

**“An Apathy Like Oblomov’s”**  
**Oblomovitis in Saul Bellow’s Fiction**

BA Thesis English Language and Culture, Utrecht University

Eveline de Smalen, 3701638

BA Thesis

Supervised by Dr. Derek Rubin

1 July 2013

9,187 words

## Table of Contents

Introduction	3
“Freedom Canceled”: Embracing Passivity in <i>Dangling Man</i>	9
“Supervised Rest”: Retreating from Society in <i>Herzog</i>	18
“To Burst the Spirit’s Sleep”: A Small Note on <i>Henderson the Rain King</i>	25
Conclusion	29
Works Cited	32

## Introduction

In 1971, one of the leading Yiddish scholars Ruth R. Wisse published *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*, a study of the Jewish stock character known as the *schlemiel*, whose appearance in literature she traces from its origins in Yiddish literature from the Old World to the present, paying particular attention to the way the character is constructed in post-Holocaust America. She writes about the *schlemiel* that he

is rooted in tragic optimism which grows from the simultaneous perception of two contradictory realities – “that the world is moving toward Messianic fulfilment, and that the future comes one day at a time” ... His will to righteousness, when challenged by the obvious failure of righteousness, protected itself by ironying out the situation, thereby preserving the faith while allowing itself an outlet of aggression.

(59)

The tension between believing to be part of a chosen people, yet not seeing this belief realised in the actual world, leads to the question “at what point ... failure [will] break the back of faith” (60). Somewhat surprisingly, the Holocaust was not that point, because the *schlemiel* is still alive to this day. The *schlemiel*, Wisse writes, migrated from Europe to America, where he was incorporated in fiction by Jewish-American writers as diverse as Bernard Malamud, Nathanael West and Grace Paley (82). This migration, however, has not come about without changes occurring in the nature of the *schlemiel*. Wisse writes:

The American Jewish author is not concerned with faith-rootedness – if anyone is – nor with the survival of a God-centered community. His schlemiel is not even remotely symbolic of a people. He is an expression of heart, of intense, passionate feeling, in surroundings that stamp out individuality and equate emotion with unreason. The schlemiel is used as a cultural reaction to the prevailing Anglo-Saxon model of restraint in action, thought, and speech. ... The American schlemiel declares

his humanity by loving and suffering in defiance of the forces of depersonalization and the ethic of enlightened stoicism. (82)

One of the writers whose work Wisse discusses in some detail is the Canadian-born American Saul Bellow. Wisse gives the protagonists of his novels *Dangling Man*, first published in 1944, and *Herzog*, first published in 1964, as examples of this post-Holocaust *schlemiel*. These two novels have also been noted in connection to another literary figure: Oblomov, the eponymous character from Ivan Aleksandrovich Goncharov's 1859 novel. Irving Malin notes that *Dangling Man* shares its theme of power with *Oblomov* (16), and Julian Moynahan describes the protagonist of *Herzog*, the eponymous Moses E. Herzog, as "a kind of intellectual Oblomov on the run" (par. 6<sup>1</sup>). In spite of these brief references to Oblomov, no extensive analysis of the Oblomov-like traits exhibited in Bellow's fiction exists to date.

*Oblomov* is "generally accepted as one of the most important Russian novels" ("Goncharov" par. 3) as well as "the greatest monument to sloth in literature" (Freeborn 105). Its main character, Ilya Ilyich Oblomov, notoriously fails to leave his room for the first 180 pages of the novel, and then loses his lover Olga to his best friend Stolz because she refuses to grow old with a man who will forever sit about in his room and never act upon his thoughts. Having grown up on an estate in provincial Russia, Oblomov has always had servants, his footman Zakhar in particular, to take care of him: "Never in my life, thank God, have I had to pull a sock on my foot myself!" (Goncharov 97), he says. The fact that he has never had to do anything himself has led him to give up his job as a civil servant and spend his days at home, never going out with friends and unable even to finish reading a book. He is either displeased with or not interested in any type of action he contemplates undertaking, and therefore does

---

<sup>1</sup> Moynahan's article, like several other articles, does not have page numbers. In these cases, paragraph references are given instead.

nothing. After Olga marries Stolz, Oblomov decides to marry the widow Agafya Matveyevna Pshenitsyna, the embodiment of his easy life in the country who allows him to live in quiet passivity until his death. Oblomov, and, to a lesser degree, the characters around him, seem to regard the state of inertia he finds himself in as a given: he is a victim of “Oblomovitis”<sup>2</sup> (Goncharov 180), and will never be cured. Nikolay Alexandrovich Dobrolyubov, in his essay “What is Oblomovism,” points out that “the disgusting habit of getting his wishes satisfied not by his own efforts but by the efforts of others developed in him an apathetic inertness and plunged him into the wretched state of moral slavery” (346) from which he cannot escape.

In this paper, I will describe in what ways Malin’s and Moynahan’s characterisations of respectively Joseph and Herzog as Oblomovs are apt. By involving the *schlemiel* in my discussion, I will describe the attempts of the protagonists of *Dangling Man* and *Herzog* relate to the *schlemiel* on the one hand and Oblomov on the other as all three of them struggle to find a satisfactory perspective from which to view life in post-Holocaust America.

*Dangling Man*, Bellow’s first novel, is the journal of Joseph, a young unemployed man who is waiting for his service in the United States army to begin. Several mix-ups in the bureaucratic system, however, have led to the indefinite postponement of his enlistment, about which he writes that “This tedious business has not ended yet, I am sure. It will drag on for another two, three, four months” (8-9). This leaves Joseph with nothing to do except stay in his room, aimlessly wander the streets of Chicago and, most importantly for the reader, keep a journal in which he explains himself. He can do nothing besides wait for his enlistment, so that, when he is finally able to leave for the army, he exclaims: “Hurray for regular hours! And for the supervision of the spirit! Long live regimentation!” (126). After

---

<sup>2</sup> The Russian term is *Oblomovshchina*, which is sometimes translated as “Oblomovitis” (as in Magarshack’s translation of *Oblomov*), sometimes as “Oblomovism” (as in the title of “What is Oblomovism?”) and sometimes not at all (as in the body of Dobrolyubov’s essay). I will use the former term, in keeping with the novel I have used. Marian Schwartz, in a note to her 2010 translation of the novel, writes that “the English suffix ‘-ism’ is neutral and encompasses all of Oblomov’s characteristics, good and bad alike, whereas the Russian suffix ‘-shchina’ has exclusively negative implications” (qtd in Vanuska par. 4). Although Schwartz decides not to translate the term, the suffix -itis does reflect its negative nature.

months of idleness, he forsakes the emotions he, in a very *schlemiel*-like fashion, deemed so important at the start of the novel and submits to the obliteration of choice and responsibility that comes with army life, to become an Oblomov.

*Herzog* is the story of Moses Elkanah Herzog, a failed academic specialising in the field of Romanticism. Just emerging from his second divorce, Herzog is trying to find peace of mind by writing imaginary letters to people he knows or once knew, but also to people he does not know, or who have already died. Like Joseph, he is very much focused on emotions and uses writing to come to terms with himself and try to connect with other characters. However, his attempts are futile and the letters as much comic as they are profound. He spends much time in his second home, removed from his everyday life as an academic in the city, in a house near the remote village of Ludeyville in western Massachusetts. He recounts travelling to Chicago with the hopelessly idiotic plan to regain custody of his daughter June by murdering his ex-wife and her lover. Realising, however, that June is safe and happy in her home, he refrains from doing so. After he is arrested for possessing a loaded gun, he moves to his home in Ludeyville with his new lover Ramona where, for the first time, he does not feel compelled to write messages and finally comes to terms with himself. He decides that he no longer needs to write to explain himself. In his resignation from ordinary life and his submission to a state of inertia in which he is cared for by Ramona, he becomes like Oblomov.

Sarah Blacher Cohen compares a third character from Bellow's fiction, Eugene H. Henderson from the 1959 novel *Henderson the Rain King*, to Oblomov (Cohen 115, note 2). In a manuscript of the novel, Henderson reads *Oblomov* and compares himself to the hero of this novel (Cohen 115). Before concluding my paper, I will dedicate a short section on *Henderson the Rain King*. Contrary to Joseph and Herzog, Henderson starts out as a character

who resembles Oblomov to a great extent, but manages to escape his Oblomovitis and even becomes like a *schlemiel* by the end of the story, in spite of the fact that he is not Jewish.

In his essay “Human Migration and the Marginal Man,” Robert E. Park argues that “Every nation, upon examination, turns out to have been a more or less successful melting-pot” (883). In other words: a people does not exist in isolation, but is constructed through the influence of other peoples. He describes how the “social changes” (887) that come with migration affect individuals who have decided to break with their old environment and start a new life in a different place. These changes, he writes, “have their inception in events which ‘release’ the individuals out of which society is composed. Inevitably, however, this release is followed in the course of time by the reintegration of the individuals so released into a new social order” (887-888). This leaving one and then settling into another society, means that “The emancipated individual invariably becomes in a certain sense and to a certain degree a cosmopolitan. He learns to look upon the world in which he was born and bred with something of the detachment of a stranger” (888). According to Park, the individual attains an “intellectual bias” (888) because he is tied neither to his old country, nor to the new land.

In the following sections, I will discuss in what ways Joseph and Herzog showcase aspects of different cultures in their personalities. Both Joseph and Herzog were born in the New World and are generally accepted as members of society in the United States, as Joseph is called up for military service and Herzog holds a position as a university professor. They are also both very much Jewish characters, and can be described as *schlemiels*. However, they also display character traits of Oblomov, a literary hero from the Old World, more specifically from Saint-Petersburg, the very city Herzog’s family originates from. This is interesting, as Oblomov was a gentile whereas Joseph and Herzog are Jews. Therefore, their families do not directly share a background with Oblomov. After elaborating on *Dangling Man* and *Herzog*, I will provide a short section on *Henderson the Rain King*, in which I will show that the effects

of migration are not only apparent in Joseph and Herzog, characters whose family has a history of migration, but also in Henderson, whose upper-class American family has since long been settled in society.

In an essay about his identity as a Jew and a writer, Bellow states that

I thought of myself as a Midwesterner and not a Jew. I am often described as a Jewish writer; in much the same way one might be called a Samoan astronomer or an Eskimo cellist or a Zulu Gainsborough expert. There is some oddity about it. I am a Jew, and I have written some books. I have tried to fit my soul into the Jewish-writer category, but it does not feel comfortable accommodated there. (*Starting 5*)

Bellow expresses the view that a person's heritage need not define the way he or she sees himself, and his characters, in a similar manner, are able to transcend their heritage and find a place in society that might not be obvious to the outside world, but that does suit their respective characters.

## “Freedom Canceled”:

### Embracing Passivity in *Dangling Man*

Joseph is a prime example of marginality and the influence of characteristics of multiple peoples in an individual. A Jew from an immigrant family, he is lucky enough to find himself a fully accepted member of society in America. The only great problem regarding his acceptance occurs when he is drafted into the army. He cannot be enlisted immediately because he was born in Canada rather than the United States. The fact that Joseph is Jewish has nothing to do with this. Still, Joseph displays characteristics that originate in the home country of his ancestors as well. He exhibits behaviour that is typical for the post-Holocaust *schlemiel*, which is apparent in the great value he ascribes to human emotions. It also appears in his willingness to forgive other characters. He also displays some characteristics of another figure from European literature; *Oblomov*, which is curious as Oblomov was a gentile and not a Jew, and thus not directly part of Joseph’s heritage. It is true that Joseph and Oblomov are very different characters. Whereas Oblomov does not actively think about his situation, Joseph hardly does anything else. Moreover, while Oblomov cannot relate to other characters on any deep level, Joseph can. This is shown in the way he tries to present himself to others, and the way he feels when his attempts fail. It is also apparent in the way his character is mirrored in other characters, such as his neighbour Vanaker and his niece Etta. However, Joseph’s final decision to join the army as soon as possible shows that he has internalised some of Oblomov’s mindset: he accepts passivity and deference of will, and finally death.

Joseph shares many characteristics with the post-Holocaust *schlemiel* Wisse describes; one of which is his focus on emotions. In spite of the fact that the novel is set and was written during the years of the Holocaust, Wisse uses Joseph as one of the main examples of the defining characteristic of the post-Holocaust American *schlemiel*, namely, the conviction that emotions, although discarded by society as being “unreason[able]” (Wisse 82), are the key to

retaining one's humanity in face of the horrors that occur in the contemporary world (82).

Indeed, in the opening paragraph of the novel, Joseph characterises the general attitude toward emotions at the time in an ironic, almost cynical manner:

[T]his is an era of hardboiled-dom. Today, the code of the athlete, of the tough boy – an American inheritance, I believe, from the English gentleman – ... is stronger than ever. Do you have feelings? There are correct and incorrect ways of indicating them. Do you have an inner life? It is nobody's business but your own. Do you have emotions? Strangle them. To a degree, everyone obeys this code. (7)

Joseph is clearly not of the same opinion, as he continues: "If you have difficulties, grapple with them silently, goes one of their commands. To hell with that! I intend to talk about mine, and if I had as many mouths as Siva has arms and kept them going all the time, I still could not do myself justice" (7).

Another example of Joseph's *schlemiel*-like convictions is his belief of the essential goodness of both himself and those around him. He writes that, a year before starting his diary, he believed

There might be some justice in the view that man was born the slayer of his father and of his brother, full of instinctive bloody rages, licentious and unruly from his earliest days, an animal who had to be tamed. But, [I] protested, [I] could find in [my]self no such history of hate overcome. [I] could not. [I] believed in [my] own mildness, believed in it piously (27).

He is gravely upset when he finds behaviour of a fundamentally bad kind in his own friends when he attends a party thrown by one of them, and the fact that he recounts the events at the party in great detail, even if they happened a year earlier, shows that he still feels this way.

When Abt Morris, one of his friends, brings Minna, the hostess, under hypnosis and then humiliates and hurts her, Joseph is disgusted with him: "All at once, looking at [Minna's] face

and her closed lids, my impatience with Abt turned into anger. Yes, I thought, he *likes* this” (36). However, he still cannot or will not bring himself to condemn Abt, for “It isn’t his fault that I am disappointed in him” (39).

His reaction to indecent behaviour of others is like that of Gimpel, the main character from Isaac Bashevis Singer’s 1953 short story “Gimpel the Fool,” which was translated from the Yiddish into English by Bellow in the same year. The story is seen as a landmark in *schlemiel* literature: “The transplantation of this figure from Europe to America could be symbolized by the story “Gimpel the Fool” (Wisse 60). Although Gimpel is continually deceived and made fun of by his fellow villagers and even his wife, he refuses to lose his faith in them, and when he is tempted in a dream to take his revenge on them, his deceased wife appears to warn him not to, after which he proclaims that “the longer I lived the more I understood that there were really no lies. Whatever doesn’t really happen is dreamed at night. It happens to one if it doesn’t happen to another, tomorrow if not today, or a century hence if not next year. What difference can it make?” (246). Like Joseph, Gimpel is very much aware of the mistakes of others, but cannot or will not condemn people for making them. The importance Joseph ascribes to his own, but also to other’s emotions, as well as his reluctance to judge his friend indicates that he shares important traits with the post-Holocaust *schlemiel*.

Joseph also shares some traits with Oblomov, but these are mostly superficial ones. Oblomov does not leave his room for the entire first part of the novel, and similarly, Joseph indicates that he “rarely leave[s] [his] room” (*Dangling Man* 7). Oblomov has often started to read a book “and formed some idea of what it was about; another step and he would have mastered it, but instead he lay looking apathetically at the ceiling, with the book lying beside him unfinished and not properly understood. He grew indifferent much faster than he had grown interested” (Goncharov 67). Joseph says: “I find myself unable to read. Books do not hold me. After two or three pages or, as it sometimes happens, paragraphs, I simply cannot go

on” (*Dangling Man* 8). Like Joseph, Oblomov is disgusted with his acquaintances’ behaviour at parties (Goncharov 172). However, the reasons the two characters have for behaving and feeling the way they do differ greatly from one another.

Although they may be similar on the surface, the inner lives of Joseph and Oblomov are vastly different, and so are the ways in which they engage with other characters. Oblomov is satisfied with his situation and does not question it. In no internal dialogue does he address his state, and when others confront him with his passivity, he defends it, “thank[ing] God” (97) for the fact that he has never had to perform even the slightest action; he is convinced that “everybody strive[s] to achieve the very thing [he] dreams of” (180). He gives no arguments to support his position, but rather regards it as a given that needs no further thought or explanation.

Joseph, on the other hand, is a far more complex character, as he spends a significant amount of time contemplating his position. His reflective nature is most apparent in his conversations with his alter ego “*Tu As Raison Aussi*” (89) in which he explores his state of mind and the choice he faces of remaining inactive or joining the army. These conversations are a further testament to his Jewish heritage, as Wisse places *Tu As Raison Aussi* in the Jewish tradition, naming him “a Talmudic dybbuk” (81) and the Joseph’s conversations with him a form of “authentic Talmudic debate” (81). She sees *Tu As Raison Aussi* as an evil spirit whom Joseph has to combat with rhetoric. In the two conversations he has with *Tu As Raison Aussi*, a shift in his opinions can be noted. In their first discussion, Joseph feels that a man needs a belief “in conduct, in God, in art, in money” (93), and to be “willing to pursue his ideal until his eyes burst from his head and his feet from his shoes” (93). Later, however, Joseph states that “while we seem so intently and even desperately to be holding on to ourselves, we would far rather give ourselves away” (102), expressing a desire to be held unaccountable for his life and his actions. The second discussion concludes with Joseph

resigning his mental complexity, being unable to contemplate the possibility of “a separate destiny” (Bellow, *Dangling Man* 112). He thus arrives at the same state of mental passivity as Oblomov finds himself in, but only after long and complex debates with his alter ego.

Oblomov fails to interact with other characters on any deep level, whereas Joseph is very much influenced by the people around him. Even Olga, the woman who, of all characters, has the most influence over Oblomov and who succeeds in keeping him occupied to such a degree that Oblomov’s dressing gown, the symbol of his inertia, disappears in his closet, becoming of “no use to [him]” (331), ultimately fails in changing him: “I had thought that I’d bring you back to life, that you could still live for me – whereas you died long ago” (362), she tells him. Oblomov cannot answer her in the negative when she asks him “You would sink deeper and deeper into sleep every day, wouldn’t you?” (363). Olga can convince him to get out of bed, but cannot change his mindset, so that, when she does not pressure him, he sinks back into apathy. He is deeply sorry to lose his sweetheart, but when she asks him “What has ruined you? There is no name for that evil. ...” (365), he answers: “There is, ... Oblomovitis” (365), indicating that he sees his position as intrinsic, determined and unchangeable.

In contrast to Oblomov, as isolated as he may be, Joseph’s sense of himself is very much dependent upon his interaction with society. He is ashamed of his inability to act and does not want other people to know of his passivity: “I have fallen into the habit of changing restaurants regularly. I do not want to become too familiar a sight in any of them, friendly with sandwich men, waitresses, and cashiers, and compelled to invent lies for their benefit” (10-11). When confronted with his idleness by his wife’s cousin Sam Pearson, he feels offended and extremely uncomfortable. After a number of sentences, he assigns a question-and-answer format to his recording of the conversation: “‘What are you doing with yourself?’ ‘Nothing.’ He smiled, allowing me my joke. ‘Who was it that told me you were taking a

course in a trade school...?' A: 'That's just a rumour.' Q: 'What are you doing, then?' A: 'Just living off Iva.'" (72). This format shows Joseph's extreme discomfort with the situation he finds himself in; although there is little or no evidence to strengthen his claim, he characterises Sam's questions as "exercis[ing] a social or family tyranny over me" (72). He also expresses his fear that Sam will tell his wife's family of his poor existence. The way in which Joseph describes this scene makes him seem slightly paranoid about other people's opinions of him. Instead of defending his idleness, he is very self-conscious about it and tries to keep people from forming a bad opinion of him.

Joseph's relations with other characters are meaningful to such an extent that critics have argued that the relations he has with some characters "suggest the irrational configurations not only between disparate individuals but between opposing aspects of the self" (Pifer 30-31). Ellen Pifer describes Vanaker as Dostoevskian "*Doppelgänger*" (Pifer 30). The reading of Vanaker as *Doppelgänger* originates from Porter, who writes:

The parallels in the lives of the two men are many, from the insignificant to the profound. ... It is in Vanaker's theft of Joseph's socks, however, that the symbolic significance of the men's relationship is made clear. ... Joseph has not consciously 'put himself in Vanaker's shoes,' but Vanaker has done him the favor of putting himself in Joseph's socks, the next best thing. (19)

Joseph's psyche is so interrelated with that of others that it can even be read in that of others. Porter continues: "Though Joseph doesn't articulate these matters for himself, it is clear that Vanaker is his alter ego, a Conradian secret sharer. A Death-in-Life figure, he stands daily before Joseph as an object lesson in the price of continued isolation" (20).

Etta provides another example of a double and in this case, Joseph is more aware of the fact that he and Etta are perhaps closer in spirit than they would care to admit. Pifer writes: "Joseph is explicitly aware of their resemblance; the mirror in which 'vain' Etta

admires herself reflects his own likeness. ... To Joseph, this ‘similarity of faces must mean a similarity of nature and presumably of fate.’ He ‘assume[s] that [their] physical resemblance was the basis for an affinity of another kind’” (33-34). Abt, too, reveals something of Joseph’s character: “Joseph clearly shares with his ‘oldest friend’ some telling psychological traits” (Pifer 29).

Thus, unlike Oblomov, who fails to be affected by the interaction he has with others, Joseph is very much influenced by the people around him in many ways. Indeed, Joseph argues that a man’s personality cannot be seen as separate from society, when he says:

You can divorce your wife or abandon your child, but what can you do with yourself?” “You can’t banish the world by decree if it’s in you. Is that it, Joseph?” “How can you? You have gone to its schools and seen its movies, listened to its radios, read its magazines. What if you declare you are alienated, you *say* you reject the Hollywood dream, the soap opera, the cheap thriller? The very denial implicates you. (91)

In spite of the fact that they are fundamentally different, by the end of the novel, Joseph has internalised Oblomov’s mindset to some degree. In the diary entry for 9 April which concludes the novel, Joseph writes: “I am no longer to be held accountable for myself; I am grateful for that. I am in other hands, relieved of self-determination, freedom canceled. Hurray for regular hours! And for the supervision of the spirit! Long live regimentation!” (126). Pifer writes: “[Joseph] greets the prospect of ‘regular hours’ like a man eager to exchange the dilemmas of ‘the spirit’ for a form of ‘supervision’ that is really repression” (39). It is at this point that the most significant characteristics of Oblomov can be noted in Joseph. Like Oblomov, who only acts when he is told to do so, Joseph will submit to the orders of others. Furthermore, whereas Oblomov, due to his inertia, is described as being dead (Goncharov 362), the ending of *Dangling Man* also hints at death. Earlier in the novel, Joseph

has declared that “Death is the abolition of choice. The more choice is limited, the closer we are to death” (98), and as life in the army is perhaps as close to the obliteration of choice as one can get, this utterance adds to the negative nature of Joseph’s final words. Porter describes many other instances of death appearing in the novel (20-24), including an interpretation of Joseph’s night out with Iva as a journey into the underworld of the Ancient Greeks where “the Styx is a lake and the ferry is a train, but it is clear from the imagery that the crowds and their ultimate destination are the same” (21). Joseph’s increasingly positive stance towards passivity is also apparent in the conversations he has with *Tu As Raison Aussi*, in which he declares that people in general “are afraid to govern [themselves]. ... We soon want to give up our freedom” (111). Earlier, he had expressed the idea that “while we seem so intently and even desperately to be holding on to ourselves, we would far rather give ourselves away” (102). Oblomov, due to his passivity, is less than human in a way, because he is unable to fully live. Clayton writes of Joseph that he makes “the error of becoming more-than-human and so becoming less-than-human” (81). Although he makes a long mental detour, Joseph finishes with a passivity that is very similar to that of Oblomov.

In conclusion, Joseph displays characteristics from both the Jewish *schlemiel* and the Russian Oblomov. This is in keeping with Park’s proposal that people living on the margins of society, due to immigration or the outside position their people holds in a country, adopt traits from the different ethnicities they find themselves confronted with. The *schlemiel*-like characteristics in Joseph are apparent in his opinion regarding emotions, as well as his willingness to see the good in people and forgive them their mistakes. His passivity shows that he is also like Oblomov. However, many differences can be noted between Joseph’s and Oblomov’s personalities: whereas Oblomov does not contemplate his position, Joseph very actively does do so. Furthermore, Oblomov cannot relate to other characters in any significant sense, while Joseph not only cares deeply about other people’s opinions of him, but also finds

himself mirrored in other characters. In spite of these differences in personality, Joseph's decision to join the army shows that he finally adopts the passivity Oblomov also subjects himself to, thereby becoming a twentieth-century, American victim of Oblomovitis.

## “Supervised Rest”:

### Retreating from Society in *Herzog*

Like Joseph, Herzog uses physical as well as mental writing to record and organise his thoughts. In his case, the writing takes the form not of a diary but of “letters to everyone under the sun” (*Herzog* 7), none of which are sent or even meant to be sent. Also like Joseph, Herzog finds himself in a position that unsettles both his idea of himself and, consequently, his position in society. In Herzog’s case, this crisis is initiated by the betrayal of and separation from “his disorderly, malevolent second wife” (Cohen 144) after he had previously “forsaken his orderly, benevolent wife” (144). In Herzog, as in Joseph, the influence of marginality is very much present and can again be read in Herzog’s likeness to the *schlemiel* on the one hand, and Oblomov on the other. Herzog is a quintessential *schlemiel*. This is shown, as it is in Joseph, in his great concern for emotions as well as his readiness to forgive. The mental struggle which Herzog faces and which makes up most of the novel shows that his mindset differs greatly from Oblomov’s. Unlike Joseph, however, he does not display the outward features that can be used to liken Joseph to Oblomov: unlike these two characters, Herzog is a very active man. However, his final retreat to his house in the Berkshires with his new lover Ramona is very similar to Oblomov’s end in the outskirts of Saint Petersburg with his industrious former landlady as caring wife.

Herzog is a prime example of a post-Holocaust *schlemiel*. Like Joseph, Herzog focuses very much on human emotions. His lawyer Sandor Himmelstein tells him: “Well, when you suffer, you really suffer. You’re a real, genuine old Jewish type that digs the emotions” (90). Earlier on, Herzog himself calls attention to feeling: “Let each man now examine his heart” (57), he declares, because he “perceives that true salvation comes only through ‘a great change of heart’” (Pifer 121). Pifer writes that emotion is what he finds lacking in modern society: “He has yearned for that ‘wider range of human feelings’ he

experienced as a child – when, despite material poverty, existence was richly permeated by love in many forms: love for family, for one’s fellow human beings, for a physical and social environment to which one belonged, and (in contrast to his recent self-contempt) for oneself.”

(126). Indeed, it is love that can redeem existence. Herzog muses that

a man doesn’t need happiness for *himself*. No, he can put up with any amount of torment ... And this is the unwritten history of man, his unseen, negative accomplishment, his power to do without gratification for himself provided there is something great, something into which his being, and all beings can go. He does not need meaning as long as such intensity has scope. Because then it is self-evident; it *is* meaning. (296-297)

Herzog, like the post-Holocaust *schlemiel*, is very forgiving towards others. Like Gimpel, he has the opportunity to avenge himself when he takes into his head the plan of killing his ex-wife Madeleine and her new lover as well as his former friend Valentine Gersbach, thereby regaining custody over June, the daughter he had with Madeleine. However, also like Gimpel, he has a vision that prevents him from carrying out his plans: while Gimpel sees the apparition of his wife’s ghost, Herzog sees Gersbach tenderly bathing his daughter. The fondness that is apparent in this scene brings Herzog to refraining from his absurd plan.

Herzog feels a need to accept and decide to love the entirety of humankind. Richard Pearce writes: “Herzog, despite his personal experiences of failure and despair, and despite his awareness that history is driven irrationally by the violent clashing of egos, continually affirms his faith in rational humanism” (80). Initially, Herzog is unsure about his feelings towards humankind, saying that “Without a great change of heart, I would not trust myself in a position of authority. Do I love mankind? Enough to spare it, if I should be in a position to blow it to hell?” (57). However, he does indicate that he values human beings, as this

utterance shows that, although Herzog may not be trusted with the fate of humankind, he deems it high enough to think that it deserves someone who can, and he continues: “Now let us all dress in our shrouds and walk on Washington and Moscow. Let us lie down, men, women and children, and cry, ‘Let life continue – we may not deserve it, but let it continue’” (57).

Wisse dedicates an entire chapter to Herzog in her *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*. She identifies “[t]he ironic smugness” (97) of Herzog as a feature of the *schlemiel* that is apparent in Herzog. This “smugness” (97) emerges already in the first sentence of *Herzog*: “If I’m out of my mind, it’s alright with me” (7). Wisse also notes Herzog’s “final self-acceptance” (97) in relation to the *schlemiel*. She writes about this: “In every conceivable empirical test the schlemiel may fail, but he never fails in his final self-acceptance; otherwise the whole premise of the loser-as-victor would be destroyed” (97). She sums up Herzog as “the most Jewish of Bellow’s heroes, his most typical schlemiel, and most entertaining humorist” (93).

Herzog, unlike Oblomov, is mentally very active. This is shown very clearly in his letter-writing. Indeed, Herzog feels “overcome by the need to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to clarify, to make amends” (8), and the novel that tells his story is “a complete reassessment of values” (Scheer-Schätzler 101). Whereas Oblomov can hardly be said to possess anything like consciousness, in *Herzog*, “plot in the broadest sense involves the un complication of ... consciousness” (Fuchs 122). Herzog is very keen on unravelling his “complex mind” (Bellow, *Herzog* 70); he sees a psychiatrist, Dr Edvig, and takes his sessions with him very seriously; Dr Edvig is also the addressee of a number of Herzog’s letters, one of which is composed even while Herzog has a consult with him.

Herzog feels that to understand oneself, one must engage with society. Cohen writes that, “in order to make sense of his own complexities” (152), he feels that he has to engage “through his ‘helter-skelter’ correspondence ‘in all directions’ ... to fathom the complexities

of history and society” (152). In his writing, he makes clear that he realises the worth of other people:

By means of spiritual dialogue, the I-It relationship becomes an I-Thou relationship. God comes and goes in man’s soul. And men come and go in each other’s souls. You have dialogue with a man. You have intercourse with his wife. You hold the poor fellow’s hand. You look into his eyes. You give him consolation. All the while, you rearrange his life. You even make out his budget for years to come. You deprive him of his daughter. And somehow it is all mysteriously translated into religious depth.

(70)

Herzog is aware that people can have either a positive influence on others or a negative one, but either way, their influence is important and must be acknowledged. Robert R. Dutton even goes as far as saying that “Almost every character that Bellow introduces into his work becomes for Herzog a source of what is often a very painful illumination. His is a case of the instructor instructed ... He comes to regard life as his personal instruction in reality, even bitterly giving the name of ‘reality instructors’ to his many teachers” (120). In applying the term “reality instructors” (132) to people around him, Herzog acknowledges the influence they have on him.

Like Joseph, Herzog is also described as having doubles who reflect aspects of his personality, showing that he is strongly rooted in society. Pifer points out that Herzog sees in Gersbach “a second Herzog” (qtd in Pifer 118) and writes: “Gersbach’s adultery with Madeleine is also an odd attempt at intimacy with her husband, an expression of his admiration for, as well as rivalry with, the man he has cuckolded” (118). According to Pifer, Herzog also sees “an appropriate double” (118) in George Hoberly, Ramona’s ex-boyfriend: in the triangle Madeleine-Gersbach-Herzog, he occupies the same position, namely that of outcast former lover, as Hoberly does in the triangle Ramona-Henderson-Hoberly. Herzog’s

engagement with his mind and with other characters shows that he is a character of far greater complexity than the simple Oblomov.

Herzog finally retreats to a quiet place, away from society, a move which is reminiscent of Oblomov's decision to settle in a house in the outskirts of Saint-Petersburg. Here, he becomes enamoured with the elbows of his Agafya Matveyevna, his landlady, which symbolise her housewifely industriousness and bring to his face "a smile of deep devotion" (Goncharov 376) because they remind him of Oblomovka, his estate where he grew up. Later, he marries Agafya, and she bears him a son. His life at this point, as Stolz remarks, "is Oblomovka all over again" (383). Herzog ends his narrative in a position that resembles Oblomov's. At this point, he is staying in a house near an isolated village in the Berkshires, with a woman to care for him: his most recent lover, Ramona. The novel opens with a listing of Herzog's many recent travels: "He had carried this valise from New York to Martha's Vineyard, but returned from the Vineyard immediately; two days later he flew to Chicago, and from Chicago he went to a village in western Massachusetts" (7). This travelling stands in sharp contrast with Oblomov's travels, which are planned but never executed. At the time of writing, however, Herzog like Oblomov, is idle.

Herzog reaches a state of mental tranquillity by the end of the novel that resembles Oblomov's state of mind. Pifer writes: "That he is physically inert during much of the novel – collapsed on the sofa of his New York apartment and supine on mattress, couch or hammock in his Ludeyville retreat – only underscores the turmoil of Herzog's hyperactive mind" (112). However, by the end of the novel, at which point he still occupies the same physical place, his psychological state has become quite different from what it was at the beginning of the novel. At the start, Herzog "wrote endlessly, frantically" (Bellow, *Herzog* 7), whereas at the end of the novel "he had no messages for anyone. Nothing. Not a single word" (348). Where he had already retreated from his life in Chicago by moving north to Ludeyville, thereby mirroring

Oblomov's actions, his mental state now also resembles that of the Russian nobleman. He no longer muses on his situation, but accepts it as given.

Herzog is left to the care of women who will make his life comfortable for him, at least for the time being. Mrs Tuttle and Ramona are to Herzog what Agafya Matveyevna is to Oblomov. Mrs Tuttle is a friendly Ludeyville woman who cleans Herzog's house so he can live in it comfortably. Ramona also comes over to support him, and has to care for him to such a degree that she needs to bring a corkscrew to open the bottle of wine for Herzog. Both his physical and his mental state have at this point become ones of inertia.

Whereas Oblomovitis is described as a negative trait by its inventor, in *Herzog*, the condition can be interpreted in a positive way. Scheer-Schäzler writes that Herzog is one of Bellow's characters who "[suffer] from the queer disease of Humanitis – 'when the human condition is suddenly too much for you'" (113), but when he decides to stop composing letters, at least for the time being, he shows that he has changed this disease for the one Stolz calls "Oblomovitis" (180). In Goncharov's novel, Oblomovitis is considered a purely negative state of mind, as to Oblomov it means the loss of love, the near loss of his property on several occasions, and ultimately the loss of his life after he suffers a series of heart attacks. However, in *Herzog*, the professor benefits from it, as it finally gives him peace of mind after his mad writing, and the love of Ramona after the viciousness of Madeleine, who after betraying him even tries to discredit him when they meet at the police station after Herzog's arrest for carrying a loaded gun without a licence (307). Herzog's Oblomovitis means his sanity:

He went around and entered from the front, wondering what further evidence of his sanity, besides refusing to go to the hospital, he could show. Perhaps he'd stop writing letters. Yes, that was what was coming, in fact. The knowledge that he was done with these letters. Whatever had come over him during these last months, the spell, really seemed to be passing, really going. (348)

To conclude, Herzog is a marginal man, and displays characteristics of both the *schlemiel*, but also of Oblomov. He starts the novel as a typical post-Holocaust *schlemiel*. He is a far more complex character than Oblomov, as his engagement with other characters, as well as attempt at grasping the world around him through his mental letter-writing show. However, when he retreats to the remoteness of Ludeyville and the care of Ramona, he does submit to the state Oblomov finds himself in; one of passivity and absence of mental engagement, with that difference that, whereas Oblomov's Oblomovitis is deplored by other characters, the condition benefits Herzog.

**“To Burst the Spirit’s Sleep”:**

**A Small Note on *Henderson the Rain King***

Bellow references Oblomov in the manuscript of one of his novels: *Henderson the Rain King* (Cohen 115, note 2), one of very few of his works to feature a gentile protagonist: the middle-aged WASP<sup>3</sup> Eugene H. Henderson. Henderson is a member of the American elite, and even resembles a celebrity when Lily, a girl at a party, who will later become his second wife, exclaims: “Why, everybody knows you are Eugene Henderson” (9). It is therefore unlikely that he should show the influence of a number of different cultures that marks marginal men like Joseph and Herzog. However, even in him, characteristics of Oblomov and, later on in the novel, the *schlemiel*, can be noted. Cohen describes Henderson as “an Oblomov who gets up from bed and comes crashing through the world to try ‘to burst [his] spirit’s sleep’” (115). Although the allusion to *Oblomov* does not appear in the final version of the *Henderson the Rain King*, the comparison is a valid one; the ways in which the two men have been raised from childhood are very much alike, and Henderson’s life does resemble that of Oblomov at the beginning of the novel. However, the voice in Henderson’s head that keeps repeating “*I want, I want*” (12) facilitates a break away from Oblomovitis. At the end of the novel, he is no longer an Oblomov: his newfound love for humanity shows that he has internalised some features of the *schlemiel*.

Due mainly to his upbringing, Henderson appears at the beginning of the novel as a character who is very much like Oblomov. Although Henderson’s story is set almost 100 years after Oblomov’s, and the former was brought up near the town of Albi in the south of the United States rather than on an estate in the south of Russia, as the latter was, both characters were pampered as boys. Upon the death of his parents, when he inherits their estate, working becomes unnecessary for Henderson, as it is for Oblomov. As a result, he

---

<sup>3</sup> WASP is an acronym for White Anglo-Saxon Protestant that was coined in 1957 and is used to describe members of the privileged upper class in the United States (“E. Digby Baltzell”).

never really does anything apart from playing the violin in a half-hearted attempt at understanding his deceased father and breeding pigs “which maybe illustrates what [he] thought of life in general” (Bellow, *Henderson* 20). He says of himself: “I am rich. From my old man I inherited three million dollars after taxes, but I thought myself a bum and had my reasons, the main reason being that I behaved like a bum” (3). Like Oblomov, he is not encouraged to perform any kind of intellectual activity. One day, he happens upon an inspiring statement in one of his father’s books, but he forgets where he found it, and in his search for the quotation he finds no wisdom, as “all that turned up was money, for my father had used currency for bookmarks” (3). Henderson recounts that he “spent the afternoon on a ladder shaking out books and the money spun to the floor. But [he] never found that statement about forgiveness” (4). In an early manuscript of *Henderson the Rain King*, Henderson, like Oblomov, is unable to concentrate on his books. Ironically, the novel he tries, but fails to finish reading, is *Oblomov*. Daniel Fuchs writes: “Henderson has the Oblomovist’s response to *Oblomov*: ‘I never finished reading it’” (118). Henderson acknowledges that he and Oblomov are alike, saying of Oblomov that he, like Henderson himself, “didn’t know what to do with himself either” (qtd in Fuchs 118). Henderson’s life is marked by the passivity that also makes up Oblomov’s: “In Henderson we have divorce without murder ... money without need, unemployment without guilt” (Fuchs 100).

Henderson is able to break away from his Oblomovitis. Whereas Oblomov never even manages to finish reading *A Journey to Africa*, “the page [he] stopped at [having] grown mouldy” (Goncharov 169), Henderson not only visits the continent, but also manages to explore both the land and his own mind in a very profound way. In spite of his easy life, unlike Oblomov, Henderson feels “a disturbance in [his] heart, a voice that spoke there and said, *I want, I want, I want!* It happened every afternoon, and when I tried to suppress it it got even stronger. It only said one thing, *I want, I want!*” (24). Neither his two marriages, nor his

violin playing can satisfy it, so that he finally says that he “had to go to Africa” (32). The main result of his trip is not a physical exploration of the land, but the teachings he receives from the people he meets there and his mental development as a result thereof. Dutton writes: “Africa is his destination; but ‘all travel is mental,’ says Henderson – and his journey is no different. This Africa of the mind is the *Pequod* or Lilliput, where values can be reconsidered and reality subjected to new perspectives (102). From his conversations with the people he meets, he gains a deeper insight into himself and the world. Henderson manages to become active in both his body and mind, although he recognises that “If [he] hadn’t come to Africa [his] only other choice would have been to stay in bed” (188).

Although Henderson is a gentile, and quite emphatically so, he returns from Africa having adopted some features of the *schlemiel*. Henderson is far from being Jewish; in fact, his pig breeding business was conceived to spite a Jewish fellow soldier (20). By the time the novel finishes, however, Henderson has come to resemble the *schlemiel* as he, like Joseph and Herzog, has come to the realisation that emotions are essential to human existence and must be valued as such. The wisdom of Queen Willatale of the Arnawi tribe and King Dahfu of the Wariri tribe, characters Henderson meets during his travels and who leave a deep impression on him, are accountable for this. Pifer writes: “Even when he marries [his second wife] Lily, ... Henderson cannot bring himself to say that he loves her; only after his journey to Africa can he acknowledge and, with increasing conviction, articulate his love” (97). It is, indeed, in his relation to Lily that the change in his disposition is most obvious, especially in the letter he writes to her at the end of his voyage. In the last pages of the letter to Lily he broadens his love to include all of humanity: “I had a voice that said, I want! *I* want? *I*? It should have told me *she* wants, *he* wants, *they* want. And moreover, it’s love that makes reality reality. The opposite makes the opposite” (286). Furthermore, he defies the expectations of society and,

middle-aged man though he is, plans to enrol in a medical school. Others may call him a fool, like Gimpel, but to Henderson, that is wholly irrelevant.

In short, Henderson, although being a member of the American elite and far from being a marginal man, does display characteristics that can be traced back to literary characters from different peoples. Henderson is very much like the Russian Oblomov; like Oblomov, he has never been required to work, which as a result, he does not. However, thanks to the voice in his head that keeps repeating “*I want, I want*” (Bellow, *Henderson* 12), he manages to escape his Oblomovitis. The love for humanity he has found by the end of the novel shows that he has internalised some of the character traits of the *schlemiel*, in spite of his gentile background.

## Conclusion

The concept of marginality, which Park proposes, is very much present in the works of Bellow that I have discussed in this paper, namely *Dangling Man*, *Herzog* and *Henderson the Rain King*. The protagonists of all of these three novels, although they are all citizens of the United States of America, all display characteristics of the Yiddish *schlemiel* and the Russian Oblomov, showing that they have adopted features of other peoples in their personalities.

Both Joseph and Herzog can be identified as typical *schlemiels*. This becomes clear in the importance the two characters ascribe to their emotions as well as those of others, and their attempts at voicing theirs through their writing. Furthermore, both characters are very forgiving to others, even if these others do not immediately seem to deserve their leniency. In addition, Wisse describes how the “smugness” (97) and “self-acceptance” (97) that are typical of the *schlemiel* are present in Herzog.

In both mental and social terms, Joseph and Herzog are much more fully developed than Oblomov is. Whereas Oblomov does not think about his situation, Joseph and Herzog do. Their writings, in particular, are testimonies to their active mental lives. Both try very hard to make sense of their existence through contemplating it to a great extent. This shows that they are very different from Oblomov. Joseph and Herzog are both very deeply connected to society, unlike Oblomov, who seems incapable of interaction with others on any deep level. Whereas Oblomov can only act when he is commanded to do so, he remains inactive when his friends are gone. This shows that, although they may make him temporarily active, they cannot change his mindset so that Oblomov can act of his own accord. Contrary to this, Joseph and Herzog are both very much influenced by society and actively contemplate their relation to others. Furthermore, their characters are mirrored in other people, showing that they do not exist as isolated people, but rather as part of society.

However, in spite of these differences, Joseph and Herzog do internalise some of Oblomov's disposition by the end of the respective novels. Joseph's decision to resign his individuality shows that he has taken up some of Oblomov's mindset. Herzog's retreat in the Ludeyville countryside with Ramona is reminiscent of the final years of Oblomov's life. In the cases of both Joseph and Oblomov, Oblomovitis is a very negative trait: Joseph's decision hints at death, and Stolz scolds Oblomov for his passivity. However, interestingly, in Herzog's case Oblomovitis means a state of tranquillity that is very welcome and positive, meaning that by internalising it, Herzog has transformed this particular Russian disposition into something constructive.

A third character I have discussed is Henderson. Although he is an unlikely marginal man, he does show influences of both Oblomov and the *schlemiel*, as marginal men Joseph and Herzog do. This shows that, even if he is no direct product of it, immigration and marginality have also influenced him.

Being Jewish Americans, Joseph and Herzog need to find a way of positioning themselves between two cultures. This explains their *schlemiel*-like behaviour. It is curious that they also show a likeness to Oblomov, as he was a gentile nobleman who would have belonged to a very different class with very different customs from those of Joseph's and Herzog's Russian ancestors. Their adopting traits of Oblomov thus seems slightly unnatural. A reading of Henderson as marginal man also fits this description, although a comparison of him with the *schlemiel* and Oblomov shows that such a reading is apt.

Bellow has stated that he feels heritage a too restrictive means for determining a person's position in society (*Starting 5*); people should find their own personality and not be defined by specific aspects of their background. The inclusion of some of Oblomov's traits in Joseph and Henderson, as well as the marginality of Henderson may be explained by this opinion, and it makes Joseph and Herzog, as well as Henderson, all the more interesting

characters. In the words of Park: “They become, in the process, not only emancipated, but enlightened” (888).

### Works Cited

- “Baltzell, E. Digby.” *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online*.  
Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013. Web. 30 June 2013.
- Bellow, Saul. *Dangling Man*. 1944. New York: Signet Books, 1965. Print.
- . *Henderson the Rain King*. 1959. London: Penguin Group, 2007. Print.
- . *Herzog*. 1964. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977. Print.
- . “Starting out in Chicago.” *Who We Are: On Being (and Not Being) a Jewish American Writer*. Ed. Derek Rubin. New York: Schocken Books, 2005. 12-18. Print.
- Clayton, John Jacob. *Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968. Print.
- Cohen, Sarah Blacher. *Saul Bellow’s Enigmatic Laughter*. Chicago: University of Illinois
- Dobrolyubov, Nikolai. “What Is Oblomovism?” *Amherst College*. 343-356. Web. 29 June 2012.
- Dutton, Robert R. *Saul Bellow*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1971. Print.
- Freeborn, Richard. “The Classic Russian Novel” *The Routledge Companion to Russian Literature*. Ed. Neil Cornwell. London: Routledge. 2001. PDF file.
- Fuchs, Daniel. *Saul Bellow: Vision and Revision*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1984. Print.
- Goncharov, Ivan. *Oblomov*. Trans. David Magarshack. London: Penguin Books, 2005. Print.
- “Goncharov, Ivan Aleksandrovich.” *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013. Web. 4 May 2013.
- Malin, Irving. *Saul Bellow’s Fiction*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969. Print.
- Moynahan, Julian. “The Way up from Rock Bottom.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times. 15 Dec. 1999. Web. 28 Mar. 2013.

- Park, Robert E. "Human Migration and the Marginal Man." *American Journal of Sociology*. 33.6 (1928): 881-893. *JSTOR*. Web. 24 June. 2013.
- Pearce, Richard. "The Ambiguous Assault of Henderson and Herzog." *Saul Bellow: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Earl Rovit. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975. Print.
- Pifer, Ellen. *Saul Bellow against the Grain*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990. Print.
- Porter, M. Gilbert. *Whence the Power? The Artistry and Humanity of Saul Bellow*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974. Print.
- Scheer-Schäzler, Brigitte. *Saul Bellow*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1972. Print.
- Singer, Isaac Bashevis. "Gimpel the Fool." *Great Jewish Short Stories*. Ed. Saul Bellow. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1963. Print.
- Vanuska, Karen. Rev. of *Oblomov*, by Ivan Goncharov. Trans. Marian Schwartz. *The Quarterly Conversation*. Web. 28 Mar. 2013.
- Wisse, Ruth R. *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971. Print.