Saul Bellow published his first novel, *Dangling Man*, in 1944, when books were being published with a notice to readers assuring them that their book had been produced in full compliance with government regulations for the conservation of paper, metal, and other essential material. The message was usually reinforced with a picture of an eagle swooping down with a book in its claws, like a bomb. The caption read: “Books are weapons in the war of ideas.”\(^1\)

Under wartime circumstances, the American intellectuals were having a hard time adjusting their ideological positions to rapidly changing social environment during the War, after the disillusions of the 1930s. They were also being censured for being irresponsibles, and for their failure of nerve. They were alienated from the majority, and even persecuted by some, but at the same time, they were taking advantage of their position as outsiders, and even actively joining in the analysis of their condition. In fact, the debate over the failure of nerve was initiated by a series of articles in *Partisan Review*, and the altercation that continued for a year took place mainly in its pages.

The protagonist of *Dangling Man*, Joseph, is a former communist whose experiences are similar to Bellow’s in a general way.\(^2\) After dangling for about one year, due to delays caused by the “bureaucratic comedy trimmed in red tape” (10),\(^3\) Joseph decides to give himself up and requests to be taken “at the earliest possible moment into the armed services” (184). The novel begins with a journal entry for December 15, 1942, and concludes on the last day of his civilian life, April 9 of the following year. The last entry ends with his impassioned cry: “Long live regimentation!” (191).

Though Joseph’s decision may have been the “right thing” at the time, as Edmund Wilson described it as a matter of fact,\(^4\) the moral
implication of the ending is ambiguous, or even puzzling and troubling for the reader familiar with Bellow’s subsequent stand defending the freedom of the “soul” and emphasizing the importance of the “truth” as a basic moral value. It seems to evince a certain intolerance with intellectuals and their liberalism, in favor of down-to-earth soldiers and their basic needs.

This is an attempt to review Saul Bellow’s first novel, *Dangling Man*, in its literary and historical context, and to distinguish the more general aspects of Bellow’s fiction from the more uniquely personal achievement. The final objective is to arrive at a clearer understanding of Bellow’s design in choosing the format and content of *Dangling Man*, and to re-evaluate some of the forces that informed the novel. The attempt to reconstruct the contexts of *Dangling Man* and the literary paradigm available to Bellow can not even hope to be exhaustive or well-balanced, and so this is a limited attempt at such a perspective.

To put it in another way, and to define my approach more narrowly, this is an attempt to describe the mode of “dangling” in this novel, and to shed some light on “the backdrop against which [Joseph] can be seen swinging,” as Joseph puts it himself (12). The perspective we now have looking back on the novel from the present point in time necessitates such a re-examination. Saul Bellow has committed himself more openly to comedy or parody of the intellectuals in the contemporary world and supports Allan Bloom’s project for countering modern relativism with classics and basic values, in his foreword to Bloom’s book. In this essay, Bellow retells the story of his growth out of his Chicago environment and emphasizes the dominance of his free will. All of this information should be incorporated into a fuller understanding of Bellow’s work, and justifies a reading of his earlier work with the help of hindsight based on information we now have about the author and his subsequent writings.

American society and the wider world has also undergone changes since the publication of the novel. The postulated closing of the American mind may be compared with the failure of nerve during the World War II period. Together, they provide a clue to a deeper understanding of the author and his fiction as an interesting example of the American literary mind in historical context.

The interpretation of *Dangling Man* as a whole depends very much on the interpretation of its ending. Whether Joseph’s decision to join
the Army signifies an escape from freedom, or a desperate commitment
to “sound creation” by any means, is crucial to any reading of the novel.
There have been many interpretations of the novel’s ending, but the
results are inconclusive, mainly because the text of the novel does not
support either interpretation consistently.

A review of the contexts of the novel suggests that a more balanced
view can reconcile these polarized interpretations, and that this novel
should be read as a description of the process of Joseph’s failure to
tolerate intellectual uncertainties. What at first seems to be a rationali-
zation of his final choice is not a negation of what goes on before the
conclusion. The comedy is more in the treatment of Joseph’s reasoning
and explanations, than in the complexities of red tape. Bellow as an
author seems to be temperamentally unwilling or not interested in
following up on the questions raised in the novel, at the realistic level.
As Augie generalizes, it is “senselessness” that Bellow’s protagonists
tend to submit to “after much making with sense.”

DANGLING

The central image of Dangling Man is that of Joseph waiting, dan-
gling and swinging. It is evident that he is “deteriorating” and “grow-
ing more dispirited.” Furthermore, the fact that he is acutely conscious
of his own condition is explicitly stated in the first entry of his journal.
What is not clear is what were the viable choices he had, between which
poles of alternatives he was swinging. From a related but different
point of view, it is also noticeable that the details of his actual condition
in the outside world are left rather vague, in contrast to the more sym-
bolical and metaphysical aspects of his dangling.

Joseph is removed from the everyday life of the people, but he is
also representative of the times in a more symbolic way. He is “up
in the air” (38), but he does take a “sad or negative satisfaction in
wearing what he calls ‘the uniform of the times’” (28).

Dangling Man can be read both as a realistic journal and as a tour
de force of comic ratiocination in the tradition of the Underground
Man, presented in the popular journalistic form both in fiction and
non-fiction. This mixture of realistic and comic modes in the text
may explain the cause of some difficulties in contemporary reviews and
interpretations of the novel.

Many of the reviews focused on the historical or realistic aspect of
the novel. Edmund Wilson praised it as an excellent document and an "honest piece of testimony of a whole generation,"[7] Delmore Schwartz as "experience siezed and recorded."[8] William Phillips has caught the paradoxical quality of this novel when he defended the novel by saying that Joseph was dangling with "both feet on the ground."[9] Those evaluative judgments of authenticity can not be taken at their face value, especially when they come from a time when the feelings of the nation were more united, for better or worse, than at other periods in history.[10]

The actual grounds of Joseph’s dangling are not as evident as it seems at first reading. His legal position in terms of the draft is not clear: he is an alien, and he could have claimed exemption by withdrawing his first papers, if he had filed them at all. The nature of his involvement in Marxist organizations is sketchy, his intentions about naturalization are not clear, and the citizenship of his wife and relatives are not documented. This vagueness in the background of an otherwise realistic novel of psychology is puzzling, because these details must have played an important and even decisive role in Joseph’s attitudes toward the Selective Service. Concerning the War itself, Joseph is surprisingly nonchalant: "I support the war, though perhaps it is gratu-itous to say so" (84).

What inhibited Joseph from enjoying his period of waiting as "a true vacation of the spirit," as Podhoretz seems to have done,[11] and what was seen as the realistic element of this novel by contemporary readers relate to a more abstract aspect of the novel. Joseph was actual to Bellow’s contemporary readers in the sense that he represented and typified the Jewish intellectuals in his time and place. Even his Jewishness and alienation are, to some extent, representative rather than uniquely his, and the novel was welcomed almost as a genre piece than as an innovative fiction.

Later interpretations of the novel tend to focus on Joseph’s more abstract polarities, such as between affirmation and despair of the wasteland outlook, belief in free will and naturalistic determinism, innocence and experience, chaos and order.

However, it should be remembered that these alternatives were the central concerns of the ongoing debate of the period, such as the one on the new failure of nerve. Marcus Klein suggests that the problem and formal construction of the novel may be borrowed from the debates
in *Partisan Review.* Bellow himself has stated that he was doing "nothing very original," and that he "had to touch a great many bases" and demonstrate his abilities in writing his earlier novels. Thus, the significance of a closer look at the backdrops of this novel.

The historical context of *Dangling Man* was also a period when cultural pluralism was a major goal, when second generation Jews were experimenting with modes to harmonize diverse elements such as Jewishness and Americanness, "high" culture and "low." Jewishness and alienation was beginning to be conceived of as an intellectual asset, and Muriel Rukeyser argued that the Jewish heritage was a "guarantee against closing of the spirit, against hardness in the war." Wendell Willkie was assuring the public in his best-seller that "within the tolerance of a democracy, minorities are the constant spring of new ideas, stimulating new thought and action, the constant source of new vigor."

Though the general trend was toward a somewhat forced affirmation of humanity or the American civilization, some of the above observations were only wishful thinking, or proved to represent only one side of the whole picture. One of the points of Sidney Hook's argument in "The New Failure of Nerve" series was the pragmatic observation that the American people, especially the labor organization as a new center for the Left, should unite in the war effort, if the United States is to win the war for democracy, or socialism.

It could be argued that Joseph was doing "the right thing," as Wilson observed, and also that Bellow was in fact "touching the bases" and pleasing everybody. The impression of honesty may be a happy congruence of public expectation and authorial deference or sensibility to the intellectual climate. Bellow is no doubt aware of this when he dismisses his earlier realistic novels of victims for not being original enough for him.

Observed from a wider frame of reference, however, Joseph's self-renunciation is still questionable in its implication, and though Bellow may be a committed and sincere author, honesty—implying innocence and artlessness—is not one of his most characteristic traits. Bellow's involvement with the times, and his expression of the time-spirit, are more complex. Joseph as a character is treated in an ironic and comic mode, sophisticated enough to incorporate Bellow's approach to the world and his art.

If we take this more roundabout way of observing the novel, Bellow's
own repudiation of his earlier novels can not be taken at its face value as evidence of a difference in his fiction. The novel is a product of the time and place, of course, but it also manifests some of the more enduring Bellovian characteristics. The obvious fact seems to be that there is more continuity than discontinuity in Bellow's works. In order to sort out the foreground from the "background," to define Bellow's distinctive way of dangling, it is necessary to review what was going on at the time in the field of literature and ideas.

The relevance of "The New Failure of Nerve" series as both a probable influence on the novel, and its importance as a source of insights into the spirit of the times has already been examined. We need only to review some of the general observations before we proceed to examine some examples of the fiction from that period.

As Cooney has argued, what is now revealing about this debate is the basic agreement among the intellectuals participating in it concerning the fundamental importance of rational analysis and scientific method. In spite of the fact that Hook was only one among the six original contributors to the series including his mentor John Dewey, and Margaret Mead, among others, and the additional fact that Hook's main thrust in the first half of his essay was aimed at the crisis of theology, represented by the "theology of despair and politics of wish" of Reinhold Niebuhr and Jacques Maritain, the ensuing argument tended to focus on Hook's two-part essay and to go into the details of Hook's present ideological position in relation to his past stands and the political feasibility of his proposals.

What is most relevant to our re-examination of Dangling Man was that Hook opened his essay by calling attention to the "intellectual and moral irresponsibility" that gave privileged importance to private experience and made "our viscera an organ of knowledge." He points out the prevalence of a "desperate quest for a quick and all-inclusive faith that will save us from the trouble of thinking about difficult problems."

Joseph's response to his difficult problems fits Hook's description of the failure of nerve very well, although some of the more actual problems brought on by the War, such as the meaning of volunteering and participating in the War, are not faced squarely enough in the novel to justify and authenticate his failure of nerve between the covers of the book, probably because the moral condition was taken for granted,
and there was no need for a detailed presentation.

Nor was Hook's argument an isolated instance of Jeremiad among the intellectuals, though it was probably one of the most talked about subjects at the time of the publication of *Dangling Man*, especially in the circle of the New York intellectuals. Archibald MacLeish had argued, back in 1939, that writers and scholars were exiles from the responsibilities of moral choice, "a refugee from consequences." At about the same time, Philip Rahv also deplored that most of the artists and "thinkers" were "voluntarily subjecting themselves to a regimen of conformity," and "adapting their products to the coarsening and shrinking of the cultural market." He concluded that "individual integrity—the probing conscience, the will to repulse and to assail the forces released by a disintegrated society" was all that was left to go on.

The phenomena was a noticeable characteristic of the fiction of the period in general. Delmore Schwartz called it the "post-Munich sensibility," marked by a "complete helplessness of perception and feeling."

Lloyd C. Douglas's popular book of 1944, *The Robe*, touches on difficult questions of racism and slavery, and allegiance to the nation in the historical time of Jesus Christ. The choices are evaded or transcended when the robe of the Savior recovered from the cross gives anyone holding the relic a "relief from everything." In John Hersey's *A Bell for Adano*, one of the "imperative" selections by the Council on Books in Wartime, the difficulties of the post-war occupation by the American Army are overshadowed by the importance of a church bell, whose tone "soothed all the people" of the town of Adano.

In Lillian Smith's problematical novel, *Strange Fruit*, dealing with the love and sexual relationship between Nonnie, a black girl, and Tracy, a white youth, Tracy evades the crisis when Nonnie becomes pregnant by deciding to marry a white girl and arranging a marriage of convenience for Nonnie by bribing his servant. "Let's don't think about it," is his initial response, and for him, Nonnie is something he "tried not to think about." After his dubious decision to "go straight" and "face things," he examines his own feelings: "Things stop. Like cutting off your circulation. Numb. Relief."

All these examples may be somewhat remote from what the "intellectuals" were agonizing about. These novels, after all, were probably
intended for the larger public in time of war, but they do point to a way to return to our original examination of *Dangling Man* as another work showing the symptoms of a failure of nerve, by way of a strange intermediary, Ernest Hemingway.

One of the first literary bases Bellow touches in the opening paragraph of Joseph’s journal is the “hardboiled-dom” of the era and the “code of the athlete, of the tough boy” (9). Joseph believes “most serious matters are closed to the hardboiled” since they are unpracticed in introspection (9), and in the second paragraph he rebels against their “commandments” and declares his intention to talk about his “difficulties” in his journal (9).

In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway had faced the war and politics in his way, and was criticized in the pages of *Partisan Review* by Dwight Macdonald for being “uncertain of his values and intentions.” Macdonald quotes Jordan’s admonishment to himself as an evidence of Hemingway’s weakness: “Turn off the thinking now, old timer, old comrade. You’re a bridge-blower now. Not a thinker.” Macdonald also criticizes the reasons Jordan gives for fighting with the Communists “for the duration of the war”: “Here in Spain the Communists offered the best discipline and the soundest and the sanest for the prosecution of the war.”

Another bridge-blowing in Harry Brown’s *A Walk in the Sun* brings us back to the corresponding attitude of Joseph. Brown covers a platoon of a landing force in Italy, in a “confused,” “incoherent,” “unreasonable” war, in which the commanding officer is killed and the orders are lost. The platoon can only proceed on the assumption that their orders are to take a farmhouse and to blow a bridge. In the final attack, however, all confusion and uncertainty suddenly vanish. The world stops, time stops, and the central character’s mind becomes “clear as polished glass.” The last sentence in the novel is his soliloquy as he charges: “It is so terribly easy.” The trouble for the uninitiated reader is, of course, that what has become so “clear” and “easy” is effectively lost in the emotionally laden confusion of the attack.

As these examples indicate, Joseph’s dangling and his final transcendence are part of a more general literary and intellectual climate, represented in fiction of the time in closely analogous styles and situations. Though Joseph was consciously examining himself and writing about his findings, his eventual choice of a separate peace with the outer
world is superficially not very different from that of his arch enemy's flight from political and personal responsibility into codes and disciplines of organizations and necessities of the war. Joseph's is a variation of the wide-spread failure of nerve, a general tendency to turn off the thinking, both as a moral and a literary phenomenon.30)

The next stage in our examination of Bellow's first novel in the context of history and his career, is a closer look at the position of Dangling Man as a work of art among other works of fiction dealing with the war and depicting or representing various cases of the failure of nerve.

WAR

Dangling Man may be read as a war novel, though the novel ends long before the actual military action takes place, with the journal entry on his last civilian day. Nevertheless, the war does constitute the main influence in the background of his everyday life, and he thinks of himself as a "moral casualty of war" (18).

Viewed as an example of the war novel in relation to the pervasive failure of nerve, and the guilty feelings of civilians, Dangling Man reveals itself to be a somewhat softened and theoretical depiction of conflicts in an individual engulfed in the War.

A review of some of the war novels of the time, especially those dealing with the home front and conscription, helps to define certain characteristics of Bellow's novel. At the same time, such an overview should provide a perspective to the alternatives Bellow had in his chosen theme and format, a paradigm available to him for the treatment of Joseph and his problems.

Although the guilt approach seems to have been a certain way to appeal to people at home, in various genres from the advertisements to the movies, books dealing with home front problems were not popular.31) This paradoxical reaction may in itself be symptomatic of the uncertainties of the war years, and certainly not unrelated to the ambiguities and roundabout ways noticeable in the ways in which writers treated the touchy question, if at all. Even Superman was caught in a dilemma of allegiances, and had to go through the gesture of taking a physical examinations, and only an unexpected failure in one of the tests, contrived by his creator and not Superman's fault, could make him acceptable at the home front.82)
One of the earliest and interesting examples of the war novel is Kenneth Patchen's *The Journal of Albion Moonlight*, published privately in 1941. The book is a mixture of hallucinatory adventures foreshadowing William Burroughs, self-conscious and self-referential observations, and formal experiments. Described as a "pacifist anti-novel" by Larry R. Smith, the book presents some interesting similarities and contrasts in regard to Bellow's treatment of the war in *Dangling Man*.

Patchen's novel is also in the form of a journal, and though it is especially misleading to characterize this phantasmagoric work with a few quotations, a table of contents that appears near the end of the novel describes a section of the book as a "complete description of the world as men knew it in the summer of the year 1940" (290). The narrator wants to say that "there is a plague from which there is no escape for anyone," "the plague of universal madness" (305).

Patchen's attitude toward the War in this novel is most apparent in a relatively realistic dialogue between Albion Moonlight and a recruiting officer, followed by another with a second officer evidently in charge of uncooperative draftees. Albion argues his position as a conscientious objector, refusing to fight the government's war (92). However, his definition of the war and his harangue against Capitalism as the common enemy of the working classes of the world is a little too schematic (93).

The addition of a Whitmanesque rhapsody immediately after the confrontation is also too facile: Albion declares that he speaks for his own kind, "for those who love the warm fields in summer sunlight; for those who love . . . yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes" (94). The section is actually followed by a complete quotation of "As I Lay with My Head in Your Lap Camerado."

It is sufficient for our purpose of comparison to recognize that Albion does take a stand in the face of the Selective Service, at least in his imagination, although it would be difficult to interpret and evaluate the significance of Patchen's treatment of Albion's challenge against the authorities and the forces of war. His case proves that the prevailing failure of nerve was not completely engulfing everyone of that time, even within the scope of literature dealing with the War. However, it should also be pointed out that this particular episode is isolated and distanced from the author in a technical and formal framework that makes it difficult to ascertain, from the text of the novel itself, the exact contents of Patchen's ideas concerning the War.
A more realistic misadventure and death of a conscientious objector is the central plot of *Behold Trouble* by Granville Hicks. Pierre, the protagonist, confronts the draft board and defies the community, vowing that he would “just as soon shoot a few of the bastards around here as shoot Japs.” In this novel the issue is lost in layers of absurd incidents. Pierre has an aggressive kind of the failure of nerve and mistakes a girl for an agent coming for him and shoots and wounds her. Then he takes to the mountains and hides in a cave. He is eventually killed by a shot in the head, but the final outcome is almost a bathos because of the way Hicks develops the case.

For one thing, Pierre is not pursued or persecuted, either for his objection to be conscripted or for the shooting of the girl, at least not immediately for the shooting. The broad dramatic irony when the reader is allowed to read the report of the chairman of the local Selective Service Board makes Pierre’s fight for personal belief a meaningless act of defiance based on mistaken assumptions: the chairman decides to recommend that Pierre be considered a conscientious objector as defined in the Selective Service and Training Act of 1940, even though his is a personal belief. As a fictional character, Pierre is not allowed to know of this decision, of course, and the basis of his subsequent action is ironically undermined.

A more serious problem in the treatment of the whole question arises when Hicks discloses Peirre’s reasoning, which is again closely analogous to what Hook has described as the new failure of nerve:

There can only be one basis for decision: your individual awareness of good and evil. Fortunately you do not have to assess the relative guilt of this nation or that in any particular war. Leave such decisions to the historians, who will take their time and settle nothing. (268)

Hicks proceeds to tell the reader that Pierre knew “beyond any possibility of self-deception, that the whole business had been a mistake,” that he had been under an “evil spell” (312).

His failure of nerve is aggravated when he decides, in spite of his awareness of his mistake, that nothing can be done, that “things had gone too far, and that was all there was to it” (312). Finally, the novel ends with a scene in which a woman, who was active politically in college and is now married comfortably, declares that it is not her war anymore.
After discussing the moral responsibility of people in not helping Pierre, she decides in the last sentence of the novel, to have another drink, and to show the guest the babies and the horses (340), which of course can be labeled as another failure of nerve, and interpreted as an escape into the safety of her affluent everyday life.

Another mode of dealing with the critical but sensitive questions involved in the life at the home front is exemplified in short stories published in *Partisan Review* by H. J. Kaplan, and by Bellow’s friend and comrade in the Trotskyist movement from Chicago, Isaac Rosenfeld. The examination of these short stories in the comic mode will bring us back to *Dangling Man* once more.

“The Mohammedans” was published in *Partisan Review* four months before Bellow’s “Notes of a Dangling Man,” and both deal with the year 1942. The narrator tells about Simon’s involvement in the “affair of the Mohammedans” in the summer of that year, when Simon was dangling in his way in his ancestral mansion, expecting to be called up by the draft board. He is a poet, and he explains that he feels everyone’s feeling to the point where he has almost none of his own, and that it is difficult to live and make decisions and have attitudes at the same time.35 Through a series of unexpected events, he finds himself facing the officials to plead exemption for a suspicious Black character, who had registered as a Mohammedan. His refusal to plead for himself is all the more strange because he has a physical disability that disqualifies him from military service. The episode involving conscientious objection ends in a fiasco, when policemen come to get the Negro.

Simon thinks of the Negro in contradictory terms as a charlatan, a rapist and no doubt a great man (287). There is also a whole section of this short story made up from his journal, in which Simon ruminates:

I sit here and lose the name of action, grumbling about the moral formlessness of it all: everything is slurred over, arranged, or forgotten. No heroism, no grandeur. Whenever a real question arises, it is destroyed precisely by its American particularity, which means that the principle involved is forever distorted by every kind of irrelevance. (289)

The story ends as Simon keeps banging his head against the wooden paneling in exasperation and despair, saying aloud each time that the
Negro hasn't proved any point by his extended and disastrous fight for his rights.

Kaplan, however, does not treat the final outburst as a tragic revelation, but as self-conscious theatrics both on the part of the protagonist and the author. Kaplan's use of the parentheses in the last sentence to inform the reader that Simon couldn't bear pain of any kind, may be Kaplan's technique to draw attention to the fictional quality of the short story. The information itself is apparently contradicted, and Kaplan's use of the exaggeration and the cliché in his closure seems to be openly facetious. This short story also closes with a comic overtone after opening up actual and difficult questions.

Isaac Rosenfeld's "The Hand that Fed Me" is in the form of a series of one-sided letters from Joseph Feigenbaum to Ellen. The time is again 1942, and Joseph in this story is remembering and interpreting their brief encounter in 1939 in a WPA office. The letters comprise a series of monologues, or a journal in effect, because Ellen does not answer any of them. The format of this one-way communication gives the story as a whole an atmosphere of comic futility, and the focus of this story is on an infatuated and voluble youth, desperately fishing for any kind of response, but also conscious of his awkward and absurd situation.

Joseph in "The Hand that Fed Me" remembers the summer of 1939 as one of "no work, no friends, no conversation" and the realization that he was meant for WPA. The difference between this Joseph and Joseph of Dangling Man is that Rosenfeld's Joseph justifies the chaos of that time as a "wonderful summer of self-discovery." He has turned himself out, like an empty pocket, and has lost most of his delusions. Here again, is another use of the cliché combined with a sense of self-conscious irony.

He argues that though he was outwardly forced to go on WPA, inwardly, he went as a "free man," to be preserved "from decaying" This Joseph fights against the urge to pour himself out, "release all the stops and let go." He cautions himself that few people have the right to confess: only murderers and hardened criminals, never men who are merely unhappy. He suggests that half of what we say may be false, and the other half "merely the result of a ridiculous striving for a sense of personal history." The lengthy argument, of course, contradicts his stated intention, and he only succeeds in
revealing his pathetic uncertainties.

The striking similarity between the two Josephs suggests that both were drawn close to an accepted type of the artist or intellectual lost in times of war. If we add Simon, in reviewing our examination of the fiction based on the home front, a pervasive feeling of moral futility emerges from the samples, and the ambiguities of the authorial voice is a noticeable common trait. The novels of Patchen and Hicks represent two different ways to pose the question and to evade the issue, by ingeniously framing the critical section in one, and by a broad dramatic irony in the other.

In light of these observations, the characterization of Joseph in *Dangling Man* as an ironical and unreliable character, and the ambiguous implications of the closure may be explained, if not understood. It is possible to simplify the correspondences and to rationalize that Bellow was catching what was in the air as components of his first novel, and the readers were getting what they expected, and recognizing it as realistic. This, I believe, is an aspect of what was really happening at the time *Dangling Man* was being written, published, and accepted. We have to think of the other side of the picture when we go further back in our examination and remember that the *Dangling Man* subsequently became an archetype for most of the fiction of Saul Bellow, in spite of the author's renunciation.

Our third field of excursion is into the art of Saul Bellow: how he sees the responsibilities of the artist and the function of fiction in our world.

**ART**

Some critics have observed that Bellow’s characters might be related to Joseph as different configurations of the *Dangling Man*; that Bellow’s posture and sensibility might be characterized as that of the Dangling Imagination. It is interesting to speculate to what extent different aspects of the cultural and literary environment might have formulated or influenced Bellow’s imagination, but pertinent biographical information is not available in full detail as of yet.

Under the circumstances, we should restrain ourselves and confine the examination to identifying a few of the common characteristics between Bellow’s fiction and his ideas about art, and what we have reviewed as elements of the context of *Dangling Man*. 

— 52 —
Augie March is determined to go at things as he has taught himself, "free-style," and to make the record in his own way, even though he admits that a man's character might be his fate (3). In the process of his picaresque adventures he admits that the "axial lines of life" appear as a "gift" when striving stops (454). Finally, he is moved by the "animal ridens," the laughing creature in him. Augie does not know what's so laughable, but believes that laughing is an "enigma" that includes both deterministic nature and human power of hope. (536).

Herzog was overcome by the "need to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to clarity, to make amends." When the novel opens he is thinking about his recent activities: "If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me" (1). He has realized that he had mismanaged everything (3), and is aware of an "idiot joy that makes this animal, the most peculiar animal of all, exclaim something." But he decides that he has no arguments to make about it, and at the end of the novel, he has no message for anyone: "Nothing. Not a single word" (340-41).

Even from this dangerously short and limited series of quotations, it is evident that polar opposites in Bellow's set of fictional characters have traits reminiscent of Joseph, and preoccupations analogous to his: Augie, probably the most vital character so far, and Herzog, the most intellectual.

Bellow's characters tend to make decisions based on their gut-feelings, which no doubt represent the affirmative life-enhancing force in us. Mr. Sammler is skeptical of the intellectual man who has become an explaining creature and declares that the soul wants what it wants, that it has its own "natural knowledge, explanations, terms of contract." He believes that the truth of it is that "we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know." However, when these acts of faith in the heart or the spirit are described in connection with the animal in us, we are reminded that Joseph in Dangling Man ironically remembers as the "symbol" for his final surrender the analogy of a dog running out of the condition of freedom and rolling over on it back and asking for the leash (168, 183). Although Joseph in Dangling Man argues that "judgment is second to wonder" and that "in a sense, everything is good because it exists," the correspondence suggests uncertainties of transcendence and human serenity in animal conditions in Bellow's fictional world (29-30).
When the narrator tells the reader that Uncle Benn, the well known botanist in *More Die of Heartbreak*, told the newsman who interviewed him on the dangers of radioactivity from Three Mile Island and Chernobyl that "sorrow at heart killeth full many a man," the impossibility of either substantiating or refuting the statement and the style it is expressed in is more disturbing than the statement itself, or its truth-value. The narrator goes on to support his Uncle:

And it's a safe guess that there are more deaths from heartbreak than from atomic radiation. Yet there are no mass movements against heartbreak, and no demonstration against it in the streets.\(^{41}\)

Saul Bellow underlines the message by using this insight as the title of the whole book.

The cumulative effect of the passages suggests that there is, in Bellow's work, a touch of the failure of nerve that Hook observed in the defensive position of liberalism, which he defined very broadly "as an intellectual temper, as faith in the intelligence."\(^{42}\) There is a tendency in Bellow's works to represent the viscera as an organ of knowledge, and to believe in the "voice" that speaks to us.\(^{43}\) A certain impatience with the scientific procedure and with human beings as rationalizing creatures is attributable to these episodes and quotations.

The correspondence observable in works of fiction spanning over a period of almost fifty years is paradoxical and intriguing because Bellow as an author is apparently one of the most sophisticated and intellectual authors in contemporary American literature. His interviews and occasional writings give proof to his awareness of his difficult position in the last decades of the twentieth century, but they also are indicative of a benign case of blindness, or of political amnesia on his part, both in terms of his subject matter and his treatment. There seems to be considerable evidence in his literary make-up of an author carrying over the ages a frame of mind formulated during the time he was reaching maturity, and beginning his career as a writer with the publication of *Dangling Man*.

Bellow has been consistently underplaying the image of the victim in his fiction ever since the publication of *The Adventures of Augie March*, avoiding the limiting influences of his expressively titled novels, *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*. In spite of Bellow's explanations and
denials, there is a noticeable “pattern of self-immolation” that “goes back as far as his first novel,” as Morris Dickstein has indicated.44)

Bellow explains that he has moved away from his early novels because he finds them “plaintive,” and sometimes “querulous,” and that *Herzog* makes comic use of complaint.45) He goes on to defend and justify what he puts forward as his new approach:

The book is not anti-intellectual, as some have said. It simply points to the comic impossibility of arriving at a synthesis that can satisfy modern demands. (192)

In his foreword to Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bellow repeats his point about the comic and parodic nature of the novel, and adds that he meant it to show “how little strength ‘higher education’ had to offer a troubled man.”46) After indicating the difficulty of the artist in the midst of “the disheartening expansion of trained ignorance and bad thought,” Bellow concludes with an advice to the artist:

Thinking alone will never cure what ails him, and any artist should be grateful for a naive grace which puts him beyond the need to reason elaborately. (18)

Again, Bellow’s statements are irrefutable, both because they do point to a possible cure of present difficulties, and because his reasoning defies evidence as proof, and again, the quotation reminds us of attitudes towards difficult decisions in times of war, particularly Pierre’s rationalization of his pacifist position in *Behold Trouble*.

We should also remind ourselves that the choice of comedy as a mode of expression was a common response to the impasse in the 1940s and a strategy of cultural pluralism. Though Bellow emphasizes comedy as a shift away from victim literature in his fiction, Joseph is aware of the existence of an “element of the comic or fantastic in everyone,” and decides that one is never able to bring the elements altogether under control (28).47) In Bellow’s selective forgetfulness, there is a literary case of what Alan M. Wald has called the “political amnesia” evident in many of the published recollections of the New York intellectuals.48) Some of the episodes in *Dangling Man* may even be read as routines in a home comedy, and the closure of the novel can only be appreciated in its full complexity with a comic overtone.
However, Bellow was not trying to be funny or frivolous, neither in the 1940s, nor at the present time. Then, the comic style was a way of dealing with a complex world view. A few years after the publication of *Dangling Man*, Irving Howe described the dilemma of the "lost young intellectual" in the 1940s:

What makes his situation more unbearable is that he often cannot take even his own misery with complete seriousness. The biting sense of irony he has acquired from his family associations and from the Jewish cultural tradition forces him to observe his own ridiculousness, his own posturing, his objective insignificance in relation to his self-preoccupation.\(^{49}\)

Even alienation for the New York intellectuals was, according to Cooney, a device for the containment of opposing ideas, to have it both ways.\(^{50}\)

The pattern of self-immolation is also a system of giving free play to the intellectual powers to some extent and to transcend them by giving the process a comic and ambiguous closure, at least at the more logical level. This is effectively a way to have it both ways, in that the ending does not deny the importance of the preceding mental activity. The ending depends on the authenticity of the "dangling" of the "victim" for its effectiveness as a comic closure. As Bellow has phrased it, the conclusion of *Herzog* is not a unconditional denial of "higher education" but a return to "some primal point of balance."\(^{51}\)

This sense of a precarious balance between what Joseph calls the "personal destiny" and what Bellow includes more recently in the large category of "the noise of history and the distractions of our immediate surroundings," is what alienation implied for the New York intellectuals in the 1940s. This sense of balance still appears to inform Bellow's idea of the comic in his art.

The 1940s was a time when intellectuals, especially those around *Partisan Review*, were consciously investigating ways to incorporate new elements into their scope; from the so-called low-brow literature to other cultural media such as movies. Bellow's conscious attempt to incorporate the plebeian class, and even the underworld, into his fiction may be seen as another inheritance from the cultural climate of that time.

On the other hand, Joseph was very conscious of what he calls the
colony of the spirit, the elite of the culture as a utopia in the Hobbesian world of modern confusion. Isaac Rosenfeld alludes to Joseph's vision in "Under Forty: A Symposium of American Literature and the Younger Generation":

...in every society, in every group, there are what Saul Bellow has called "colonies of the spirit." Artists create their colonies. Some day these may become empires.\(^52\)

Cooney, writing from a later time in history about this evidence of a "tender optimism for the old cosmopolitan dream," comments that "the vision of new cultural empire, so important to Partisan Review in the thirties, did not die easily."\(^53\) It certainly seems to be maintaining a stronghold, if not expanding its reign, in Bellow's inner world.

From this perspective, it is necessary to qualify some of the current observations about the quintessence of Saul Bellow's fictions. Malcolm Bradbury writes, also in relation to this aspect of Joseph's aspirations, that his search is to "find a world of spirit which contains transcendental reflections of nobility," and indicates that this is Bellow's essential theme.\(^54\) The truth of this statement can not be denied, but the fact that the theme was not unique to Bellow should also be noted. What emerges as the outstanding characteristic of Bellow is not so much the nature of ambiguity or dubious transcendence, which are traits discernible in much of the literature of the time, but the tension and persistence in the author's attempt to arrive at a literary definition and presentation of the human condition as a whole.

It is impossibly difficult to balance all the disparate points of view in a unified field, or to fully describe the context, but Bellow is an author who places importance on realistic details and background information, and, in spite of his populist and anti-intellectual gestures, expects a lot from his ideal readers. He is also a writer who believes in the supreme position of art in the activities of the human mind in a wider sense. For Bellow, art is still the source of true information:

We must wait for art to produce figurative equivalents of information—objects or symbols of knowledge and consciousness transcending mere fact.\(^55\)

Only art penetrates the "seeming realities" of this world and enables us to receive the hints from the "genuine" reality.\(^56\) In order to make
this possible, we have to lighten ourselves, "to dump encumbrances."\(^{57}\)

Because art is a supreme power in Bellow's world, we should be careful to ascertain what it is that is dumped as "encumbrances." All the more so when Bellow precedes this statement with a general statement that "when complications increase, the desire for essentials increases too."\(^{58}\)

This kind of intolerance with complications lies behind Joseph's decision to relinquish his intellectual autonomy and identity, and there seems to be an increased readiness or disposition in Bellow to make the final leap toward what he believes to be the unexplainable essence, which is again something that might be followed back to the cardinal truths in Joseph's colony of the spirit.

This is not intended to be a facile censure of either Joseph or of Bellow himself, for the simple reason that he refused to take a stand against the War, or to give a rational closure to the novels. What Joseph has called the "wonder," of life and literature, is beyond the scope of the present analysis. Rather than attempting to give a final evaluation of Bellow's fictional world, I have tried to follow up in a documentable manner, though a very selective and sketchy one, a few of the elements that have become problematic in the interpretation of *Dangling Man* in the light of some observable relationship the novel has with its time and place. Bellow's first novel contains in it much of what was "in the air" at the time, and also much of what has proved to be enduring in Bellow's works.

If it is true that a man's character is his fate, as Augie pronounces in the beginning of his novel, and if distractions and complications are increasing, as Bellow seems to believe, there is an ominous conclusion to be derived from Joseph's example. Whether we call this phenomenon a third failure of nerve, or the closing of the mind, is not so important as the awareness of its complexity and historicity, both in the history of ideas and in Bellow's personal history. A reader with the added perspective should be in a better position to reach a deeper understanding of the novel, the author, and the culture.

Bellow's intolerance with complications that may be a lingering effect of the failure of nerve is the other side of his openness to what he thinks of as the mysteries of mankind. In a still wider context, we can envision Bellow's fiction as a reflection of the complexity of American culture, where anti-intellectualism is coupled with the American
dream of human perfectability and where the reign of wonder defies the empire of the spirit.

NOTES

The research for this paper was made possible by the exchange program between Tokyo Metropolitan University and The Graduate School of the City University of New York. I would like to thank Professors Morris Dickstein and Francis Murphy for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

1) Bellow published “Notes of a Dangling Man” in Partisan Review X.5 (1943). The text of the short story is a few long excerpts from Joseph's journal, and is quite close to the published book. The novel version is more readable, with more commas and paragraphs. Some allusions to war-time conditions such as to the posters of Japanese “with rat faces and foundering ships” were revised to delete the animal imagery. The short story is introduced as “excerpts” of Bellow's first novel, to be published in the winter of 1944, Partisan Review X (1943) 401. The copy of Dangling Man in the New York Public Library, acquired in April 1944, does not have the eagle design.

2) Joseph's commitment to politics was probably limited by his overriding need to keep “intact and free from encumbrance a sense of his own being, its importance” (27). There is little information on Bellow's own attitude toward politics, though William Barrett remembers Bellow as “past master at protecting himself” in relationship to the Partisan circle, The Truants: Adventures Among the Intellectuals (Garden City: Anchor, 1982) 49.

3) All subsequent page references in parentheses are to Dangling Man (New York: Vanguard Press, 1944).

4) Edmund Wilson in his review of Dangling Man, New Yorker 1 April 1944: 78.


10) Paul Fussell has recently discovered and publicized the hoax of My Sister and I in “Writing in Wartime: The Uses of Innocence.” Fussell’s iconoclastic approach demonstrates the historicity and subjectivity of evaluative judgments concerning authenticity of a book which was actually written by one of the publisher’s editors posing as a twelve-year-old Dutch boy. It sold well and was reviewed as an authentic, honest and moving document. This case demonstrates the necessity of some caution in the interpretation of the reviews of Bellow’s fictive journal. Thank God for the Atom Bomb and Other Essays (1980; New York: Ballantine, 1990).


14) Podhoretz, Making It, 122.


19) Partisan Review, X (1943) 8. In answer to a letter, Hook later explains that the “main point” of his articles were “directed primarily to religious doctrines and models of belief that have mixed themselves up, directly and indirectly, in social and political affairs with claims to superior knowledge about nature, history and man,” Partisan Review X (1943) 206.

20) Partisan Review X (1943) 2-23.

21) Julian Simons argues that what is called in Partisan Review “The New Failure of Nerve” applies perfectly to the English scene, in a section entitled “A Fascism of the Intellectuals,” in “Writing in the Desert,” Partisan Review X (1943) 424. He cites an extreme anti-rationalism, a dotty mysticism, belief in the “realities of life” and belief in the soil or soul as its characteristics.


24) “New Year’s Eve” in The World Is a Wedding (Norfork: New Directions, 1948) 88. The narrator is, of course, looking back from a later time in history after the Munich pact of September 1938.


26) Strange Fruit, (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1944) 5, 43, 161, 191. Going straight and facing things in Tracy’s case means joining the church and being decent to a white girl across the street and marrying her.


28) Quotations from For Whom the Bell Tolls (New York: Scribner’s, 1940) 17, 163. Macdonald, 25, 27.

— 60 —


32) Goodman, 500–1. Joseph was called a "pharisaical stinker" and the fact that the "Author Bellow" was not in the Army was ironically pointed out in a book review, *Time* 8 May 1944: 104.


37) Later revised in favor of WPA, as the only place that writers had "official existence."


44) *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Basic Books, 1977) 39. Dickstein argues that Bellow's first novel is important because it represents the whole intellectual climate of the fifties, and anticipates his turn toward accommodation. I believe it is more representative of the fiction of the forties, and that the accommodation is more apparent in *Dangling Man* than Dickstein's estimation.


49) "The Lost Young Intellectuals: A Marginal Man, Twice Alienated," *Commentary* II (1946) 366.


51) *The Closing of the American Mind*, 16.

52) *Contemporary Jewish Record* VII (1944) 36.


54) *Saul Bellow* (London: Methuen, 1982) 38.


57) Nobel Lecture, 342.

58) Nobel Lecture, 321.