

School of Languages and Media Studies

English Department

Master Degree Thesis in Literature, 15 hp

Course code: EN3053

Supervisor: Billy Gray

**The Description and Meaning of Faces**

**in Selected Texts by Saul Bellow**

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HÖGSKOLAN  
DALARNA

MASTER DEGREE THESIS

Dalarna University  
English Department  
Degree Thesis  
Autumn 2011

## **Table of Contents**

1. Introduction	1
2. A Few Words about Physiognomy	3
3. Faces as the “Reflection of the Soul”: What Faces Betray	5
4. How Bellow Depicts Faces	8
4.1. Descriptions of Some Individual Facial Features	9
4.1.1. Noses	9
4.1.2. Eyes	11
4.1.3. Mouths/Lips	13
4.1.4. Skin/Complexion	13
4.1.5. Teeth	15
4.2. Humorous Depictions	16
4.3. A Recurring Image and a Recurring Adjective	18
4.4 Ageing Faces	19
5. The Protagonists’ Relation to Their Own Faces	22
6. Faces as Representations of the Whole Character and of Humankind	24
6.1 Bellow and Levinas	29
7. Conclusion	31
Works Cited	33

## 1. Introduction

“To see was delicious. Oh, of course. An extreme pleasure!” (*Mr. Sammler’s Planet* 147). Seeing, that is, visual impressions and renderings, appears to be an important element in the fiction of the American writer Saul Bellow (1915–2005): “the most basic activity of his fiction . . . is a matter of this very looking: the protagonist stares at the world” (Opdahl, “Strange Things” 14), and his prose could be said to work “through the acuteness and intensity of its seeing” (Clayton 293).

Thus, although Bellow is in many respects “a novelist of intellect” (Fuchs 67), who often fairly wallows – or, rather, has his protagonists wallow – in intricate theoretical analyses and subtle reflections on everything human, he is also to a very high degree a sensual writer. This comes to the fore in his tendency to dwell on descriptions of both physical settings and human beings, not least their faces. “[H]is incredible sensitivity to the physical world . . . gives . . . his intensely evocative description” (Opdahl, “Strange Things” 14), and “[w]hat is rather perfunctory filling-in in most writers’ hands becomes, with Bellow, a more important detailing, and investigating” (Lelchuk 59).

In *Humboldt’s Gift* one of the female characters tells Charles Citrine, the main character-cum-narrator, that he has “always been a great observer. For years I’ve watched you looking at people cannily” (375), and Charles Citrine himself says that “[p]eople . . . distinctly seen have power over me. But I don’t know which comes first, the attraction or the close observation. . . . a refined perception, coming suddenly, has great influence” (62), also declaring further into the novel that “from an early age I was taken aback to see eyes move in faces, noses breathe, skins sweat, hairs grow, and the like, finding it comical” (90). Although one-eyed, Mr. Sammler, the elderly protagonist of *Mr.*

*Sammler's Planet*, is yet another keen observer of humankind – an epithet that would seem to apply to Bellow himself.

In the rich array of descriptions of human bodies to be found in Bellow's texts, the focus is on different parts of the characters' bodies (legs, hair, etc.) and sometimes also on their clothing, but the contention of the present thesis is that faces often occupy a prominent place in these descriptions.

Not many of the secondary texts studied for the purpose of writing this thesis discuss Bellow's description of his characters' appearances. Keith M. Opdahl mentions Bellow's "masterly evocation of faces and bodies" in an article from 1979 (1), without, however, citing any examples, and Charles Baxter refers to Bellow's facial descriptions in his article entitled "Loss of Face," where he contends that in this respect Bellow belongs to the old school of writers who indulged in the kind of colourful physiognomic descriptions that are no longer fashionable among more contemporary novelists (23-25). Irving Malin also touches on this subject, in his analysis of *Seize the Day*, when he comments on what one of the characters tells the protagonist, namely, that he has "a very obsessional look" on his face, saying that "we [the readers] know it applies to almost all of Bellow's characters" (24) (a claim that is not supported with other references or quotations, however). Furthermore, Suhail Ibn-Salim Hanna comments on Bellow's description of noses (138-139), and Mark Cohen, finally, though not focusing specifically on faces, displays a clear awareness of the importance of body language in Bellow's fiction, stressing the "significant expressiveness of physical bodies" (7) in *Herzog*.

In certain of Bellow's novels, *Herzog* in particular, the number of references to and descriptions of faces – the faces of minor characters, even nameless, very peripheral ones,

as well as those of the main characters – is striking. These descriptions are more or less detailed and they often focus on different aspects of the characters’ faces, where individual facial features sometimes come alive and become expressive in unconventional ways. When Joseph, the diary-writing narrator of Bellow’s first novel, claims that “the face, all faces, had a significance for [him] duplicated in no other object” (*Dangling Man* 75), he seems to echo Bellow’s own preoccupation with faces.

The overall aim of this thesis is to investigate the motif of faces in a number of Bellow’s works. This investigation will be twofold. Firstly, it will centre on an exploration and an analysis of Bellow’s descriptions of human faces, chiefly in the three novels *Herzog* (1964), *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970), and *Humboldt’s Gift* (1975), but with examples selected from *Dangling Man* (1944), *The Victim* (1947), *Seize the Day* (1956), and *Mosby’s Memoirs and Other Stories* (1969) as well, in order to find out if there is any pattern to those descriptions. Secondly, the thesis will attempt to arrive at an interpretation of the more general, underlying significance that could perhaps be discerned in the frequent references to faces to be found in much of Bellow’s work, and in this context the thesis will discuss the possible connections between Bellow’s facial depictions and the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’ thoughts about faces.

## **2. A Few Words about Physiognomy**

Thinking about his wife, Moses Herzog, the protagonist-cum-narrator of *Herzog*, reflects that “[t]he bangs concealed a forehead of considerable intellectual power, the will of a demon” (102), one of many illustrations of the link that Bellow appears to make between the appearance of the face and personal characteristics. According to Baxter, Bellow

“holds to the assumption that you can tell who a person is simply by looking at him (or her) carefully enough” (24) – a claim that harks back to the art of physiognomy, that is, the description of “character through expression” (Hartley 1).

Physiognomy is “a practice [that] has persisted from ancient times to the present. In ancient Rome, the orator Cicero declared that ‘the countenance is the reflection of the soul’. In ancient China, Confucius said, ‘Look into a person’s pupils. He cannot hide himself” (Zebrowitz 2). The practice of reading and interpreting persons’ faces became particularly popular during the nineteenth century, largely due to the Swiss physiognomist Johann Caspar Lavater (1741–1801), who held that “the physical features of a person’s face and body indicated character, instincts, and behavior” and that “in the company of a stranger, [a] man will ‘observe, estimate, compare, and judge him, according to appearances . . .” (Hartley 16).

Even if Lavater’s theories have been contested and refuted, it would still seem as if “our views of other people are strongly influenced by . . . their facial features” (Zebrowitz 2). Baxter points to the importance of being able to read faces when you are an infant and have not started to communicate verbally (19). Nevertheless, even as adults most of us pay attention to, and interpret the expression of, other people’s faces and conclude whether they are friendly, angry, bored, sad, happy, etc., and many of us probably do, whether consciously or not, infer at least a little about people’s characters and personalities from observing their faces. In Bellow’s fiction such inferences are legion.

### 3. Faces as the “Reflection of the Soul”: What Faces Betray

Traditionally, at least according to a number of verbal expressions and proverbs, the eyes have been considered the mirror, or the window, of the soul (*Norstedts ordspråksbok* 296). In Bellow’s fiction it is not just the eyes, but the whole face that often functions as a reflection of a person’s inner life. Faces are read and interpreted, sometimes very explicitly so, as in the following quotation from *The Victim*: “His head came forward courteously and he seemed to read Leventhal’s face” (60), and sometimes more indirectly, as when Moses Herzog visits Phoebe, the deserted wife of one of the main characters in the novel, and he understands “[f]rom the extreme composure of her slender face . . . how her heart must be pounding” (*Herzog* 260).

Moses Herzog says about his own face: “His white face showed everything – everything . . . his eyes, his mouth made everything silently clear – longing, bigotry, bitter anger. One could see it all” (2). Faces give out information in an irrefutable way, information that the characters are often not, unlike Moses Herzog, conscious of themselves: the “troubles” of Wilhelm in *Seize the Day*, for instance, “were clearly written out upon his face” and yet “[h]e wasn’t even aware of it” (18). The face speaks, it signals things, often essential things, about the person it belongs to, and it reveals particular characteristics as well as providing a – more often than not changeable, constantly varying – picture for others to interpret. It betrays how characters feel, and even, to some extent, who they are. “Bellow’s good and bad characters are always revealed by their faces” (Baxter 24), thus “objectifying the inner truth of man in a physical image” (Opdahl 107). Rinaldo Cantabile in *Humboldt’s Gift*, for example, is not

without a certain brutish charm but he is a thug, which is obvious not only from his behaviour but also from “his hardened dagger brows” (83), and Elya Gruner in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* may have done business with the mafia, but he is a good character, about whom his uncle, Artur Sammler, says: “there is Elya’s assignment. That’s what’s in his good face. That’s why he has such a human look. He’s made something of himself” (251).

Bellow sometimes highlights the effort made by his characters to control their faces, usually in order to conceal or suppress what they truly feel, an effort which involves some kind of struggle, and which is frequently futile: “[t]he tongue tells lies as the eyes, nose, complexion, and muscles tell the truth” (Cohen 7). There are numerous examples of this. In *Herzog*, for instance, the main character on one occasion tries “to look right and proper but [his] face turns dead with boredom” (27), and when he visits Tante Taube, his stepmother, who has aged noticeably, “[h]e stare[s] at her, and trie[s] to prevent the horror from coming into his face” (245).

However, the protagonist in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* reflects that “all human beings put on certain airs” (227), which would make the face an unreliable source of information about the person underneath. Some characters do seem to be able to prevent their face from showing their true feelings or character, that is, the face can sometimes serve as a kind of mask, whose purpose could be to protect a character’s inner nature: “Shapiro was not good-humored although his face wore a good-humored look” (*Herzog* 68), or, as in the case of Mr. Sammler, to “spare” someone else: “Nothing was shown to Cosbie [a doctor, whom Mr. Sammler is tempted to consult about his various physical complaints] but a certain cool, elderly rosiness. A winter apple. A busy-minded old man” (71).

Another instance of concealment or manipulation of a character's face can be found in a telling scene in *Herzog* where the narrator observes his then girlfriend Madeleine as she transforms her face into that of a more staid, middle-aged woman, in preparation for a visit to a Catholic priest. She applies make-up very methodically and the narrator seems fascinated by the process and the gradual transformation ("absorbed in this transformation of Madeleine's face" 111). At the risk of over-interpreting, this passage could perhaps be seen as revelatory of Madeleine's untrustworthy character: she is not who or what she at first appears to be but hides unsuspected layers of personality beneath her well-groomed exterior. Behind the smoothness of her face lurk murky characteristics as well as the antagonism towards Herzog which will emerge at a later stage in their relationship.

A character's intelligence, for example, often shows in the face, as when a character in one of Bellow's short stories has "a long, intelligent white face" (*Mosby's Memoirs and Other Stories* 114). Sometimes, however, the information extracted from looking at a character is of a more surprising nature; on surreptitiously scrutinising Rinaldo Cantabile, Charles Citrine draws far-reaching conclusions: "His mouth was wide, with an emotional underlip in which there was a hint of an early struggle to be thought full grown" (*Humboldt's Gift* 87). The interpretation of the face of Charles Citrine's writer friend, Humboldt, is even more elaborate:

Humboldt . . . developed in his face all the graver, all the more important human feelings. You'd never forget a face like his. But to what end had it been created? . . . A world of categories devoid of spirit waits for life to return. Humboldt was supposed to be an instrument of this revival. This mission or vocation was

reflected in his face. The hope of new beauty. The promise, the secret of beauty. In the USA, incidentally, this sort of thing gives people a very foreign look. . . . Humboldt's face clearly showed that he understood what was to be done. It showed, too, that he had not gotten around to doing it. (Ibid. 16-17)

Sometimes, thus, what can be read in, and understood from, the face of a Bellowian character would seem to be of a remarkably subtle nature. However, with regard to Charles Citrine's deciphering of the expression on Humboldt's face, it is of course governed, or coloured, by what Charles knows about his friend.

#### **4. How Bellow Depicts Faces**

Some of Bellow's facial depictions are fairly short and straightforward, using basic descriptive words (in *Herzog*, for example, there are characters who have a "straight nose" [1], "large eyes" [27], or a "pale round face" [43]). More often than not, however, they are much more eccentric and colourful, enlivened by a metaphor, an unexpected comparison or an otherwise unconventional turn of phrase, as illustrated by the following examples from *Herzog*, where someone has "a white buttocky face with a few moles" (51), someone's eyes are "moist, the color of freshly sliced cucumber" (82), someone has "timid, whole-souled blue eyes" (163), someone's nose "twitches like a little rudder" (190), and someone's look is "like a steel bender bent open" (219).

The personalities, feelings, states of mind, reactions, and attitudes of the characters in Bellow's fiction are sometimes captured by means of the depiction of individual facial features, which are frequently endowed with a particular power of expression, almost a life of their own. Be it the shape and movement of noses, lips and eyebrows, the texture

and colour of skin and cheeks, the size, colour and position of eyes, the appearance of teeth, the form of foreheads, etc. – no part of the face seems to lack fascination and potential for expressivity for Bellow. Every feature is a possible mirror of the character's inner being.

#### 4.1. Descriptions of Some Individual Facial Features

##### 4.1.1 Noses

In a nineteenth-century text entirely devoted to the description of noses, and clearly influenced by the above-mentioned practice of physiognomy, Gath Brittle claims that “[p]erhaps there is no feature of the human countenance more neglected, more abused, than the nose . . . The most prominent characteristics of the individual may . . . be determined by the shape of the nose” (16-17), and the expressiveness and eloquence of a nose is often demonstrated by Bellow's depictions of this facial feature. In his review of Bellow's book *To Jerusalem and Back*, Suhail Ibn-Salim Hanna draws the reader's attention to his “character sketches that frequently pick on the nose” (138-139) and cites the following examples: “in referring to the nose of Jerusalem's Mayor Teddy Kollek, Bellow writes: ‘His nose is straight, short, thick, and commanding,’ while the nose of Meyer, the force behind the famous Institute at Rehovoth, ‘swells out, intricately fleshy, grainy – a topographical sort of nose’” (139).

Even if they do not always take centre stage, noses are rarely omitted in Bellovian depictions of faces. Characters are frequently portrayed simply as being “straight-nosed,” “sharp-nosed,” “pug-nosed,” or “fat-nosed,” without the addition of any more particular characteristics regarding their noses. Fairly often, however, noses are singularly expressive. They can be “austere” (*Herzog* 303) or “humorous” (*Ibid.* 320), and they can

even be both “wild” and “stern” (*Mr. Sammler’s Planet* 214). It is probably a fair guess that not many noses in world literature are described as being “wild.” Although Bellow is not, strictly speaking, a poet, he sometimes “provide[s] unlikely new partnerships between words which we would never have imagined getting together,” in the manner of poets (Barry 210). In a similar vein, he also uses imagery to characterise noses, as in *Humboldt’s Gift*, where a character’s “large nostrils . . . reminded [Charles Citrine] of an oboe when they dilated” (62).

Straight, well-shaped, and often small, noses seem to have positive connotations in Bellow’s fiction, whereas big, coarse noses are sometimes to be found on characters that are less likeable: “Bill had a Cosa Nostra look. There was something corrupt about his nose. Curving deeply at the nostrils it was powerful yet vulnerable. He had a foul nose. In a different context I would have guessed him to be a violinist who had become disgusted with music and gone into the liquor business” (*Humboldt’s Gift* 92). This character’s nose obviously speaks volumes.

In *Herzog*, the protagonist’s wife, Madeleine, who abandons him, is frequently characterised through her nose, and particularly through the twitching of the tip of her nose, something that seems to occur whenever she is upset, flustered or carried away. It is, in fact, almost like a leitmotif in the characterisation of Madeleine, perhaps indicative of the precariousness of her seeming wish to flaunt a façade of emotional restraint and contained elegance. There are many examples of this, but it will suffice to quote two of them, by way of illustration. Towards the end of their marriage, after Moses and Madeleine have made love, Moses is sad to get “[n]ot a kiss. Not a last touch. Only her nose, twitching” (60), and one time when they have to confront each other after the

separation, he notes that “[a]s she stared at him . . . her nose began to move very slightly” (301), thus revealing feelings that she fails to verbalise.

Some characters’ noses impose themselves more than others and are more active, communication-wise. Madeleine in *Herzog* obviously has such a nose, and Demmie Vonghel, one of Charles Citrine’s girlfriends, is also equipped with an expressive nose, “an upturned nose that confronted you almost as expressively and urgently as the eyes” (*Humboldt’s Gift* 19). Another case in point is Moses’ aunt Zelda, whose nose signals her shifting attitude to the protagonist in the course of one of their conversations:

Her downcast look, Moses at first took as agreement or sympathy, but he realized how wrong he was when he observed her nose. It was full of mistrust. By the way it moved he realized that she rejected everything he was saying. . . . her soft powerful nostrils dilated with suspicion. (37)

Eventually, however, “[h]er nostrils tensed softly. She showed him her sympathetic face” (40). Furthermore, in *Seize the Day*, Bellow says about Wilhelm, the main character, that “his nostrils grew wide with a look of suffering appeal that stirred his father even more deeply against him” (117). In other words, Bellowian noses are not just organs of smell and breathing; they provide rich possibilities for subtle expression, and many of Bellow’s characters obviously communicate by means of their noses, if involuntarily, and of course with varying degrees of expressivity.

#### 4.1.2. Eyes

The independent power of expression often attributed to individual traits in Bellow’s fiction obviously applies to eyes as well. Thus, each of the two eyes of a minor female character in one of Bellow’s short stories expresses different aspects of her personality:

“‘Oh,’ she said with sympathy, the one beautiful eye full of candour. The other fluttering with a minute quantity of slyness” (*Mosby’s Memoirs and Other Short Stories* 65). Another example of this phenomenon is when, instead of saying that Wallace, a minor character in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, was eager to please, Bellow expresses it thus: “The large dark eyes in the big orbits wished to offer courteous entertainment” (148), almost as if Wallace’s eyes had a will of their own.

Bellow has one of his characters reflect that “[t]hose who try to interpret humankind through its eyes are in for much strangeness – perplexity” (*Mosby’s Memoirs and Other Stories* 63), thus suggesting that the eyes are not necessarily the facial feature that best mirrors a person’s soul. This suggestion is further emphasised by, for example, the description of a woman in *Dangling Man* who has “recessed brown eyes which you vainly read and reread for a meaning” (161).

The inscrutability where eyes are concerned, does not, however, apply to all characters. The eyes of Valentine Gersbach, for example, one of the main characters in *Herzog*, are prominent in the numerous portrayals of him, and the intensity and the heat exuded by his eyes are pointed out more than once, turning the description of them into a characterisation of Gersbach: “[He] had a pair of extraordinary eyes for a red-haired man, brown, deep, hot eyes, full of life. The lashes, too, were vital, ruddy-dark, long and childlike” (19). (It is worth noting that even Gersbach’s eye-lashes are endowed with a life of their own.) Gersbach is in fact so present in his eyes that they are said to be “like the broth of his soul” (61).

Moreover, eyes sometimes express what the rest of the face does not. Although she cries, Madeleine’s mother Tennie has eyes “shaped to make what seemed to Moses a

crooked appeal” (*Herzog* 109), and although Moses’ brother Will averts his face when talking to him, as if not really paying attention to what is being said, “his eyes were quietly and firmly shrewd” (*Herzog* 329).

#### 4.1.3. Mouths/Lips

“He was so pleased, thought Rogin, with all he owned and all he did and all he was that he could hardly unfasten his lip. Look at that lip, sticking up at the tip like a little thorn or egg tooth” (*Mosby’s Memoirs and Other Stories* 144). The character in question is a complete stranger to Rogin, the narrator, and yet his mouth gives rise to fairly advanced speculations about his personality. A similar phenomenon occurs when Artur Sammler examines an unknown young man in the street and registers his “heavy all-savoring, all-rejecting lip” (*Mr. Sammler’s Planet* 35).

As is the case with other facial features, mouths/lips declare something about the personality of their “owner.” If a character has, like Elya Gruner, also in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, “large noble lips” (62), it is bound to mean that this character has a noble nature. Similarly, when a doctor looks at the protagonist in *Herzog* “with thin-lipped amusement” (307), those thin lips seem to give away what the doctor truly thinks of Moses Herzog. And when, on a visit to his dead father’s house, Moses remembers “how [his father] squirted his flowers at evening with a hose and how rapt he looked, his lips quietly pleased” (242), it is, significantly enough, the lips that are given the role of expressing his father’s pleasure.

#### 4.1.4. Skin/Complexion

Even skin can be presented as an expressive part of a face, as when Angela in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* is about to cry: “Open lips, wrinkled forehead, the skin expressing utter

surrender, traits of the original person. An infant” (130). At one point in the same novel, the main character’s daughter Shula is described as having “skin thickened with concentration” (17), which is of course indicative of Shula’s state of mind rather than a description of the actual appearance of her skin.

Furthermore, although by no means consistently so, the hue of a character’s face sometimes appears to be invested with meaning, ruddy, rosy faces high in colour seemingly denoting something positive, life-enhancing, and even sensual, whereas pale, white faces are often associated with negative states, such as unhappiness, or with unpleasant characters. Doctor Cosbie in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* appears to be quite a cold fish and his face is portrayed as “very white” (70). The face of Humboldt, who does not give the impression of being a happy man, is described as “white and tense” (13), and, immersed in the contemplation of the face of Rinaldo Cantabile, a less palatable character in *Humboldt’s Gift*, Charles Citrine recalls that “Proust . . . said that he often was attracted to people whose faces had something in them of a hawthorn hedge in bloom” and goes on to reflect that “[h]awthorn was not Rinaldo’s flower. White calla lily was more like it. His nose was particularly white” (62). This whiteness is further stressed on two occasions and seems to serve the purpose of emphasising Cantabile’s insensitivity and calculating nature.

In contrast, Ramona, Moses Herzog’s lover, who is portrayed as warm and eminently sensual, has an almost constantly rosy face: her cheeks are “bright” (66) and “red” (151), and the whole of her face is often “flushed” (180, 336) and “warm” (199) with a “ripe” (199), “rich” (204) colour. Another example – among many – of this phenomenon, that is, the association between warmth and vitality and a colourful complexion, is found in

*Mr. Sammler's Planet*, where it is stated that "Sammler appreciated the degree of life in Feffer, the marvelous rich color of his cheeks" (89).

#### 4.1.5. Teeth

Like other facial attributes, teeth are not devoid of expressive potential in Bellow's fiction, in the sense that they seem to reveal something about the character they belong to. Thus, Sandor Himmelstein in *Herzog* has "protruding teeth," and Moses Herzog reflects that maybe it was "the force of [Sandor's] hellish tongue [that] made his teeth protrude" (86). Cohen comments on this description, saying that "Himmelstein's unsavory character traits have literally shaped (or misshaped) his body" (7).

A certain sweet guilelessness is sometimes underscored by Bellow's attribution of childlike teeth to some characters. About Humboldt, for instance, he writes that "his mouth was full of immature-looking teeth, like milk teeth" (*Humboldt's Gift* 12), and the teeth of Tennie, Madeleine's mother, in *Herzog*, "were like the awkward second teeth of a seven-year-old child" (31). In contrast, when it is stated about Simkin, a lawyer that Moses Herzog consults about his divorce, that he, at one point, "showed his small regular teeth, iron-hard, as though about to smile, but this was a reflective preliminary" (30), the epithet "iron-hard" is obviously meant to betray something negative about his personality.

With regard to another character, Eisen, Mr. Sammler's son-in-law, who is portrayed as a figure of fun, bizarre and unpleasant, the correspondence between his "excellent teeth" (*Mr. Sammler's Planet* 137), also referred to as "peerless bones" (*Ibid.* 139), and his personality, is poor: "Teeth like that deserved a saner head" (*Ibid.* 137). However, even if the equation happens to be negative in the last example, it demonstrates, once

again, Bellow's tendency to equate inner and outer characteristics, as well as his tendency to zoom in on one particular feature that becomes eloquent in its own right.

#### 4.2. Humorous Depictions

A facet of Bellow's fiction that cannot be overlooked is his humour, "which is so basic a part of Bellow's craft," and his use of "a consistently comical lens" (Rovit 36). This humorous approach sometimes turns his descriptions of faces into near caricatures. Bellow could in fact be seen as belonging to "a tradition of literature portraiture that goes back to Dickens and Henry Fielding," partly because he is "a quick-sketch artist of minor characters . . . [whose] sketches sometimes approach caricature . . . [though] they usually do not arrive there" (Baxter 24). Although not explicitly talking of caricatures, Rovit points out that "[a]s a humorist, Bellow's dominant strength has been his powerful sense of the grotesque and his accomplished capacity to communicate that sense to his reader" (37). Presenting a human face in such a way as to make it appear like, or almost like, a caricature could be entertaining, of course, but it could perhaps also serve as a means to distance both the reader and the character through whose eyes the face is seen, from the character to whom the face belongs; it could, in other words, be a way of putting that character at one remove from the observer. In support of this, Opdahl mentions, in another context, "the distance Bellow . . . supplies in irony, symbolism, and caricature" (156).

The emphasis of this thesis will not be on the humorous tinge of Bellow's descriptions of faces, however, especially as the humour is not restricted to isolated descriptions of faces but often emerges from the overall description of certain "strange and colorful and

melodramatic” (Aldridge et al. 18) characters. Nevertheless, in order to illustrate the above, a few examples of particularly piquant and humorous portrayals, verging on caricatures, are called for, all of them except the last one taken from *Mosby’s Memoirs and Other Stories*. One female character has “a straight sharp nose. To cut mercy like a cotton thread” (49). A character called Hymen Lustgarten, whose very name is anything but inconspicuous, is described as “grinning with mulberry lips, a froggy, curving mouth which produced wrinkles like gills between the ears and the grin” (155), and, further into the story, it says about “his smile” that it was “like a spinster’s sachet, the last fragrance ebbed out long ago in the trousseau never used,” while “the long batrachian lips continued smiling” (160). A “cat-faced woman” has a “head ferociously encased in kinky hair, Picasso eyes at different levels, sharp teeth. If fish, dozing in the reefs, had nightmares, they would be of such teeth” (169), and the face of a minor character in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* is “real yellow . . . and sweating. Awful. He looked like an old oil filter that should have been changed five thousand miles ago” (102).

In his analysis of *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, Daniel Fuchs claims that “[c]omedy is reserved almost exclusively for the secondary and minor characters” (87), and it is worth noting that almost all of the above examples of facial descriptions concern minor characters. Although the character called Lustgarten has a fairly prominent role in the short story *Mosby’s Memoirs*, he is someone whom the protagonist views from the outside and is critical, and even contemptuous, of (Abbott 278). This seems to corroborate the idea that humorous descriptions, and descriptions with a flavour of caricature, can have a distancing effect, turning the characters thus depicted into objects of curious study rather than possible objects of identification. Those Bellovian characters

whom the reader becomes more directly involved with, because they are the protagonists or the narrators of the texts, tend to get a more nuanced, or at least less fanciful treatment, description-wise.

#### 4.3. A Recurring Image and a Recurring Adjective

Bellow's facial descriptions are far from repetitive, but every now and then certain images and adjectives recur.

One such recurring image, which is very graphic, is that of imminent death being shown on the face, or rather perceived by the onlooker, as dirt or soil. This image appears in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, perhaps because Mr. Sammler himself is buried alive under tons of earth by Nazi soldiers during the Second World War, even though he miraculously manages to claw his way out (226) and thus escape death. When confronted with a "German straggler" Mr. Sammler scrutinises him prior to shooting him:

Red-headed, a big chin bronze-stubbed, he was scarcely breathing. He was white. Violet under the eyes. Sammler saw the soil already sprinkled on his face. He saw the grave on his skin. The grime of the lip, the large creases of the skin descending from his nose already lined with dirt – that man to Sammler was already underground. (113)

Subsequently, looking at his nephew and benefactor Elya Gruner, who is in hospital waiting for an ineluctable death, Mr. Sammler makes the following reflection to himself: "Soil was scattered on *his* face. Look hard. You must see some grains" (115). Moreover, in *Humboldt's Gift* the very same image crops up with regard to Humboldt, whom

Charles Citrine catches sight of after a long break in their friendship: “the dirt of the grave [was] already sprinkled on his face” (112).

With regard to recurring adjectives, Bellow uses the word ‘flat’ on a number of occasions in order to describe faces lacking in expressivity or vitality. A young man observed in the underground by the main character in one of Bellow’s short stories “was flat-looking . . . so flat-looking with his ordinary, clean, rosy, uninteresting, self-satisfied, fundamentally bourgeois face” (*Mosby’s Memoirs and Other Stories* 143, 144). A not very likeable doctor in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, strikes “Sammler as a sort of human wall. High and flat” (70), and when Charles Citrine watches a film based on his and Humboldt’s script he finds that he “didn’t care for the man in the role of [the] fiancé, with his . . . flat face” (*Humboldt’s Gift* 463). There seems to be no mistaking the negative connotations of the adjective in question in Bellow’s fiction.

#### 4.4. Ageing Faces

A frequent theme in Bellow’s fiction is the sadness – or, as the case may be, the horror, and even the disgust – aroused by the sight of the destruction, or the gradual ruin, of faces, caused by ageing. Wilhelm in *Seize the Day*, for example, is confronted with a number of old men and reacts strongly to their degraded looks. Looking at a character called Mr. Perls, he thinks, “this damn frazzle-faced herring with his dyed hair and his fish teeth and this drippy mustache . . . How can a human face get into this condition?” (36), and when he comes into contact with a character called Mr. Rappaport, he reflects, “How old – old this Mr Rappaport was! Purple stains were buried in the flesh of his nose, and the cartilage of his ear was twisted like a cabbage heart. Beyond remedy by glasses, his eyes were smoky and faded” (92). Furthermore, in *Herzog*, the main character is

“stunned to see in full summer light how much disintegration had already taken place” (248) in his ageing father’s face, and “it made him pale to see” his own face “that was devastated, especially about the eyes” (20). The characters’ reaction both to others’ and their own symptoms of ageing are frequently strong and emotional. Again it is, significantly enough, the face, rather than the body as a whole, that is used to illustrate the signs of age or decay in Bellow’s characters.

Faces that are the worse for wear abound in Bellow’s fiction; they are often, as in *Herzog*, simply referred to as “haggard” (19), “wasted” (179), “grooved” and “lined” (244), or as having “sunken” cheeks (132) or mouths (178). Sometimes, however, the depictions of decay, or wear and tear, are more detailed and expressive. Of seventy-year old Mr. Sammler’s face, it says that “[f]inely, intricately wrinkled, the left side of his face was like the contour map of difficult terrain” (*Mr. Sammler’s Planet* 64), and a character in a short story has a “face [that] seemed to have been worked by three or four diseases and then abandoned. His nose swelled out, shrinking his eyes. . . . His face, brown, mottled, creased, sunlit, was edged with kinky grey hair escaping from the beret” (*Mosby’s Memoirs and Other Stories* 130). Furthermore, fairly early on in the novel *Humboldt’s Gift*, the narrator Charles Citrine observes that Humboldt’s “handsome face had thickened and deteriorated. It was sumptuous, it was Buddhistic, but it was not tranquil” (20). Yet things get even worse, and not long before his death “[h]e was destroyed . . . His face was dead gray, East River gray. His head looked as if the gypsy moth had gotten into it and tented in his hair” (53). Finally, the day after Humboldt’s, anticipated, demise, the narrator “opened the paper . . . and there was Humboldt, ruined, black and gray, a disastrous newspaper face staring at [him] from death’s territory” (54).

Ageing can be seen as the runway leading to death, and death and thoughts of death are seldom far away in Bellow's fiction, not least in relation to faces. He writes about a minor character called Libbie, a friend of Herzog's, who "had aged a little," that "[s]he was in the time of life when . . . the blemishes of ancestors appear – a spot, or the deepening of wrinkles . . . Death, the artist, very slow, putting in his first touches" (95). The face is, in a way, the outward seat of, or stage for, a person's inward vitality (or lack of vitality, as the case may be), the place where a human being's life force is most obviously exposed. Exposed often spells vulnerable, in the case of faces a vulnerability to all the vicissitudes in life, as demonstrated by the following significant passage from *Herzog*:

The family look, the eyes, those eye-lights. And though he recalled his mother's sad face with love, he couldn't say, in his soul, that he wanted to see such sadness perpetuated. Yes, it reflected the deep experience of a race, its attitude towards happiness and toward mortality. . . . this splendid face showed the responses of his mother's finest nerves to the greatness of life, rich in sorrow, in death. All right, she was beautiful. But he hoped things would change. When we have come to better terms with death, we'll wear a different expression, we human beings. Our looks will change. *When we come to terms!* ( 232)

Bellow seems to see our faces, and the expression on our faces, as coloured by our attitude to the human condition, that is, as the canvas painted by our life experiences and, also, by our ability, or lack of ability, to cope with death (for example, the death of loved ones) as well as with the idea of death.

## 5. The Protagonists' Relation to Their Own Faces

The protagonists' relation to their own faces is another important aspect of the portrayal of faces in Bellow's works. It is not uncommon for the protagonist's perception of his (in Bellow's novels the protagonist is invariably a man) state of mind to be reflected in his consciousness of his own facial features.

Mirror scenes are quite frequent, and more often than not the protagonists shy away from what the mirror reveals. Standing in front of his bathroom mirror while shaving, Charles Citrine, the narrator in *Humboldt's Gift*, thinks: "At all events I didn't care a bit for the way I looked in the mirror. I saw angelic precipitates condensing into hypocrisy, especially around my mouth. So I finished shaving by touch and only opened my eyes when I started to dress" (66). On another occasion,

[r]eturning from the bank [Charles] shaved, and . . . noticed how [his] face, framed to be cheerful, taking a metaphysical premise of universal helpfulness, asserting that the appearance of mankind on this earth was on the whole a good thing – how this face, filled with premises derived from capitalist democracy, was now depressed, retracted in unhappiness, sullen, unpleasant to shave. Was [he] the aforementioned sensible person? (*Humboldt's Gift* 64-65)

Thus, a character's face is read not only by others but also by themselves. The face reflects inner developments, and changes, in a tangible way.

A similar scene occurs more than once in *Herzog*, with the main character also standing in front of a mirror, observing himself with some aversion: "Old fool, he called himself, glancing away from the small mirror, the graying hair, the wrinkles of amusement and bitterness" (12), and, further into the novel, "[h]is face was before him in

the blotchy mirror. It was bearded with lather. He saw his perplexed, furious eyes and he gave an audible cry” (220). What the mirror reveals can even take the observer himself by surprise.

Artur Sammler takes a sober view of his own “elderly, . . . compact, civilized face” (2): “He had developed expressions suited to an Oxford common room; he had the face of a British Museum reader” (3), which, incidentally, seems to imply that his face has been shaped by his personality. There is, however, a mirror scene in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, too, where “[m]irrors on four walls showed Mr. Sammler to himself in more aspects than he wanted” (211). “Suddenly” realising that the house is strangely silent, Mr. Sammler “stopped shaving, paused and stared at himself, his dry, small, ‘cured’ face undergoing in the mirror a strong inrush of color. Even the left, the swelled, the opaque guppy eye, took up some light from this” (211). Mr. Sammler’s emotional reaction to the slightly ominous silence of the house becomes apparent to him through what is shown on his face.

Sometimes there is no mirror involved; the protagonist simply feels or visualises his own face. At one point in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, talking on the telephone to his dying nephew, Mr. Sammler “held the telephone, concentrating, aware of the anxious intensity gathered in his face” (217), and what is noteworthy about this passage is that it is in his face that Mr. Sammler’s emotions are contained, even to himself, even though no one else can see him and he is not standing in front of a mirror.

Moses Herzog undergoes a similar experience. Having, on an impulse, taken the train to Vineyard Haven, in order to visit a couple of friends and thus get away from his broodings, he suddenly stops in his stride and realises “what a look he had – such a face!

Just then his state of being was so curious that he was compelled, himself, to see it – eager, grieving, fantastic, dangerous, crazed and, to the point of death, ‘comical’” (92). Before the trip, trying on a pair of newly-bought bathing trunks and a straw hat, and, reminiscing about his mother wanting him to become a rabbi, “he seemed to himself gruesomely unlike a rabbi now in the trunks and straw hat, his face charged with heavy sadness, foolish utter longing of which a religious life might have purged him. That mouth! – heavy with desire and irreconcilable anger, the straight nose sometimes grim, the dark eyes!” (22). Furthermore, after the car accident that occurs during an outing with his little daughter, Moses’ “face felt bloodless, hollow, stiff, its sensations intensely reduced, and this frightened him” (282). Thus, his state of mind, not to say his whole being, sometimes seems to be centred in and epitomised by his face. Once, when Herzog – “a formerly handsome man. His face revealed what a beating he had taken” (3-4) – was particularly downcast, he even “felt incapable of looking into [a] girl’s pretty, healthful face” (241), as if everything that was lacking from his own life at that moment was concentrated in and represented by such a face.

## **6. Faces as Representations of the Whole Character and of Humankind**

In *Herzog*, where descriptions of faces are rife, the main character at one point quotes William Blake: ““Man liveth not by Self alone but in his brother’s face . . .”” (272). Although “face” is of course not meant to be interpreted literally in this context, living and interacting with other people, we inevitably expose our faces to each other. We are seen largely through our faces; it is the face of another human being that we confront when we meet in the flesh. Considering that the face is what human beings use more than

any other part of their bodies to communicate with other living creatures, and that the face is where feelings and reactions are most readily shown and interpreted, it is hardly surprising that the face can be used to epitomise, or symbolise, a human being, as is sometimes the case in Bellow's fiction. Thus, when Mr. Sammler thinks of his beloved nephew, Elya Gruner, who is in hospital, waiting to die, it is his face that he visualises, as if his nephew were more present in his face than in the rest of his body: "Elya reappeared strangely and continually, as if his face were orbiting – as if he were a satellite" (*Mr. Sammler's Planet* 184). In a similar vein, in *The Victim* one of the protagonist's neighbours is portrayed merely as a face: "Leventhal told one of the neighbors, whom he hardly knew, 'The super's dog is having a fit. Hear him?' An elderly, guarded, pale face gave him an uncertain smile" (58).

Letting the face represent the whole character like this – a kind of metonymy, that is, letting the part represent the whole – is sometimes presented in such a way as to have an almost comical effect: "Moses . . . saw her face – she was above average height – coming toward him" (*Herzog* 108). Moreover, at one point, when Herzog thinks about the face of Valentine Gersbach, his wife's lover, he even reflects that "[a]t moments [he] dislike[s] having a face, a nose, lips, because [Gersbach] has them" (45) – a telling comment on the role of faces as representations of the whole person/character.

Furthermore, towards the end of *Herzog*, when the main character has reached a more harmonious stage in the process of struggling to survive the divorce from his wife Madeleine, there is a notable objectification of his own face, where the face becomes almost a metaphor for himself, or for the desperate predicament of the past few months of

his life, as he thinks, “To surrender the hyperactivity of this hyperactive face. But just to put it out instead to the radiance of the sun” (326).

What happens to a character is sometimes very graphically mirrored by what happens to his or her face, or the other way around, that is, what happens to the face is indicative of what happens to the character as a whole: “Her face with its much-slept-upon skin was only faintly like her own – like a cloud that has changed. It was a face. It became a ball of yarn. It had drifted open. It had scattered” (*Mosby’s Memoirs and Other Stories* 34). Furthermore, characters are sometimes made to express their feelings not just in the actual expression on their faces but in what they do with them: “Uncle Braun died angry with Aunt Rose. He turned his face to the wall with his last breath to rebuke her hardness” (Ibid. 52). Rebukes can also be expressed through faces turning *towards* others, as in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, when the protagonist witnesses a fight between a pickpocket, whom he has encountered on previous occasions, and an acquaintance of his: “Sammler said to the pickpocket. ‘Let go. Let him go.’ The man’s large face turned. New York was reflected in the lenses, under the stiff curves of the homburg. Perhaps he recognized Sammler. But nothing was said” (238). It is worth noting that it is the pickpocket’s face, and not the man, that is said to turn towards Mr. Sammler. The face represents the man. The same interpretation could perhaps be applied to what Moses Herzog says about his brother Will, who “troubled but controlled, one of the most deeply familiar and longest-loved of human faces, looked at him in a way that could not be mistaken” (331). The love that Moses feels for his brother is, on this occasion, focused on his face, that is, his brother’s face is where his whole personality is, somehow, gathered.

Overall, the characters in Bellow's works communicate largely through their faces, at least on one level. They open up, or not, to other people with their faces; there is, or not, "a responsive motion in the other man's [or woman's] face" (*Mosby's Memoirs and Other Stories* 103). In this respect there is a significant passage in *Humboldt's Gift*, where the narrator visualises an encounter and contemplates the possibility of "opening" his face in the course of this encounter: "Could I throw myself into a new relationship with Langobardi, hitch a chair forward and sit with my elbows on my knees, looking into his face and opening my own features to the warmth of impulse?" (70).

Even more significantly, the reference to faces, in the plural, is on occasion extended to symbolise the whole of humankind, or, perhaps, what is most characteristically human (in the appearance of a human being). It is hardly a coincidence that one of the epigraphs to Bellow's second novel, *The Victim* (1947), is a passage from Thomas De Quincey in which faces are prominent: "upon the rocking waters of the ocean the human face began to reveal itself; the sea appeared paved with innumerable faces, upturned to the heavens; faces imploring, wrathful, despairing; faces that surged upward by thousands, by myriads, by generations." This could perhaps be seen as a foreshadowing of the extensive references to and depictions of faces in many of Bellow's subsequent works. A similar collective reference to faces can be found in *Seize the Day*: "And the great, great crowd, the inexhaustible current of millions of every race and kind pouring out, pressing round, of every age, of every genius, possessors of every human secret, antique and future, in every face the refinement of one particular motive or essence – *I labour, I spend, I strive, I design, I love, I cling, I uphold, . . .* " (122). Yet another case in point is a reference to Stalin in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, where Stalin's purges, and his cruelty to, and inhuman

treatment of, many of his subjects, are expressed as “[t]hat mighty enjoyment of consuming the breath of men’s nostrils, swallowing their faces like a Saturn” (118). Furthermore, on a few occasions Mr. Sammler observes the faces of people he passes or stands next to in New York, where he lives, and his observations are rather bleak. Pondering what he calls man’s “poverty of soul, its abstract state,” he thinks that he “could see [it] on faces on the street” (232), and, further on, “briefly examining faces, passing from face to face to face among the people along the curb – red, pale, swarthy, lined taut or soft, grim or adream, eyes bald-blue, iodine-reddish, coal-seam black,” he reflects “how strange a quality their inaction had” (239). The faces described in the last quotation belong to people who are gaping at an aggression and do not lift a finger to intervene and help the person who is being attacked. These nameless faces seem to represent humankind, and in a way that is far from uplifting.

Another instance where the mention of faces is not related to the description of individual characters, but has a wider significance, occurs when Mr. Sammler, on a semi-professional visit to Gaza (he has followed an irresistible urge to go there and see things for himself during the Six-Day War and report back in articles to Polish newspapers), is confronted with the decomposing faces of dead Arabic soldiers. His rendering of those faces is so graphic as to be almost overwhelming: “In the sun the faces softened, blackened, melted, and flowed away. The flesh sank to the skull, the cartilage of the nose warping, the lips shrinking, eyes dissolving, fluids filling the hollows and shining on the skin” (207). Mr. Sammler also looks at “captured snipers on the bed of a truck, trussed up and blindfolded. Below these eye rags, the desperate faces, as if it were *not* a most minor affair [The war has earlier been referred to as “a most minor affair”]. . . . the wish to cry .

. . . flashed through him when he saw the snipers' bandaged faces" (209). No words are exchanged; the faces have their own language, their own power of expression, appealing to Mr. Sammler's deepest feelings and, ultimately, to his sense of humanity.

### 6.1. Bellow and Levinas

The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas wrote extensively on the subject of faces, and, "although there is no evidence that Bellow read Levinas" (Atkinson 4), it is hard not to associate to his thoughts and ideas when reading Bellow. Levinas rejects the more fragmented perception of faces as eyes, noses, mouths, etc., as being superficial: "The face speaks" (87), yet "[y]ou turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. When one observes the color of the eyes one is not in social relationship with the Other" (85). Instead he defines the face as "signification," as "meaning all by itself" – "the face is not 'seen'; you "respond to it" (88). As phrased by Bettina Bergo in her entry on Levinas in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the face "is [for Levinas] pure expression; expression affects me before I can begin to reflect on it." However, as has been amply shown in this thesis, Bellow does indeed zoom in on individual features, and his characters do reflect on the particulars of the faces they are confronted with. This is an approach that might, seen with the eyes of Levinas, have an objectifying effect, that is, an effect that prevents the reader, or the other characters in the novels, from responding to the whole person, in his or her complexity, behind the face, and particularly so in the case of humorous depictions of faces (see above). It is, nevertheless, obvious that in spite of his preoccupation with the appearance of faces, Bellow's interest in them has a wider significance that goes beyond the pleasure he seems to take in painting verbal portraits. Besides, it should be pointed

out, in this context, that Bellow's characters are of course not defined solely by their faces; it is but one – undeniably often conspicuous – aspect of his character depiction.

Another point that Levinas makes about the face is that it “is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence” (86), and towards the end of *Mr. Sammler's Planet* there is a scene that can be related to this statement. The pickpocket referred to above, and who plays quite an important part in the novel, has his face smashed; his downfall comes in the shape of a bleeding face, an outcome that Mr. Sammler is outraged by. According to Levinas, the fact that the face is exposed “in its nudity and defencelessness” (Bergo) is, however, at the same time “what forbids us to kill” (Levinas 86), which directly ties in with another passage in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*:

‘There is a scene in *War and Peace* I sometimes think about,’ said Sammler. ‘The French General Davout, who was very cruel . . . was sending people to the firing squad in Moscow, but when Pierre Bezukov came up to him, they looked into each other's eyes. A human look was exchanged, and Pierre was spared. Tolstoy says you don't kill another human being with whom you have exchanged such a look.’ (155)

This theory does not, however, apply to Artur Sammler himself, since in his youth he shot, even relishing the act, a German soldier whom he did look in the eye prior to killing him. On the other hand, the Sammler who pulled the trigger was an emaciated wreck, having only barely survived extreme hardships, and “was then not entirely human” (114).

## 7. Conclusion

From the abundance of references to and depictions of faces found in the texts by Bellow studied for the purpose of writing this thesis, certain patterns emerge.

Thus, there appears to be an undeniable link between the personality of a Bellovian character and his or her face, a link that is reminiscent of the tenets of physiognomy and that can be said to connect Bellow with nineteenth-century writers such as Dickens and Fielding. Bellow's facial portrayals frequently convey a host of information about a character – not only about his or her overall personality but also about the character's reactions, attitudes, feelings, etc., as well as about the treatment life has subjected him or her to, for example in the shape of ageing. However, it is evident from a number of quotations selected for this thesis that the face not only reveals but can also, at times, be used to conceal a character's inner nature. Bellow's depictions of faces – whether beautiful or ugly, youthful or ageing, and whether they belong to a minor character or a protagonist – are made with the unwavering hand of a literary craftsman: they are often elaborate and colourful, every now and then adorned with surprising metaphors and comparisons, and they are sometimes – particularly in the case of minor characters – humorous, verging on caricatures. Overall, it would perhaps be fair to say that what appears to be Bellow's own fascination with his teeming gallery of characters is, at least partly, expressed by the vitality of his facial portrayals.

Furthermore, the thesis highlights the fact that the individual features of Bellovian faces are often singularly alive and expressive, participating actively in the communication between the characters; a nose, a mouth, or a set of teeth can be as eloquent as – and in some cases even more eloquent than – the words uttered by a

character in Bellow's fiction. This phenomenon is so frequent as to constitute a kind of pattern.

There is also evidence of a special kind of relation between a character, usually the male protagonist, and his own face, in the sense that a character may discover, or become aware of, things about himself on observing (often in a mirror), or simply sensing, his own face.

In the last section, the thesis tries to show that there is support for the interpretation that Bellow sees the face as the epitome of a human being, and that in Bellow's fiction the face can therefore, to some extent, serve as the symbol and representation both of an individual character and of humankind. The connection between Levinas and Bellow that is touched upon in this context is not one of exact correspondence, since the latter's approach to faces is different from that of Levinas. There is, nevertheless, an irrefutable parallelism between Bellow and Levinas in their intense interest in, and awareness of, the significance of the face and the role it plays in human interaction – a significance and a role that could perhaps be said to be reflected in what Joseph in *Dangling Man* says about his own face: “my face was to me the whole embodiment of my meaning. It was . . . the way I received the world, clutched at it, and the way, moreover, in which I announced myself to it” (76).

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