

# *The Bellarosa Connection* and the Hazards of Forgetfulness

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Saul Bellow's 102-page paperback *The Bellarosa Connection* represents a tour de *force* true to the spirit of the man whose name in its Italian corruption inspires the book: Billy Rose, the Broadway impresario and "the business partner of Prohibition hoodlums, the sidekick of Arnold Rothstein; multimillionaire Billy, the protégé of Bernard Baruch, the young shorthand prodigy whom Woodrow Wilson, mad for shorthand, invited to the White House for a discussion of the rival systems of Pitman and Gregg; Billy the producer, the consort of Eleanor Holm, the mermaid queen of the New York World's Fair; Billy the collector of Matisse, Seurat, and so forth ... nationally syndicated Billy, the gossip columnist."<sup>1</sup> Billy Rose, the man who was into everything, makes an unlikely appearance in Bellow's show as clandestine savior of European Jews from the Nazi Holocaust. Rose is the first real historical personage to play a major role in his own name in Bellow's fiction, and thus with *The Bellarosa Connection*, Bellow initiates himself into a group of American fiction writers, including E. L. Doctorow, Gore Vidal and William Styron, who imaginatively combine historically real people together with fictional ones.

Like Billy, Bellow is "all over the place"<sup>2</sup> with this book. Not only does Bellow make an exploratory foray into the genre of semi-historical fiction, but he also experiments with a new narrative perspective as well.

1 Saul Bellow, *The Bellarosa Connection* (New York: Penguin, 1989), p. 12. *The Bellarosa Connection* has also been reprinted as part of Bellow's *Something to Remember Me By: Three Tales* (New York: Signet, 1991).

2 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Jeffrey Hart has remarked that "In this book Rose corresponds structurally to Gatsby (or to Conrad's Kurtz), the bizarre figure we approach only slowly, and with increasing knowledge."<sup>3</sup> Hart might have taken this comparison to more fruitful ends and noted an important similarity in narrative emphasis as well. *The Great Gatsby*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *The Bellarosa Connection* are all as much, if not more, about the narrator's response to the "bizarre figure" than they are about the "bizarre figure" itself. Bellow's main interest in the book is the nameless Jewish and would-be-WASP narrator's reaction to the story of Harry Fonstein, the man whom Billy saved, as well as to Sorella, Harry's wife, and vicariously to Billy himself, a man he knows only from popular culture and the Fonsteins' descriptions of their contacts with him. For the narrator, the memory expert and retired founder of the Mnemosyne Institute,<sup>4</sup> the telling of the story ironically becomes an exercise in remembering what he had forgotten until his "emotional memory" was suddenly stirred by an attempt to contact the Fonsteins after a thirty-year lapse and the subsequent news of their death.

*The Bellarosa Connection* becomes the narrator's belated attempt at self-discovery, an effort to tear down all the barriers he has erected to protect himself from unpleasant recognitions and what he had regarded as "vulgarity or the lower grades of thought"<sup>5</sup> and to rediscover "the roots of memory in feeling."<sup>6</sup> This ultimately involves his awakening to his own identity as a Jew. But the book is more than just one man's act of tribute and self-recovery beginning in a comic tone and ending in a melancholy and plaintive one. Through the narrator's record of his recollections about the Fonsteins and their connection with Billy, Bellow manages to touch upon such grand themes as the differences between new America and Old World Europe, the significance of memory to personal identity, and the cultural and historical identity of the Jews. *The Bellarosa Connection* represents not only innovation but also continuity with Bellow's previous works in its focus on career-long concerns like the fate of the Jews in America and the difficulty of maintaining an inner sense of self in the midst of all the distraction

3 Jeffrey Hart, "Bellow's Best," rev. of *The Bellarosa Connection*, by Saul Bellow, *National Review*, Vol. 42, 5 March 1990, pp. 52.

4 *The Bellarosa Connection*, p. 1.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 102.

American life offers. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, *The Bellarosa Connection* is an important addition to literature dealing with the American-Jewish response to the Holocaust.

In his youth, the narrator had known Fonstein as the object of his father's admiration—someone who "had survived the greatest ordeal of Jewish history" and had "seen real action,"<sup>7</sup> and hence was held up to the "spoiled American Son"<sup>8</sup> as an example of "a person schooled in suffering and endurance."<sup>9</sup> The narrator's father "hoped it would straighten [him] out to hear what people had suffered in Europe, in the real world."<sup>10</sup> Having escaped from Poland with his mother, who soon died, Harry Fonstein travelled from place to place with his crude orthopedic boot until he finally ended up at Via Veneto where he worked as a translator until mysteriously informed one evening that he would be let out of his prison cell the next night and then taken to Genoa where he would board a ship to Lisbon. The man who secretly masterminded this Scarlet-Pimpernel-like<sup>11</sup> rescue mission was the seemingly "flimsy" and vulgar Billy Rose, who finally turns out in Bellow's book to be a more ambiguous and complex character than one might expect: To Bellow's Billy, "the God of his fathers still mattered—<sup>12</sup> enough for him to put his money into saving his European brethren.

After his arrival at Ellis Island where he discovers to his disappointment that he is to have no further connection to Billy Rose and a five-year stay in Cuba where he finds and marries Sorella, Harry returns to the States and becomes highly successful in the heating business with his wife's help. But Harry and Sorella, unlike the narrator, do not deny their roots or forget who they are. Harry does not assimilate at the expense of his own former identity, nor do he and Sorella come to define themselves in terms of their possessions or their recent success:

The Fonsteins were not your predictable, disposable distant family relations who labeled themselves by their clothes, their conversation, the cars they drove, their temple memberships, their party politics.... Though his face was silent and his manner 'socially advanced'—this was the only term I could apply: far from the Jewish style acquired in New

7 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Jersey communities — I believe that he was thinking intensely about his European origin and his American transformation: Part I and Part II.... Fonstein was doing something with his past.<sup>13</sup>

Harry feels that he owes Billy his life and therefore wants to meet and thank him personally, but Billy will have nothing to do with him. In fact, Billy is so adamantly against even speaking to Fonstein that, when Fonstein once approached him in a restaurant, he turned and faced a wall in order to avoid acknowledging him. Early in the book Bellow suggests various reasons for Billy's behavior in a conversation between Sorella and the narrator.

"Behaves as if Harry Fonstein never existed."

"Why, do you suppose? Afraid of the emotions? Too Jewish a moment for him? Drags him down from his standing as a full-fledged American. What's your husband's opinion?"

"Harry think it's some kind of change in the descendants of immigrants in this country," said Sorella.<sup>14</sup>

These speculations, which are developed and modified later in Sorella's encounter with Billy, hint early in the book at some of Bellow's thematic preoccupations in this work.

Sorella, the New Jersey "tiger wife,"<sup>15</sup> whose obesity the narrator constantly and comically dwells upon as a sign of the greatness of her soul, has made it the object of her life to study the atrocities of the Nazi era and to find a way to make Billy acknowledge her husband. She even befriends the embittered Mrs. Hamet who, because her love for Billy was not returned, compiled a journal recording embarrassing gossip about Billy's life. Upon Mrs. Hamet's death, Sorella inherited this journal, which she then planned to use as a weapon against Billy in Jerusalem. After hearing of Sorella's face-to-face encounter with Billy at the King David Hotel during which she attempted to blackmail him into meeting Harry, the puzzled narrator, who does not really understand why the matter is so important, asks what it was that Sorella was really after. She answers, explaining the greater significance of Harry's connection to Billy: "'Concluding a chapter in Harry's life. It should be concluded,'

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

said Sorella. 'It was a part of the destruction of the Jews. On our side of the Atlantic, where we weren't threatened, we have a special duty to come to terms with it....'<sup>16</sup>

In its portrayal of different American responses to the Holocaust, *The Bellarosa Connection* shares concerns with other works of fiction like Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, Singer's *Enemies: A Love Story*, as well as Bellow's own *The Victim* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, all of which concern in some way the inability or unwillingness of many American Jews to confront and deal with the horrors committed by the Nazis and their desire to obliterate the Jewish race. The difficulties Jews in America faced when they attempted to reconcile their own American experience of being Jewish with the Jewish extermination in Europe were no mere fictional dilemmas, however. In *World of Our Fathers*, Irving Howe pointedly summarizes the psychological plight American Jews suffered upon hearing of the fate of their European brethren:

During the postwar years the life of American Jews was inherently 'schizoid.' At home: improvements in social and economic conditions, a growing sense of ease, comfort, security. Abroad: the greatest horror in the history of mankind, the destruction of six million Jews for reasons no mind could fathom, no intuition penetrate. How were these two elements of Jewish experience to be reconciled? The only honest answer was that they could not be: it was a division which anyone who retained even the faintest sense of Jewish identity would have to live with as best he could.<sup>17</sup>

Besides finding the two realities—the American and the European—impossible to square with one another, many Jews were plagued with guilt as well, not only at being "survivors" when millions of their own people had been put to death, but also at not having done enough to affect official U. S. policy towards rescue of the Jews from Europe during WWII.<sup>18</sup> Three of Bellow's main characters in *The Bellarosa*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>17</sup> Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt, 1976), p. 626.

<sup>18</sup> One need not look far to find accusations aimed at American Jews who, according to many critics, acted as accomplices in the slaughter of European Jews by supporting policies that turned refugees away from American shores. Yehuda Baucr concisely summarizes official U.S. policy towards rescue of the Jews from Europe during WWII: "Every humanitarian consideration was dropped, and the slogan 'rescue through victory' became the statement of official policy" [Quoted in Edward Alexander, *The Resonance of Dust: Essays On Holocaust Literature and Jewish Fate* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1979), p. 121]. Edward Alexander bitterly remarks that rather than protesting an attitude that would condemn millions of their brethren to death, many American Jews actively supported Roosevelt and the American cause and thus "barely thought of allowing their Jewish loyalties to 'interfere' with the war effort" [*Ibid.*, p. 121]. Those who felt moved to action were impeded

*Connection*, Sorella, Billy, and the narrator, represent different American-Jewish ways of reacting to the Holocaust. Sorella, who struggles actively and unevasively with Jewish guilt in her research of the Holocaust and in her devotion to her husband, a Holocaust survivor, emerges as the exception rather than the rule. Sorella's size reflects the grandeur of her ambition.

In his encounter with Sorella, Billy refuses to think about the Holocaust and tries to dissociate himself from the Jewish issue by arguing that Harry suffered much less than others since he escaped the horrors of the concentration camps. When reminded by Sorella of the genocidal intentions of Hitler's regime and of the orders to the Italian police to hand all Jews over to the SS, he replies, "Look, lady, why do I have to think about all of that? I'm not the kind of guy who's expected to. This is too much for me."<sup>19</sup> Billy himself admits that he cannot deal personally with the terrifying realities of what happened in Europe and his own unavoidable connection with them by virtue of his own Jewishness. To meet and talk with Harry would require that he face his own feelings of guilt head on without the protective shell of his show-biz personality. Sorella mentions another of Billy's wartime exploits—the "We Will Never Die" pageant that she sees as being indicative of the American-Jewish way of dealing with the Holocaust:

When American Jews decided to make a statement about the War Against the Jews, they had to fill Madison Square Garden with big-name celebs singing Hebrew and 'America the Beautiful.' Hollywood stars blowing the *shofar*. The man to produce this spectacular and arrange the press coverage was Billy.... Well, it was full, and everybody was in mourning. I suppose the whole place was in tears. The Times covered it, which is the paper of record, so the record shows that the American Jewish way was to assemble twenty-five thousand people, Hollywood style, and weep publicly for what had happened.<sup>20</sup>

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by dissension within the American Jewish community, which "was unable to overcome internal differences and speak with a single voice" ["Jews," *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 592]. Thus an inability to get beyond bickering and petty disputes kept American Jews from making an effective effort to change government policy towards Jewish refugees. This inadvertently resulted in a death warrant for millions and set the stage for inevitable post-war guilt once the extent of the destruction of European Jews was revealed.

<sup>19</sup> *The Bellarosa Connection*, p. 61.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59. The actual "We Will Never Die" pageant presented by Ben Hecht took place on April 2, 1943 in Madison Square Garden. According to Henry Feingold in *The Politics of Rescue* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970) the pageant was not merely a show-business affair, as one might imagine from Sorella's description of it. Feingold maintains that "it proved extremely effective and thereafter the leaders of the rescue effort frequently tapped the theatrical talent in the Jewish community to bring its message to the public" (p.

Bellow's Billy could deal with the Holocaust as long as he did so in the trappings of Hollywood and Broadway, but a personal encounter in which he would have to meet face-to-face with a single survivor was more than he could manage. Billy altruistically finances rescue operations, but then, wishing to forget what is perhaps his life's only truly great action, he refuses to face those whom he saved, thus denying any kinship with them and rejecting the possibility of community. The narrator himself, after having long puzzled over Billy's behavior, poses a plausible explanation for Billy's behavior towards Sorella and Harry: "He wasn't able to be the counterexample in a case like Harry's. Couldn't begin to measure up."<sup>21</sup> In the presence of Harry Fonstein, a man who has truly suffered in the Old World and triumphed in the New, Billy would have felt himself to be the cheap and superficial showman he truly is. As Coral Fenster observes, however, "Billy knows his identity."<sup>22</sup> Billy himself says, "I don't care for my own story."<sup>23</sup> Unlike the narrator who has spent most of his life trying to forget where he comes from, Billy admits what he is.

Sorella offers a more extensive interpretation with far-reaching implications of what Billy's behavior might mean: "The Jews could survive everything that Europe threw at them. I mean the lucky remnant. But now comes the next test—America. Can they hold their ground, or will the U.S.A. be too much for them?"<sup>24</sup> Billy's behavior suggests that, at least for the characters in this book, perhaps America has been too much—a possibility supported by the violent and grimly ironic death of

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176) He cites the twelve-point resolution that the rally produced and argues that it served as the basis for the "new ground rules which became the crux of all rescue discussions for the next two years" (p. 176).

In "Why Billy Rose? Bellow's Use-Misuse of the Real Billy Rose in *The Bellarosa Connection*," *Saul Bellow at Seventy-Five: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Gerhard Bach (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1991), Steven Bloom implies that Bellow gives a "false picture" of the "We Will Never Die" pageant, as well as of Billy Rose as a person. He suggests that the success of the traveling pageant, which had been extremely effective in Madison Square Garden when it was first performed, was blocked by the Jewish Establishment because of Ben Hecht's connection with the radical Committee for a Jewish Army, the Bergsonites. Bloom goes on to say that "all this was just *one* example of how disunited American Jewry was, why they, why *we* didn't do everything in our power to help the Jews of Europe" (pp. 196-198).

21 *The Bellarosa Connection*, p. 65.

22 Coral Fenster, "Ironies and Insights in *The Bellarosa Connection*," *Saul Bellow Journal*, Vol. 9 (2) (1990), pp. 24..

23 *The Bellarosa Connection*, pp. 58-59.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

the only people in the book who maintain a true sense of themselves as Jews: the Fonsteins, killed on the New Jersey Turnpike on their way to rescue their wayward American genius son Gilbert. Gilbert represents the kind of "change" for the worse in the descendants of immigrants that Harry ironically had prophesied earlier. The story of the narrator himself suggests how that kind of change can come about and what the personal consequences of it may be.

The narrator, who never reveals his own name, is still suffering the judgment of his father who constantly charged him with "American puerility" in the "unreal" American world.<sup>25</sup> He himself admits "I was not my father,"<sup>26</sup> and says that at the age of thirty-two, in contrast to Fonstein who grew up quickly of necessity, he was still behaving "like a twelve-year-old," still drifting and playing the Greenwich village intellectual.<sup>27</sup> Looking back on his youth, the narrator realizes that the charges of immaturity and silliness were indeed correct: "Were we giddy here? No doubt about it. But there were no cattle cars waiting to take us to camps and gas chambers."<sup>28</sup>

Unacquainted with suffering and unencumbered by depth of character, the "memory man" got his start in business in his undergraduate days when "showing off at parties" he "would store up and reel off lists of words fired at me by a circle of twenty people."<sup>29</sup> The narrator is the quintessential "facts-and-figures" man and has made his millions by teaching the tricks of memory to such illustrious clients as The National Security Council, and other "executives, politicians, and members of the defense establishment."<sup>30</sup> Although the narrator pretends to disparage the kind of memory that involves "Rote, mechanical storage, an unusual capacity for retaining facts," as well as "nostalgia and its associated sentiments,"<sup>31</sup> he betrays himself as a person who has for most of his life been caught up in factual memory and its practical (business) applications. But as he writes, he finds himself straying into nostalgia and sentimentality. He even mentions that he reads his dead wife's books, "concentrating on passages marked by Deirdre and on her notes at the

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.



back of the book. It has become one of my sentimental rituals."<sup>32</sup> The command of facts, figures, and minute details has been his life-long habit, and only now does he become acquainted with another sort of memory—the kind connected with emotion. He himself suggests how different a task the telling of Fonstein's story is from his usual business: "I am preoccupied with feelings and longings, and emotional memory is nothing like rocketry or gross national products."<sup>33</sup>

Feelings, particularly ones of human affection and need, have been mostly absent from the narrator's life. People have not had high priority: he has cut himself off from his family to the extent that when he meets the Fonsteins in Jerusalem he must ask *them* how is father's widow is faring; during the time between his first meetings with the Fonsteins and seeing them again in Jerusalem, the narrator has thought of New Jersey as "only a delay en route to New York or Boston. A psychic darkness. Whenever possible I omitted New Jersey" and by extension, everyone connected with it;<sup>34</sup> and after the Jerusalem episode he thinks of Harry and Sorella as in-absentia friends in the "warehouse of intentions"<sup>35</sup> for three decades. His notion that he might join the Fonsteins for retirement in Florida after not having seen them for thirty years emphasizes how out of touch he is with normal social relations. But circumstances being what they now are, the narrator is sorry that he "didn't cancel a few Jerusalem appointments for their sake.... It would have been easy enough for me to clear the decks."<sup>36</sup> In his associations with others, the narrator in fact resembles Billy Rose: he can not be bothered with close personal contacts. He shares no sense of community with anyone, and his thirty-year abandonment of the Fonsteins can be seen as a slightly softer version of Billy's refusal to recognize Harry. The narrator himself remarks that "it's not really in us nowadays to extend ourselves, to become involved in the fortunes of anyone who happens to approach us."<sup>37</sup> Implied in such statements is not only a criticism of the narrator and Billy Rose, but American society at large, and perhaps most particularly American Jews who wept publicly in Madison Square Gardens but

32 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 46.

did nothing active to save their European brothers and sisters. Toward the end of his narrative the narrator admits that he realizes that he had misunderstood the whole affair between Billy and the Fonsteins. Thirty years before in Jerusalem, Sorella had tried to explain to him what the matter was all about:

"I made up my mind that Billy was going to do right by him."

Yes, sure, of course; Roger; I read you. Something is due from every man to every man. But Billy hadn't heard and didn't want to hear about these generalities.

"If you lived with Fonstein's feelings as I have lived with them," said Sorella, "you'd agree he should get a chance to complete them. To finish out."

In a spirit of high-level discussion, I said to her, "Well, it's a nice idea, only nobody expects to complete their feelings anymore. They have to give up on closure. It's just not available."

"For some it is."<sup>38</sup>

Upon learning of the Fonsteins' death, the narrator realizes that he too needs closure, and thus he writes *The Bellarosa Connection* in an effort to reach it.

That the narrative is a record of recollections told in a suppressed state of grief is not clear until the last pages of the book, even though the narrator hints that the Fonsteins are dead when he says on page three that he is trying to picture "the late Harry Fonstein and his late wife, Sorella."<sup>39</sup> Stricken with shock and sudden grief at the Fonsteins' death as well as annoyance at what he interprets as the cavalier attitude of the Fonsteins' house-sitter who gives him the bad news, the narrator immediately begins looking for a way to deal with his emotions, which, he finally must recognize, are intimately connected with his memories.

Suppose I were to tell him [the house-sitter] about the roots of memory in feeling — about the themes that collect and hold the memory; if I were to tell him what retention of the past really means.... But how was I to make an impression on a kid like that? I chose instead to record everything I could remember of the Bellarosa Connection, and set it all down with a Mnemosyne flourish.<sup>40</sup>

For the narrator, the writing of *The Bellarosa Connection* is not just another test of his memory's accuracy. His obsessiveness about memory of facts and details has dramatized itself earlier: first, in his attempt to

38 *Ibid.*, p. 57-58

39 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 102.

remember George Herbert's poem "The Flower," which he misquotes and does not realize is a poem partially about the power of emotion to color or even obliterate memory, and second, in his frenzy to remember the song "Swanee River," a song also ironically about memory and longing. The writing of the Fonsteins' story makes demands on him that are different from anything else he has had to face. Upon learning of their death, the narrator must recognize that their story has a significance that goes beyond its sensationalistic qualities: "If you were living in a house of such dimensions, among armoires, hangings, Persian rugs, sideboards, carved fireplaces ... you would better understand why the recollection of a refugee like Fonstein and his Newark wife might become significant."<sup>41</sup> Once he realizes how deeply he felt about Harry and Sorella, the narrator must figure out why he feels as he does and what part the Fonstein-Billy Rose story plays in his own life.

The quotation above in which the narrator mentions his sumptuous surroundings is reminiscent of many comments he makes throughout the book that emphasize his ambivalent attitude toward his antebellum house in Philadelphia and his multimillion-dollar fortune accumulated through the memory business. But this ambivalence is evidently newly acquired, perhaps even sparked by his new attempt to remember the Fonsteins after their death, the event that prompts him to record his memories. The ambivalence and irony that emerge as the narrator tells his story are brought about through a narrative perspective that functions on two levels simultaneously: the first indicates how the narrator saw the events as they occurred in actual time and how he saw himself at those times; the second reveals how he sees the former events *now* as he writes and how he has come to regard himself. This split-level view indicates just what it is that the narrator himself is achieving by recording his memories—the recovery of a sense of who he is. As noted earlier, the narrator testifies to his wish in earlier years to forget his New Jersey connections. As he is talking to the house-sitter on the phone, he admits again to having "closed out New Jersey mentally."<sup>42</sup> But on the second page of the book he gives a version of New Jersey that suggests a different view of the past: "I force myself to remember that I was not born in a Philadelphia house with twenty-foot ceilings but began life as the child

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

of Russian Jews from New Jersey. A walking memory file like me can't trash his beginnings or distort his early history."<sup>43</sup> Most of *The Bellarosa Connection* illustrates, however, how the narrator has indeed tried to deny his past and how this denial has affected his life. His enlightened view of the past comes only after his attempt to contact the Fonsteins and his shock at their death, and finally through his rehearsal and interpretation of the events through which he knew them. This for the narrator is the real Bellarosa Connection in personal terms.

For most of his life the narrator has played at being "Main Line" and has prided himself not only upon his "X millions" but also upon his acquisition of a WASP wife and other possessions "fit for a Wasp of great wealth."<sup>44</sup> In his pursuit of an all-American identity, the narrator has abandoned his Jewish background and cut himself off from his Jewish roots. But he is not peculiar in this; Bellow seems to imply, partly by not giving the narrator a name, that the narrator may be the rule rather than the exception in American society. The narrator describes Swerdlow, a man who is "both saturnine and guilt-free,"<sup>45</sup> and has drained "the Jewish charge" from his face. He explains that "One could assimilate now *without* converting. You didn't have to choose between Jehovah and Jesus."<sup>46</sup> But these comments are not meant to be taken positively. Of the Swerdlows the narrator then says, "What had happened to them couldn't have been helped."<sup>47</sup> These are the comments of a man who has only recently come to know better and perhaps realizes that the Swerdlows' mistakes are similar to his own. The narrator has come to realize that for American Jews who lived during the time of the Holocaust, feeling "guilt-free" is simply a refusal to deal with an important aspect of their own history and identity. The narrator then states that in America "Your history, too, became one of your options. Whether or not having a history was a 'consideration' was entirely up to you."<sup>48</sup> What the narrative reveals, however, is that there are very serious consequences for attempting to erase one's past and cultural identity.

In his youth and during the time he knew Sorella and Harry, the nar-

43 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

rator had tried to dissociate himself from the horrifying facts of recent Jewish history. Repeatedly reminded by Sorella of the atrocities done to the Jewish people, he refused to discuss or even imagine them: "I didn't want to 'think of the history and psychology of these abominations, death chambers and furnaces. Stars are nuclear furnaces too. Such things are utterly beyond me, a pointless exercise."<sup>49</sup> Looking back on his Jerusalem trip, the narrator admits that he had opted out of his own Jewishness: "This particular Jew couldn't say what place he held in this great historical procession. I had concluded long ago that the Chosen were chosen to read God's mind. Over the millennia, this turned out to be a zero-sum game. I wasn't about to get into that."<sup>50</sup> But even the vulgar Billy Rose has some feeling left for his people, enough to finance a Hollywood-style rescue operation and donate a sculpture garden to the state of Israel—two acts that indicate some kind of concern for his Jewish identity even if their main purpose is to exalt himself: "His calculation in Jerusalem was to make a major gesture, to enter Jewish history, attaining a level far beyond show biz."<sup>51</sup> But this is a lot farther than the narrator with his millions is willing to go.

The dangers of disowning one's historical and cultural identity suddenly manifest themselves to the narrator in a parable-like<sup>52</sup> dream soon after he has begun to try to contact the Fonsteins again. What makes the narrator wake up to his sleeping or buried self is a dream in which he sees himself in a hole, "not a grave but a trap prepared for me by somebody who knew me well enough to anticipate that I would fall in."<sup>53</sup> This person is himself, and the nightmare is that he cannot crawl out because he does not have the strength. He is overwhelmed not with fear or despair but with the sense that he has made a terrible mistake: "What made the dream terrible was my complete conviction of error, my miscalculation of strength, and the recognition that my forces were drained to the bottom.... I was being shown—and I was aware of this in sleep—that I had made a mistake, a lifelong mistake: something wrong, false, now fully manifest."<sup>54</sup> This realization he tells us is "essential to the

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>52</sup> In *Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man* (Rev. ed. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979) John Clayton notes that "In Bellow, such parables we in the form of dreams and these dreams are nearly always moral" (p. 38.).

<sup>53</sup> *The Belluoso Connection*, p. 86.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

interpretation of what I have set down about Fonstein, Sorella, or Billy even."<sup>55</sup> But even before that connection becomes clear he tells us that he was suddenly forced to recognize that he had been deceiving himself his entire life. This dream, this communication, reinterprets his outwardly successful life as an elaborate structure of folly and delusion: "Revelations in old age can shatter everything you've put in place from the beginning—all the wiliness of a lifetime of expertise and labor, interpreting and reinterpreting in patching your fortified delusions, the work of the swarm of your defensive shock troops, which will go on throwing up more perverse (or insane) barriers."<sup>56</sup> Now there is no escaping himself and the recognition that he has lived superficially, tritely and unimaginatively. His unwillingness to imagine and comprehend brutality, particularly the violence directed against the Jews—something he had earlier dismissed as a "pointless exercise"—has left him weak: "Your imagination of strength is connected to your apprehensions of brutality, where that brutality is fully manifested or absolute.... It wasn't death that had scared me, it was disclosure: I wasn't what I thought I was. I really didn't understand merciless brutality."<sup>57</sup> Along with the discovery that he does not know who or what he truly is, he must also accept that he has missed out on a great deal in life—that he has heard only a thin version of life's real music: "I had discovered for how long I had shielded myself from unbearable imaginations—no, not imaginations, but recognitions—of murder, of relish in torture, of the ground bass of brutality, without which no human music ever is performed."<sup>58</sup> He writes *The Bellarosa Connection* to find out who he is and whether it is still possible for him to hear the music he has missed in all its resonance.

For the significantly nameless narrator, the process of writing about the Fonsteins and Billy Rose helps to redefine his own identity as an American Jew. After his dream and before he finds out that the Fonsteins are dead, the narrator realizes that he had misunderstood the significance of the Fonstein-Rose connection:

For Fonstein was Fonstein—he was Mitteleuropa. I, on the other hand, was from the

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

Eastern Seaboard—born in New Jersey, educated at Washington Square College, a big mnemonic success in Philadelphia. I was a Jew of an entirely different breed. And therefore (yes, go on, you can't avoid it now) closer to Billy Rose and his rescue operation, the personal underground inspired by "The Scarlet Pimpernel"—the Hollywood of Leslie Howard, who acted the Pimpernel, substituted for the Hollywood of Douglas Fairbanks. There was no way, therefore, in which I could grasp the real facts in the case of Fonstein. I hadn't understood Fonstein v. Rose, and I badly wanted to say this to Harry and Sorella. You pay a price for being a child of the New World.<sup>59</sup>

But as the narrator very soon finds out, it is too late to discuss these matters with the only two people who would have understood them. When the narrator mentions that he has "been out of touch with the Fonsteins for too many years," the house-sitter replies, "People withdraw into themselves, and then they work up imaginary affections. It's a common American condition."<sup>60</sup> Now that all who were involved are dead and the perils of "imaginary affections" in place of real ones are clear, the narrator finds that he must face himself and his emotional memories alone. His claim to be angered at the house-sitter and to make him want to understand sounds like a coverup for feelings so overwhelming that he must write them down to keep from being overcome. Thus his resolve to write *The Bellarosa Connection* becomes the start of his own "self-revision,"<sup>61</sup> one that for Bellow represents the redefining of the self that all American Jews who have not come to terms with their own cultural identity and its connection with brutality may have to undergo.

Although Elaine Safer argues that the novel represents "the comic vision that arises from the juxtaposition of characters' high-sounding or romantic assertions and the characters' relativistic behavior,"<sup>62</sup> the effect of the book is finally sobering. The strong moral implications of the narrator's story and the serious, though emotionally repressed, tone on which the novel ends undercut, or perhaps overpower, the earlier comic or even flippant tone of the narrator. The Holocaust as the definitive event in modern Jewish history gradually darkens the humorous tone with which the narrative begins.

Bellow has elsewhere commented upon the difficulty of imagining the

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>62</sup> Elaine Safer, "Degrees of Comic Irony in *The Theft* and *The Bellarosa Connection*," *Saul Bellow Journal*, Vol. 9 (2) (1990), pp. 15.

horrors of the Holocaust as well as comprehending and accepting its implications about human nature:

The Holocaust may even be seen as a deliberate lesson or project in philosophical redefinition: 'You religious and enlightened people, you Christians, Jews, and Humanists, you believers in freedom, dignity, and enlightenment—you think that you know what a human being is. We will show you what he is, and what you are. Look at our camps and crematoria and see if you can bring your hearts to care about these millions.'

And it is obvious that the humanistic civilized moral imagination is inadequate. Confronted with such a 'metaphysical' demonstration, it despairs and declines from despair into lethargy and sleep.<sup>63</sup>

The narrator's dream in *The Bellarosa Connection* suggests that ultimately, especially if one is an American Jew, the imagination may be forced upon one. The notion that American Jews have escaped having to deal with the Holocaust by living in the United States reveals itself to be a dangerous illusion. Like Freeman in Malamud's "The Lady of the Lake" who loses his love through his denial of his Jewish identity and name (Levin), the narrator of Bellow's novel loses the human fellowship that an acceptance of his own identity could have provided him. The narrator realizes finally that he has missed out on a chance for community through meaningful connections to those whose history is inextricably bound up with his own. If his fate is meant to be representative of the fate of American Jews, the implication may be that, just as the elderly narrator's time is running out, the opportunity of American Jews to strengthen Jewish community through shared reaction to the Holocaust may be just about up. In his discussion of Singer's *Enemies: A Love Story* Edward Alexander notes that "The single shared experience which might creatively shape the inner life and direct the actions of a substantial group of American Jews as we see them in this novel is the Holocaust."<sup>64</sup> Except for Harry and Sorella who are killed, the characters in Bellow's book fail in this respect, just as Singer's do. Sorella's question looms as an appropriate epigraph on the American-Jewish theme: "will the U. S. A. be too much?"<sup>65</sup>

In her recent biography *Saul Bellow: A Biography of the Imagination*, Ruth Miller poses the idea that Bellow is perhaps directing Sorella's

63 Saul Bellow, *To Jerusalem and Back* (New York: Avon, 1976), p. 78.

64 Edward Alexander Isaac Bashevis Singer (Boston: Twayne, 1980), p. 109

65 *The Bellarosa Connection*, p. 65.



question toward himself, asking "Are you a Jewish writer? Or, to borrow the question from Sorella: Can you hold your ground or has the USA been too much for you?"<sup>66</sup> Although Miller's argument that the narrator is an alterego for Bellow seems misguided, the issue whether Bellow may be questioning his own identity as a Jew and attempting to determine his own role in history seems highly pertinent. The passage quoted above from *To Jerusalem and Back* suggests the enduring difficulty of trying to come to terms with the greatest horror in the history of mankind. The narrator's dream suggests that confronting the subject is ultimately unavoidable, and that attempts to avoid dealing with it are merely counter-productive retreats into a shallow and trivial life. As a Jewish American and a writer Bellow feels perhaps a particular need or even responsibility to try to respond in words.

The predicament of the American-Jewish writer who may be tempted to focus on himself, or art for its own sake, or even on the rich and varied life of America, but who finds himself inevitably drawn back to the darkest of all subjects, finds poignant expression in the poem "Persistences" by Anthony Hecht. Having seen in the whirling snow of a blizzard spectres he cannot identify, the poet speculates about who these people might be, wondering first whether they are enemies or friends, then whether they might be people who had wronged him in the past. His final recognition discounts the significance of his own injuries and illuminates his realization that he has a task more important to fulfill than elaboration on the misfortunes of his own past:

Who comes here seeking justice,  
 Or in its high despite,  
 Bent on some hopeless interview  
 On wrongs nothing can right?  
 Those throngs disdain to answer,  
 Though numberless as flakes;  
 Mine is the task to find out words  
 For their memorial sakes  
 Who press in dense approaches,  
 Blue numeral tattoos  
 Writ crosswise on their arteries,  
 The burning, voiceless Jews.(lines 41-52)<sup>67</sup>

66 Ruth Miller, *Saul Bellow: A Biography of the Imagination* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 332.

67 Anthony Hecht, "Persistences" *The Venetian Vespers* (New York: Atheneum, 1979), pp. 30-31.

Just as Hecht's poem does, Bellow's *Bellarosa Connection* points to the irrepressible persistence of the Holocaust in the minds of Jewish-American writers. Half a century after the fact, the Holocaust still haunts the imagination, and those who were lost seem still to cry out for a response. Bellow's dedication of the book to John Auerbach, an Israeli friend and Holocaust survivor whose life has various parallels to Fonstein's, suggests that Bellow himself might have intended the work as some kind of "memorial" for or tribute to those whose fate he, as an American, did not share.<sup>68</sup>

68 Bellow discusses John Auerbach and his history in *To Jerusalem and Back*, pp 30-33.