel has no sustained chronological action and there’s barely any action that takes place outside Herzog’s brain. During the course of the novel, the protagonist is forced to cope with his sense of alienation and displacement as he analyzes his past and tries to determine his future.

Moses Herzog, a professor of philosophy with a huge success during the first years of his career but whose brilliant insights seem to have come to a stall lately, is left by his wife Madeleine, a former student of his, in favor of his best friend Valentine Gersbach. The whole novel is a recapitulation of his past (his two unfortunate marriages, the resulting children, his academic career, his instances of infidelity) and of the perverted social background that pushed him on the verge of

¹⁴ Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, p. 58.

¹⁵ From *Nobel Lectures*, Literature 1968-1980, Part I.

insanity. Like most of Bellow's protagonists, Moses Herzog is an American Jew and that positions him, despite his fairly conventional outlook on life, outside of the American mainstream. Firmly rooted in the American tradition, Herzog is never fully able to escape his European roots and persistently holds on to the vestiges of the European tradition, as they are what unites him with history. Afraid of letting go of history and afraid of fully merging into the whimsicality of the present, Herzog becomes a typical exile, caught up in-between two worlds, belonging to neither of them and trying to come to terms with himself. Herzog's exile is not geographical, although he does spend his entire inheritance on a crumbling Berkshires cottage, away from the tumultuous urban life, but rather mental.

Throughout the novel, the reader is invited to an alternative, reconstructed reality, a mental improvement of the social and moral values that forced the exile in the first place. It is a conscious, ironic acceptance of the feeling of being "different" from the others, by thinking, a condition symbolically associated with insanity: "If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me", the opening line of the novel. Bellow's dissatisfaction with contemporary society is constantly expressed throughout his novels and essays: materialism, ignorance, violence, urban ugliness and lack of moral standards are the key factors that force Herzog to withdraw from society and start a dialogue with himself, much through the use of imaginary letters. Aware of the impact of the oppressive forces of society, Herzog's retreat to the inner realms of his mind (exile as a metaphysical condition) bears many similarities to Baldwin's flight to Europe. Baldwin's considerations on democracy, on the violence and materialism of contemporary America are also mirrored in *Herzog*; the inescapable influence of the temporal and spatial context on the self is also doubled by Bellow. Caught up in the same unmistakably postmodernist struggle for identity, Herzog brilliantly summarizes the plague the modern man confronts with: "Well, for instance, what it means to be a man. In a city. In a century. In transition. In a mass. Transformed by science. Under organized power. Subject to tremendous controls. In a condition caused by mechanization. [...] In a society that was no community and devalued the person. Owing to the multiplied power of numbers which made the self negligible. Which spent military billions against foreign enemies but would not pay for order at home. Which permitted savagery and barbarism in its own great cities. [...] Values? You—you yourself are a child of this mass and a brother to all the rest, or else an ingrate, dilettante, idiot. There, Herzog, thought Herzog, since you ask for the instance, is the way it runs".¹⁶

As most of Bellow's novels, *Herzog* is built around an individual who continuously (and most of the times, vainly) tries to locate himself within, to fit in. The personal crisis that surrounds his personal life (triggered by his second divorce) also extends to his professional sphere which, as he concedes, leaves him with nothing but empty ideas, without any practical applicability to his personal predicament and incapable of providing an immediate answer: "But he couldn't deceive himself about his work. He was beginning seriously to distrust it. His ambitions received a sharp check. Hegel was giving him a great deal of trouble. Ten years earlier he had been certain he understood his ideas on consensus and civility,

¹⁶ Saul Bellow, *Herzog*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992, p. 344

but something had gone wrong. He was distressed, impatient, angry”.¹⁷ There is a dramatic turn in Herzog’s destiny that is anticipated from the very first pages of the novel and that accounts for his subsequent mental divagations. From a devoted scholar, as we learn of Herzog, who permanently relied on theoretical models of history and tried to forge new ones, “looking at the past with an intense need for contemporary relevance”¹⁸, he progressively loses faith in his academic background to solve his personal problems and to help him reintegrate in society. Moreover, his immigrant background adds more drama to his inability to adapt: caught between two worlds, not really belonging to any of them, either Jewish or American, Herzog commands our sympathy not so much for his attempt to transcend his social condition as for the suffering associated with it. Once again, true knowledge cannot be attained other than by pain and suffering, which becomes, in Herzog’s terms, “a more extended form of life, a striving for true wakefulness and an antidote to illusion”.¹⁹ Faced with oppression, decadence and constantly victimized, Bellow’s heroes invariably turn (as a normal psychological reaction) from external fact to illusion and suffering becomes the only thing that tempers the hero’s symbolic attempt to refashion the universe in accordance with his preconceptions. But for suffering, madness would set in both freely and completely, as the only rational response to a menacing environment (see the theoretical introduction, particularly on schizophrenia which, Hassan considers, is the ultimate form of recoil). Essentially a moralist and aware of the responsibility of the intellectual towards community, Bellow takes the paradigm of exile one step further and prepares the hero’s return. Without constant pain, the common denominator of contemporary society, the modern man would wander forever in schizophrenic realms of thought and lose contact with society. The social circumstances demand self sacrifice and each individual has a moral obligation to contribute to improving communal existence. Exile is a necessary step, as it allows a distant perspective from the tumultuous social life; however, the exile should always return and try to accommodate, to fit in, once he has found that better reality and thus, due to the dual function of society as both creator and mirror of consciousness, upgrade the world.

The line between real life and imaginary life, between esoteric and more practical approaches is easily crossed and the mental exile is the perfect vehicle for it. The frail and dotted line between the realm of philosophy and the realm of the quotidian is ironically depicted by Herzog in one of his imaginary dialogues with Heidegger: “Dear Doktor Professor Heidegger, I should like to know what you mean by the expression ‘the fall into quotidian’. When did this fall occur? Where were we standing when it happened?”²⁰ This quote is also relevant for Herzog’s inner battle between the celebration of ordinary experiences, the pleasures of flesh and material life, of his desire not to leave this ‘quotidian’ life permanently and his inclinations for higher meanings and mental exercise. And the clash between these

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 6

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 5

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 211

²⁰ Ibid., p. 49

two worlds – the material and the spiritual – is what stands at the core of Herzog’s drama: unable to leave one in favor of the other, he is caught up in an incessant commuting between the two, blaming the older philosophical models for having failed to find a way to cope with both of them: “No philosopher knows what the ordinary is, has not fallen into it deeply enough. The question of ordinary human experience is the principal question of these modern centuries, as Montaigne and Pascal, otherwise in disagreement, both clearly say. – The strength of a man’s virtue or spiritual capacity measured by his ordinary life”.²¹ However, Herzog seems to have failed poorly in both worlds and hence his crisis. He longs to integrate in both of them while knowing that this would prove a rather impossible desiderate but eventually fails to integrate into any.

In Bellow’s case, it is the intellect itself that helps the hero to cope with the overwhelmingly negative environment. By keeping “one foot in the world of speculative intelligence and one in the active life”²², Herzog manages to fulfill, with ironic detachment, his role as an intellectual. Herzog’s mental exile allows two levels of awareness. On one hand, he is aware of himself as the PhD professor retired to Berkshires and engaged in a self-scrutiny of his past selves, the correspondent of his social, active life, a man prone to revenge, a man intoxicated by the surrounding world; on the other hand, those recollected selves are, in turn, self-conscious and it is this play of identities that gives depth to the novel and which ensures the necessary exilic distance of the protagonist. Herzog himself is reading Herzog. He reflects upon himself as he would upon a character and thus, the mind we are exposed to is continually engaged in trying to gain knowledge of itself by reading the acts that led to its very formation. There’s no need for the self to flee to a different country to gain a wider perspective on himself. Geographical exile is replaced by mental exile and the distancing possibilities are even vaster. The mind is still tributary to exile, as a mental condition, but the in and out movements are faster, more practical and thus the mental exile looks like a better version of geographical displacement.

Herzog’s mental exile can be fruitfully interpreted from the perspective of religion as well. The ever uprooted, displaced and alien Jew has grown tired of wandering and has completely removed the element of place from the equation of exile. And this is yet another source of irony, as Earl Rovit suggests: “It is he, the homeless one, who is able to establish a fruitful liaison with the world. In Herzogian terms, the Mosaic law has been amended to read, ‘Be it ever so humiliating, there’s no place like home’”.²³ Herzog’s genius lies in the substitution of real action (actual traveling, in this instance) with another form of traveling, by the power of thought. Forced to survive in this contemporary wasteland and having vainly tried a retreat to nature (as Herzog looks back on the Ludeyville interlude, he sees it not in terms of the pastoral relief he had hoped for but rather as the beginning of the dissolution of his marriage, his career and his sanity), the only solution left to effectively distance

²¹ Ibid., p. 106

²² Forrest Read, “Herzog: A Review”, in *Saul Bellow and the Critics*, Ed. Irving Malin, New York, 1967, p. 187.

²³ Earl Rovit, *op. cit.*, p. 181

himself from society is mental isolation. Thinking thus replaces action: “on this level, the discrete world of ideas *does* become causally connected with man’s actions. *To think* – even though it is possible only to think about oneself – becomes synonymous with *to act*. And the greatest actor, the largest hero of our time, would be the man who thinks most about his many selves in the most fluidly creative way”.²⁴ The modern intellectual no longer acts but thinks and tries to influence society not by actions, but by ideas. In this context, the letters that Herzog keeps writing become the only liaison between his mind and the real society, the practical expression of his ideas that contain hints for future action, that comment on the status quo of contemporary society or urge for social change: “how paradoxical it is that a man who uses heroin may get a 20-year sentence for what he does to himself...”²⁵; “public life drives out private life. The more political our society becomes (in the broadest sense of ‘political’ – the obsessions, the compulsions of collectivity) the more individuality seems lost”;²⁶ “De Tocqueville considered the impulse toward well-being as one of the strongest impulses of a democratic society. He can’t be blamed for underestimating the destructive powers generated by the same impulse”.²⁷

Herzog’s letters become a vehicle that connects the world of ideas with the world of action. At the same time, by symbolically representing a bridge with society, they account for Herzog’s sanity. Without this anchor in reality, Herzog’s ideas would be too abstract and the benefits of the exilic mind would be lost. These intellectual formulations, so crucial to the fabric of the book, are not merely a question of aesthetic pattern; as one’s life is indistinguishable from one’s perception, and as perception is shaped by real life events, these epistolary forms humanize Herzog and trigger the readers’ sympathy. The millions of copies sold are indicative of the fact that the readers identify easily with the real events in Herzog’s life, his divorce, the professional stress and his feelings of alienation and dissatisfaction with the current development of contemporary society. As Bellow himself acknowledged in one of his interviews, Herzog stands for “the professor, the son, the brother, the lover, the father, the husband, the avenger, the intellectual – all of it. It’s an attempt really to divest himself of all of the personae...”²⁸ In *Herzog*, Bellow expresses many of the readers’ unexpressed thoughts and feelings; the activity of writing mental letters becomes a literary extension of the inner dialogue everyone has with himself. And, in essence, it is the acknowledgement that all of us are permanently in a form of exile, in the world of ideas.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 181

²⁵ Saul Bellow, *Herzog*. p. 56.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 178

²⁷ Ibid., p. 57

²⁸ Jo Brans, “Common Needs, Common Preoccupations. An interview with Saul Bellow”, in *Critical Essays on Saul Bellow*, Ed. Stanley Trachtenberg, Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1979, p. 64

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