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Judaism Challenges Modern Philosophy in Crisis

A New Reading of Saul bellow's Herzog

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Abstract:

This work is a study of transformed European thought systems in American context of post Second World War. Relevant issues are dealt with from a philosophic view point, because in philosophy other influences, from social, economic, political and cultural to artistic are more or less touched upon. The philosophic vantage point is itself focused more on the question of changing relation of the subject and the object and also on their transforming scope of meaning.

Enlightenment philosophy in its rise in Europe stimulated an inclination among the middle-class bourgeois for forsaking a repressive past for a just future. Yet the plan they devised finally, was seeped through with idealistic impossibilities. After a failure to fulfill the promises made, attempts were undertaken by the old elite to topple down the bourgeois and re-attain a lost power. Romanticism takes power with the aim to amend Enlightenment frivolities by making reconciliations with a refuted past and leveling the new hierarchies, but it fails to do so. The bourgeois, on the fact of such threats, takes the risk of verifying the credibility of its promises and the possibility of their fulfillment in the ripe American context of after 1945. The work then shows these new philosophers to be mainly Jewish and their philosophy an attempt to revive a Jewish conception of the world through literary production. The conscious attempt the Jewish intellectuals make ricochets in American literature of the 50s and the 60s.

The analysis finds the point of focus on a work by Saul bellow, himself a Jewish intellectual, and studies the ways different European trends of thought like Existentialism are imbibed and tampered with to help construct a Jewish-American point of view. The influence the Old Testament leaves on the pages of this literary work-Herzog-, is also the proof for its being Jewish in a deeply cultural sense which partakes of its religious edge too.

در بخش آنالیز، اثری از سال بلو که خود متفکری یهودی است بررسی می‌شود تا چگونگی درون کشیدن و حل شدن روندهای اروپایی همچون اکزیستانسیالیسم آشکار شود. تأثیری که کتاب مقدس یهودیان بر این اثر ادبی – هرزاگ- گذاشته تأییدی است بر هویت یهودی اثر که در عین برخورداری از مفهومی عمیق فرهنگی از خصایص مذهبی نیز بهره میبرد.

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1. Introduction

Modernity is a world of meanings hardly comprehensible. Many critics and historians have tried to pin its meanings down or classify its sinuous and sometimes divergent inclinations, like Raymond Williams, Habermas or Adorno, to name a few. As many believe the beginning of the modern time was the early eighteenth century and the geographical locus was France, yet many more find the starting phase much later in the backlash of Romantic thought, when a European trend of aestheticism begins, while still others identify modernism with the Romantic age itself. Bradbury and McFarlan define modernism as "an extraordinary compound of the futurist and the nihilistic, the revolutionary and the conservative, the naturalistic and the symbolistic, the Romantic and the classical. It was the celebration of a technological age and a condemnation of it; an excited acceptance of the belief that, the old regimes of culture were over, and a deep despair in the face of that fear; a mixture of convictions that the new forms were escapes from historicism and the pressures of the time with convictions that they were precisely the living expression of these things." (Harvey 24). Later the New Critics turned the concept into a "metaphysics and a technique" (Lazarus 431), but this concept was also changed. Fredric Jameson refers to modernism as a "cultural struggle" (429) which lost its vigour on the way. Lazarus warns against such reductionist views of modernism by saying "I think we should also be wary of accepting without reflection Jameson's argument that modernism's criticality has become neutralized" (430).

This work does not purport any credence in according a new classification or a new meaning, but accepts and centers on what Lazarus calls "the ongoing criticality of modernism" (432), which is the one definition serving our purpose best. The modern revolution in thought and politics was a bourgeois phenomenon. It shook the old hierarchies and principles to their roots and was successful to silent the upper ruling

class for a time. But when it was met with massacres on great scale the effete ruling class found a chance to reassert their own mentality again and in this way to acquire the lost stature they once had, but the point is that the experience of modernism is not something to be eradicated. The emergence of America as the cultural political power on an international scale with its ideals of bourgeois mentality and life is a sign of its continuation in spite of all inimical stances towards it. And also the power of a minority group, the major victims of this bourgeois and high intellectual wrath, the Jews, to have the upper hand and the authority is the sign of a displacement and tampering of antagonistic means to beneficial ends (R. B. Pippin 8).

In their book *Dialectic of Modernism* Roberts and Murphy talk of three modernisms, Enlightenment, Romantic and aesthetic. This thesis does not separate the latter two, and also introduces a new phase as modern which is not European but American. This classification is only done for the ease of discussion and does not claim academic credence. In this work, therefore, Enlightenment and Romanticism and also the post-world-war America in the 50s and 60 are treated as parts of the modernity project. The first part of the work thus, treats all three phases under the rubric of Project of modernity. In the very first part Enlightenment and Romanticism are discussed, but only on those aspects that later find a reflection in the American phase. This part treats Enlightenment and Romanticism as intermingled, because more than the German idealist tradition by which we recognize Romanticism, the work searches for the contribution of a figure in transience from Enlightenment to Romanticism. Kant is therefore the link that reveals the dependence and borrowings of the Romantic thought from the Enlightenment ideology and shows the latter in inconspicuous existence. From this it becomes clear that the work does not deal with Aesthetic modernism or Romanticism separately, but it escapes to the post-war climate of America to see what

happens to the European trends when transferred to America. This part puts forth the idea that the Enlightenment project found a home in America, and though many got disillusioned with its promises, many more made use of its principles in an amalgamation with different imported but altered ideas to make something of an American identity with it. On the way to discuss all these, influence from Existentialists as well as Pragmatists will be studied and finally all this will find its relation to the diasporic tradition of Jewish writings. The Jewish intellectuals revive a new meaning of rationality that both answers the question of failed promises and at the same time gives them the elite position they craved.

The work is meant to deal with all these questions from a philosophical outlook. Philosophy has been chosen as the lense to look at the subject, because the modern question is in many cases a philosohic one. As Pippin believes the largest part of the issue comes from alterations of definitions of “some key terms”, and that makes all the difference in the social political sphere as well (12).

One of the most vital issues of philosophy, especially in the modern times, is the question of the relation of the subject and the object, on which this work focuses. Adorno defines the task of philosophy, in his *The Idea of Natural History* as overcoming the devision of nature and history, and suggests the need for an ontological reorientation of philosophy of history, taken from Lukasc's *Theory of the Novel* and Benjamin's *Origin of German Tragic Drama*. This reorientation is the allegorical task of philosophy which is now aimed at reconciling what was separated through the influence of Enlightenment philosophy (Murphy and Roberts 13). The whole work discusses different issues from economic political sociological or cultural ones, but only at surface. The work is not in any way a thourough analysis of these forces, and it unavoidably narrows down issues to make them possible to handle. A burdomesome

issue like modernism when placed side by side with Philosophy defies any easy handling. But the work dares to take a plunge into this tumultuous sea and and present a touch of its depth.

A Review of the Chapters Covered

With the incoming of Enlightenment, precipitated by the advances in science, the relation of man and nature altered. When the ignored but evolving middle-class found the scientific power, he refused to submit to the unknown metaphysical powers delivered to them as law by a few elite philosophers, and this rivalry led to the antagonistic attitude of many philosophers to the new social class from among which new philosophers evolved. The lure of a perfect world achieved by the power of man's ration was irresistible. While the Enlightened man was more concerned with the present state of the world, some philosophers injected the improbable idea of Utopia as a world to be achieved in distant future into the Enlightenment philosophy, which was later used to turn the tables against them. The modernity issue at this phase is a double question; one part deals with it as a metaphysical problem the other treats it as a social political issue. The political question leads the work to assess the place of some evolving ideologies like Liberalism and Capitalism in relation to rationality. All three promise freedom and the power inherent in it. The Enlightenment philosophers helped free man and make him active, while the previous Empiricists treated them as passive recipients of sensible data. Kant is one of those philosophers that advances the cause of Liberalism and carries it into Romantic ideology. As an example Wolff's ideas are discussed briefly and the solutions Kant finds are introduced. Although Kant's ideas pose new problems, his assertion of the subjects freedom and agency was so strong that became a cultural force. In an anti-utilitarian attitude, Kant aesthetized art, and with it caused the coalescence of nature and history. This linking attitude meant to put the subject and the

object on the same par, but finally gave the subject the upper hand again. If in the eighteenth century literature, the subject is represented by an omniscient narrator, in the context of late nineteenth and early twentieth century he becomes the interiority that perceives, but cannot linguistically represent.

The next part, *The Promises and the Crisis* introduces the problems occasioned by these philosophical attitudes. All in all these problems can be summarized as this: first comes transcendental humanism which has reversed the relation between the individual subject and nature and has made man divine. Based on this view man is not awed by nature, but has established a relation of a master to its slave. This transcendentalism of the subject is a characteristic shared by the Enlightenment thinkers and the Romantics alike; the turn the issue takes is the foundationalism of the subject in the Enlightenment era which becomes radicalized as self-sufficient and anti-bourgeois. Second is a farfetched idealism concerning the power of the man, which was met with failure, in that man could not fulfill his promises or assert this power. Third is justice; a concept closely linked to the issue of idealism. The aim was to bring justice to all through the assertion of human powers, yet when justice becomes a materialistic concept under the eagies of Capitalism it produces more adversaries among people instead of reducing it. The fourth and one of the most significant plagues of this phase of modernism is the reliance on method. It was believed that human society needed to discover and devise the method that could guide human effort to realization. The other important short coming was ontological foundationalism of the subjects. This view detaches human beings from their social cultural and political context to remove them to a higher position of seeing and understanding objectively, or becoming the centre of significance. In all cases the rationality behind such projects is questioned and with it the credibility of generalizing all this into the realm of politics is suspected.

This is natural that when the bourgeois ideology is questioned they search for ways of ameliorating the flaws and upholding their premises in a new context. This new context was provided after the Second World War in America. Therefore the third part of these thesis addresses this transition and revival.

In the part specifically touching the American issue, the incoming of European attitudes to America after 1945 is discussed. The main point about American experience of European trends is their reluctance to receive passively. Therefore after dealing with the process by which French theories entered America, the part talks about the alterations it introduced to the imported concepts. McLuhan is the one responsible for making ready this transience of ideas. The work does not claim to call him the only factor, but one that was significant. French Existentialists find a home in America for their theories through the presence of such a character. Frankfurt school also seeped in. They both favored openness and a utopian view. America, but, was the Capital of the world after the Second World War and Capitalism is against freedom as defined by openness in constitution. These theories also changed the conception Americans had of history. Capitalism defines history as spatio-temporal, yet the European theories define it as wide-ranging. The Romantics aimed at reconciling the subject with the object through naturalizing history, but failed to do so for their emphasis on the subject. Americans have a similar intention, or at least we can say this was the Jewish intellectuals' intention that found its say in America strongly.

In the part which deals with the influence of Existentialism in America different issues from the role of the individual within the society and its relation with it, dynamism and utopia and their getting skewed under the pressure of American Capitalism and Corporationalism is discussed. The Existential theorist mainly referred to

in this part is Sartre. As Sartre is contrasted with briefly with Kant, a new juxtaposition is also introduced ; Liberalism in Europe and America.

America refuses to acknowledge the ethnicities it has geographically accommodated; Its Liberalism which is now local and contingent defines freedom in strictly ethnic terms. The role of the New York intellectuals as a Jewish group is then quite complicated. They have to reconcile their assimilatory aims with their impulses to keep their identity, as Jews, alive. What helps them to retain American credibility and assert their ideology is the help they get from Pragmatism as a modern American philosophic attitude.

In Europe, philosophy has most often been centered on the question of experience. Either experience itself was the crux or the knowledge it yielded. In America the question is erased to set a new one. Pragmatism denies that there is any such boundary between a comprehending subject and a comprehended object. With this it also denies the roles of philosophy and language as final arbiters themselves. Therefore the question of experience and knowledge are both irrelevant. Pragmatism is an integrating philosophy; it does not seek to create new boundaries, but removes old questions for introducing new ones which are solvable. With this attitude, Pragmatism refutes the central issue of philosophy for what has been ignored so far. This tendency to highlight the periphery finds a collaborator in French Deconstructionist philosophy. Once again the doors of America are opened to European trends. At this time of philosophic debates, some Jewish philosophers devise a new system of thought that partakes of their Judaism. The main turn the Jews give to this debate is to make important the return to the past as a Jewish anti-progressive attitude. The Jewish contribution is what will be discussed in the forth section of the thesis.

This part starts with a short history of the Jews in Russia, focusing mainly on the reasons that precipitated their emigration out of the country. From among these reasons we can count the economic hardship, religious bigotry and residence strictures. Each critic emphasizes one as the crucial issue, like Kuznets who emphasizes economic factor while Garthner considers the residence problem the major factor. Whatever the main issue, all these problems gave impetus to the largest emigration in the world.

Concentration of the Jewish population in New York helped bring about Haskalah. Haskalah was influenced by modernism and Liberalism in its main principles. Therefore Old hierarchies find a new place among Jewish intellectuals in America. The new elites were largely secular yet the desire to ingrain their ethnicity as an inseparable part of the culture of the land never diminished.

Secularism among Jews brought about divergent movements within Judaism, one being Reform movements. Asking for reform and turning away from religious Judaism became rife among the enlightened Jews. At this time the idea of assimilation is welcomed fervently and Yiddishkeit becomes the defining principle of Jewish identity. Hasia Diner, Max Weber and Leo Strauss are among many who believe Yiddishkeit with all its individualism and purported irreligiosity is characterized by Judaism at the core. Yet the disillusionment with the political promises of liberalism teaches the Jews that Enlightenment is not innocent; gentiles may be emancipated but not Jews. With the incoming of the Second World War and the Holocaust and Auschwitz, Jews once again try a reaching back to their own traditions. This is the main stream of events and does not mean that all Jews became religious after the horrors of the gas chambers and the death camps. Many resisted any religious identification. Many more tried to hide even their ethnicity, despite the fact that the intellectual climate turned to a revival of religious principles because Orthodox intellectuals more than any other group felt

betrayed and fooled. The religious revival therefore takes roots and culminates in a group like Agudat Israel.

The major aim of these activities and revivals was to rehabilitate their under-attack ideology. The attack was on the Enlightenment philosophy which promised without the power to fulfill, but then these Enlightenment philosophies were started by the middle-class bourgeois who had made an undeniably significant progress. Since in many countries the Jews were the thriving middle-class, this attack was in many parts directed to them. Jews answer the attacks by establishing the truth of their promises as possible. What they do first is to purge this Enlightenment ideology of its Christian concept of linear progress. Judaism is anticipatory and prizes past. Therefore the Jews defined the utopian future in terms of turning back to Judaism after a time of deviation to Christianity, which is a Jewish teaching of the Old Testament. They also introduced changes in the relation of the subject with nature. The relation which was at the core one of the subject and the divinity had turned to be a relation of the subject and the institutions in the society under the influence of secularism. This tendency to amalgamate can also be found in Existentialism and Pragmatism as well. Both believe in the equality of sides and hope for a future which can be made through human effort. Therefore the Jewish intellectuals, by introducing a reconciliatory attitude, retain a degree of foundationalism and absolutist authority while maintaining individuality as an inseparable component of their principle. The utopia they promised is attainable because it was once existent and its regaining is also promised in the holy book, the authority of which is once again asserted.

In the last part of the work, which is mainly devoted to a reading of the novel *Herzog*, a brief background of Bellow's life is given and relevance is established between the social literary air and Bellow's practices as a writer who is also a Jew.

Bellow's life is more closely discussed from the perspective of the 30s to late 60s, because this is the span in which the major events of his life as well as the world happened. 60s is specifically important to Bellow and his writing career, because his ideas undergo changes at this time.

The first part of the analysis focuses on the religious atmosphere invoked in the novel, but very early in this part Nietzsche's idea of Dionysus revival becomes linked to a Jewish tradition of revival. The enchantment of Nietzschean tradition finds a parallel in the deviation story of the Bible and deviation in the novel is represented by an act of madness which in Herzog's case is his uncontrollable letter writing. Letter writing is an example of derangement, but is also the sign of inclination to an actuality. As Michael K. Glendey refers to the American experience of the world, there is always a fleeing to a non-existent idealized version of reality from the bitterness of present. This utopian thinking is then associated with the Existential motivation with nothingness. Cases of Herzog's actions motivated by imaginary situations are provided to establish proof for this discussion. An analysis of the characters in this work, mainly centered on Ramona, in whose light we also see Sono and William and Herzog himself, reveals many of the characteristics shared by and desired for by the Americans of the 60s to whom Bellow attaches himself strongly. Through this character reading, the idea of cultural visibility of the work introduced by Carelevale becomes evident. Though a cultural mirror, the work does not act as a passive recipient and neutral reflector of reality. The work is active, as are the Jewish agents of the novel; they see, comprehend, find fault, criticize and offer solution, and in all these phases assert their Jewish stance. These solutions are Jewish and Existential at the same time, and aim at a cultural recovery. The way to criticize is not bitter admonishing of the present ways, but a humorous outlook to the shortcomings of a society that is in search of perfection.

Humor functions as glue; it fills in the gaps and smoothen the face while leaving a trace of its medication. Bellow's humor does not try to hide itself yet it tries to fit in with the whole context. That is why his humor is identified as sober and is hard to appreciate. Through this device Bellow finds a way in to the culture he is trying to form.

Bellow has asserted that he refuses the Jewish-writer brand. With all he claims the Jewish streak of his works is evident. The best sign of this is the selection of Jewish characters almost for all his novels, that from among them *Henderson the Rain king* is only an exception. In the novel *Herzog*, part of his Jewish indebtedness is discussed to show his role as a committed writer of rational spiritual living. This part links Bellow's characteristic way of seeing the world to the philosophic issue of subject relation with the object and represents his ideal as the embodiment of a soul that partakes of both materiality and metaphysicality.

Intellectualism is the other motif to be discussed in the work. *Herzog* is an example of a disillusioned intellectual that favors a separation from the masses who are the causes of his pains. Not sending the letters, or just writing them mentally shows that the would-be recipients would not understand him. This alienation he feels is intensified when he falls short of establishing daily communication. The novel does not show *Herzog* as an alienated mad intellectual who is inefficient or ignorant culturally or politically, but pictures him as the searching soul of America claiming authority. As the issue goes the problematic relation of the intellegentia among themselves and their relation with the masses in the novel is analysed.

Next part of the analysis is mainly devoted to the practical influences of Existentialism in the novel. The role of the Existential philosophy will be analysed by following two paths, one discussing the issue of communication, to represent and clarify

