Review of Contemporary Philosophy
ISSN: 1841-5261, e-ISSN: 2471-089X
Vol 24 (1), 2025
pp. 419 - 429

"The Comic Grave: Memory, Mortality, and Mockery in Saul Bellow's Short Fiction"

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Abstract

In "Mosby's Memoirs, " memory becomes a performative space for moral self-justification—but also a deeply ironic space where the protagonist's illusions are entombed, exposed, and even ridiculed. Through the character of Mosby, a self-aggrandizing bureaucrat-turned-memoirist, Bellow enacts a subtle dismantling of intellectual self-importance and cultural legacy. The study examines how mockery, apostrophic performance, and narrative disintegration converge in the protagonist's self-narration, thereby reflecting Bellow's broader philosophical concerns with mortality, spiritual decline, and the inadequacy of language to capture the soul's elusive residue. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of memory and George Steiner's lament of the "after-speech" condition, the article positions the story as a text that both inherits and subverts the confessional tradition. It is through Mosby's rhetorical collapse and ironic grandeur that Bellow constructs a new form of tragicomedy: one where the grave is comic not because death is mocked, but because meaning itself disintegrates under the weight of self-awareness. Ultimately, this paper argues that Bellow's story stages a late-modern meditation on the death of intellectual mastery, and with it, the decay of the self's last stronghold—its voice.

Key words: Memory, Mortality, Irony, Self-Representation, Masculinity, Narrative Control, American Jewish fiction, and Saul Bellow.

Received:16 December 2024 **Accepted:**12 March 2025 **Published**:03 July 2025

Introduction: "The Grave of Laughter"

In "Mosby's Memoirs," Saul Bellow offers a study not just in character but in cultural afterlife. The story's narrator—Mosby, an ex-intelligence officer and self-appointed moralist—sits among the ruins of his past, spinning a monologue that hovers uneasily between remembrance and performance, between failure and theatricality. He assembles fragments of his past not to relive them, but to display them—like relics in a rhetorical cabinet where sincerity fades into crafted illusion. His memoirs, though ostensibly a record of experience, remain forever in progress—unfinished in both form and intention. In that incompletion lies the deeper function of the story: memory operates less as a vessel of truth than as a site of burial, a tomb constructed from recollection and irony. What emerges is a vision of the self as both speaker and specter, a consciousness trapped in rehearsal, building monuments from fragments.

This article approaches "Mosby's Memoirs" as a signature text of Bellow's later period, in which narrative voice becomes inseparable from decay—both moral and aesthetic. As critics have long observed, Bellow's post-*Humboldt* fiction departs from the existential vitality of his mid-career protagonists and enters a phase of thematic and stylistic entrenchment. As Peter Wagner notes in his review of Malcolm Bradbury's *The Modern American Novel*, Bradbury characterizes late twentieth-century fiction as increasingly fragmented, self-reflexive, and defined by what he calls a "literature of exhausted vision"—a condition in which narrative form registers the erosion of moral and philosophical certainties (Wagner 1985, 309–11). This diagnosis is echoed in Jeffrey Meyers' account of Martin Amis's reflections on Bellow's late style. For Amis, as Meyers records, Bellow's later prose retains its intellectual density but moves in a more somber register—what Amis evocatively describes as a "Beckettian afterglow," in which language continues even after belief has receded (Meyers 2023). Amis further characterizes this phase as preoccupied with "last things, leave-taking and final lucidities," a description that captures the tonal and thematic gravity of "Mosby." In this light, the story becomes a self-aware performance of narrative fatigue: a comic tomb in

which humor no longer resists absurdity but delineates its contours. As Amis suggests, this is not the exuberant irony of youth but a posthumous wit—more elegiac than satirical. The narrator's voice refrains from imposing meaning and instead survives its absence, enacting the very cultural and literary depletion that Bradbury, as summarized by Wagner, attributes to the postmodern condition. What remains is no longer the novel as a moral vessel; it becomes a self-interrogating shell—animated only faintly by memory's pulse and the reflex of laughter.

Closely tied to this is the concept of moral theatre, which refers to the way Mosby dramatizes his ethical life. His narrative is staged like a courtroom soliloquy, filled with self-defense, appeals, and selective memory. Rather than invite judgment from others, he delivers a monologue that acts as its own trial—a performance of ethics, not a demonstration of them. In Mosby's case, the performance draws on deeper cultural echoes.

The name "Mosby" itself carries possible resonance beyond the fictional context. Readers may recall Colonel John Singleton Mosby (1833–1916), the Confederate guerrilla fighter turned Republican statesman, whose *Memoirs* (1917) construct a legacy of military daring, political transformation, and rhetorical command (Mosby 1917). Like Bellow's narrator, the historical Mosby was a figure of self-fashioning—shaping his identity through anecdote, justification, and retrospective coherence. Yet the differences are telling. Where the Colonel memorialized boldness and battlefield precision, Dr. Willis Mosby constructs a monument to evasion, irony, and moral fatigue. One writes to reinforce cultural mythology; the other speaks into its ruins. By echoing this name, whether intentionally or not, Bellow frames "Mosby's Memoirs" as a meditation on how the American tradition of self-narration—once tied to honor and history—has withered into bureaucratic performance and existential drift.

The story is also structured around the rhetorical figure of apostrophe—an address to someone or something absent or unreachable—not in the grammatical sense, but as a literary device in which a speaker appeals to the irretrievable. Mosby's voice is an apostrophe to the past, to lost ideals, to a society that no longer listens. His words hover in a vacuum, answered by no one, acknowledged by nothing but the echo of his own diction. In doing so, Bellow turns apostrophe into a meditation on narrative futility: speech directed at a void, performance staged for an absent audience. Where Bellow's earlier protagonists—Herzog, Sammler, Citrine—embodied a spiritual or intellectual striving, Mosby offers no such momentum. He does not search, question, or suffer in pursuit of wisdom. He dramatizes collapse without acknowledging it. His mind abandons dialectical tension and sinks into mimicry. The contrast lies less in worldliness versus transcendence and more in the tension between language and silence. In this way, "Mosby's Memoirs" signals a shift in Bellow's *oeuvre*: the philosopher-hero becomes the rhetorician in exile, the thinker turned vaudevillian, a figure who no longer interprets existence but juggles its remains.

This study aims to unpack the narrative scaffolding, tonal dissonance, and philosophical residue embedded in "Mosby's Memoirs." The story is more than an old man's reckoning with his failures. It is a fable about the exhaustion of cultural voice in a world that no longer remembers how to listen. Mosby treats truth as something to be performed more willingly than discovered. His performance unfolds like a ritual elegy, drained of revelation. And yet, through Bellow's layered irony, something fragile and persistent survives. The very futility of Mosby's self-narration becomes its strength. In a universe where meaning is frayed and memory is unreliable, speaking at all becomes a final gesture of dignity.

As Paul Ricoeur writes, memory is not retrieval but refiguration: it is an act of re-narration that carries within it both violence and grace. In Mosby's case, the grace is buried. What remains is the ritual of remembering, the ceremony of speech, the tragedy of endless revision. And perhaps that is Bellow's quietest joke—that in a world where nothing endures, the monologue continues anyway. The comic grave opens not to bury meaning, but to echo its absurd persistence.

Section I: Mockery as Metaphysics – Mosby and the Performance of Memory

The story begins in the third person, creating the illusion of objective distance. Yet the protagonist promptly seizes control of the narration, transforming it into an unbroken first-person monologue. Mosby does not

merely speak—he occupies the text. What unfolds is no longer a story about Mosby; it becomes a story by Mosby. His voice commandeers the narrative space, silencing all others, including the formal narrator. A comparable technique is examined in *"Exploring Power and Vulnerability in Saul Bellow's 'Leaving the Yellow House'"* (Assadi, forthcoming 2025), where the protagonist, Hattie Waggoner, disrupts the authority of the omniscient narrator by asserting her subjectivity through apostrophic address and cinematic self-framing. While Hattie's strategies emerge from vulnerability and interiority, Mosby's are driven by performative dominance and rhetorical control. In both cases, Bellow explores how narrative structure becomes a site of resistance, authorship, and identity reformation.

Mosby's approach aligns with what Erving Goffman (1959) identifies as dramaturgical performance: the staging of selfhood for an imagined audience. He curates the scene, scripts all roles, and ensures the spotlight remains firmly on himself. The result is a monologue of managed impression, far from confessional transparency. Through this narrative architecture, Bellow turns the memoir into a space of domination, where language obscures as much as it reveals, and performance eclipses introspection. This narrative seizure is existential in nature. "I speak now as the only one remaining who knows how things really were" (Bellow, 305), Mosby proclaims, establishing himself as the sole arbiter of truth. The monologic structure that follows is unbroken, uninviting, and unrepentant. No other voice interrupts, no external frame challenges his recollections. Like a playwright performing his own script, Mosby edits, arranges, and dramatizes each moment. When h Mosby's narrative is not driven by truth but by theatrical gesture. He is less interested in reflection than in display. At one point, he tells Lustgarten proudly: "He should have the pride of one who shook the hand of the hand that shook the hand of Franco" (Bellow 1968, 174). This absurdist chain of borrowed prestige captures his need to aggrandize himself through proximity to power, even when the connection is laughably indirect. The past is not something Mosby understands—it is something he stages. Each anecdote becomes a miniature performance, calibrated to preserve the illusion of consequence.

Yet Mosby's theatrical control belies a deeper metaphysical erosion. His eloquence conceals the absence of action. He boasts, criticizes, and preens, but behind his rhetorical mastery lies a life hollowed out of real moral deeds. At one moment, he refers to himself in the third person—*"When Mosby met him..."*—a gesture evocative of Henry Adams's self-distancing in *The Education of Henry Adams* (Bellow 1968, 165–66). Elsewhere, he quips, *"Mosby got the message"* (165), reinforcing this pattern of stylized estrangement. These rhetorical maneuvers transform memory into performance; Mosby is not simply recalling events, but curating them, polishing his persona even as it fractures. The self becomes a character in his own monologue, managed and narrated from a performative distance. On the final page, he declares, *"I was complete"* (183)—a phrase that rings hollow. What he calls completion is merely the exhaustion of narrative, not the achievement of coherence. He performs success, but what he reveals is evasion. The voice is polished; the life, unexamined.

Mockery becomes the governing principle of Mosby's metaphysics. He ridicules sincerity and transforms moral seriousness into farce. His narrative posture drips with contemptuous irony, reducing acts of vulnerability or idealism to naïveté or weakness. He avoids moral engagement, preferring rhetorical flair. His targets include individuals as well as the very conditions under which meaning, virtue, or vulnerability might arise. In this, he aligns with Jean-François Lyotard's (1984) depiction of postmodern incredulity toward grand narratives: Mosby no longer believes in coherent identity or redemptive history. What remains is performance.

This mode of performance—rooted in mockery and self-curation—blurs the boundary between narration and manipulation. Mosby's storytelling seeks admiration while strategically evading moral accountability. He aestheticizes his betrayals and mythologizes his failures, casting himself in the role of tragic protagonist rather than culpable actor. His voice evokes figures like Humbert Humbert or Basil Ransom, yet with a bleaker undertone—one that speaks to control more than confession Mosby's narrative functions less as confession than as choreography. It is a controlled performance in which style substitutes for substance, and irony displaces moral inquiry. His voice curates experience rather than examines it, reducing vulnerability to rhetoric and memory to monologue. He aestheticizes failure, narrates betrayal as theatrical

anecdote, and renders sincerity absurd. This is not simply a matter of unreliable narration—it is a deeper crisis of narrative legitimacy, where the very act of storytelling is used to elude rather than confront meaning. Earlier reflections on parody, fractured identity, and the collapse of grand moral frameworks come to a head in Mosby's voice, which is polished, evasive, and metaphysically hollow. What remains is performance—artful, ironic, and detached—the final refuge of a self no longer capable of coherence.

Bellow places Mosby's narrating voice within a landscape of spiritual fatigue. George Steiner's concept of "after-speech"—discourse that persists after faith in the redemptive power of language has collapsed (Steiner 2001, 63)—perfectly describes Mosby's tonal terrain. Bellow places Mosby's narrating voice within a landscape of spiritual fatigue. George Steiner's concept of "after-speech"—discourse that persists after faith in the redemptive power of language has collapsed (Steiner 2001, 63)—aptly captures Mosby's tonal terrain. His final reflections suggest that speech has become a form of existential resistance rather than a vehicle for insight. He speaks to avoid disappearance, not to assert truth. Eloquence becomes armor. Irony becomes survival. He speaks not to affirm belief but to resist disappearance. Eloquence becomes armor. Irony becomes survival.

Mosby's conduct is reminiscent of Albert Camus's conception of the absurd man. In his description of a figure who persists in the face of meaninglessness, Camus emphasizes endurance without appeal to transcendence (Camus 1991). Yet where Camus's absurd hero confronts the void with defiant lucidity, Mosby evades it through theatrical self-display. His is not the courage of confrontation, but the polish of performance.

This rhetorical performance, however, emerges from a broader existential and cultural context; it arises in dialogue with the very conditions it seeks to resist or reinterpret. It functions as a compensatory structure for a life in which decisive action has failed. Mosby's voice, so confident in tone, disguises the absence of ethical engagement. His stories bear no witness to courageous deeds; they compensate for their absence. In this way, narration itself becomes a mode of existential repair. As Paul Ricoeur (1992) argues, narrative identity arises in the space between the self as agent and the self as sufferer. Mosby fills that space with speech, styling himself into coherence. He narrates to rewrite rather than remember, to replace what cannot be retrieved instead of explaining it.

Bellow, ever ambivalent, withholds both punishment and absolution. He lets the voice run until it exhausts itself. The result is a memoir emptied of revelation, rich in artifice—a grave turned into a stage. Mosby is remembered as a self-staged figure—a trickster-philosopher whose mockery replaces metaphysics, and whose words serve as tombstones laid over actions left undone. The eulogy he performs commemorates the self he never became.

Section II: The Bureaucrat as Trickster – Language, Power, and Moral Emptiness

Instead of speaking from a position of philosophical inquiry or ethical vulnerability, the protagonist in Bellow's "Mosby's Memoirs" constructs his narrative as a rhetorical artifact—a polished bureaucratic monument to the self. A former civil servant fluent in institutional discourse, Mosby composes his memoir as a calculated rehearsal of grievances and justifications, reframing betrayals as strategic retreats and office routine as silent heroism. There is no arc of remorse or inner transformation—only the persistent rhythm of a man documenting, categorizing, and preserving a version of himself immune to disruption. His language functions like a filing system: orderly, impersonal, and resistant to intimacy. What emerges is an audit disguised as confession, a performance structured in place of memory. The self he presents appears as a narrative mechanism—streamlined, official, and emotionally invulnerable.

Instead of speaking from a position of philosophical inquiry or ethical vulnerability, the protagonist in Bellow's "Mosby's Memoirs" constructs his narrative as a rhetorical artifact—a bureaucratic monument to the self. Mosby, a former civil servant and master of institutional language, narrates his life through the lens of procedure and status. Early in the story, his literary endeavor is introduced not as a calling but as a sanctioned task: "He had a grant for the purpose, from the Guggenheim Foundation" (Bellow 1968, 157).

This framing transforms reflection into administration, memory into credential. Experiences are filtered through a bureaucratic idiom, and the messiness of emotion is displaced by procedural detachment.

Each anecdote is crafted with irony, sharpened into satire, and delivered with a practiced self-satisfaction. Mosby recalls his professional past with the tone of a civil servant reviewing an old personnel file rather than confronting any genuine moral ambiguity. He presents himself as "Dr. Mosby really; erudite, maybe even profound; thought much, accomplished much—[who] had made some of the most interesting mistakes a man could make in the twentieth century" (Bellow 1968, 157). The wit is crisp but disquieting, and the irony appears less as critique than as camouflage. Through this narrative pose, Mosby internalizes the bureaucratic logic he once served—converting failure into anecdote, and betrayal into administrative folklore.

In his performative detachment, Mosby evokes the figure of the trickster, yet he does so in a diminished register. The classical trickster—whether in mythology or folklore—serves as a destabilizing force, disrupting entrenched hierarchies through cunning, transgression, and comic subversion. Figures such as Loki in Norse mythology or Hermes in Greek tradition bend rules, deceive gods, and expose divine hypocrisy, often creating space for transformation or renewal. As Lewis Hyde explains in *Trickster Makes This World*, the trickster is "the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox" (Hyde 1998, 7). He is not only mischievous but generative—producing disruption as a path to renewal.

Mosby imitates the cleverness of the trickster but drains it of its emancipatory potential. His wit functions not to reveal or destabilize power, but to preserve his own administrative identity within it. As Hyde observes, trickster intelligence "must do more than feed his belly; he must do so without himself getting eaten" (Hyde 1998, 220). In contrast, Mosby no longer wrestles with monsters—he has become one of their bureaucratic organs. He does not bait the trap to catch others or escape it himself; he documents its workings, filing it neatly under institutional memory. His satire is not mischief, but protocol.

As Mikhail Bakhtin suggests in his discussion of carnival and the grotesque, the trickster operates within a space where "all hierarchical positions are overturned," liberating the imagination through transgressive laughter and social inversion (Bakhtin 1984, 122). Such carnivalesque inversion is absent in Mosby's world. His narrative mimics the posture of irreverence while replicating the very hierarchies it claims to satirize. The carnivalesque spirit of disorder is hollowed out and replaced with the tidy humor of procedural confidence. Trickster's insurgent ambiguity gives way to the calculated irony of the memo-writing man.

Mosby does not subvert systems; he internalizes them. His irony is less a mask of resistance than a disguise for acquiescence. He performs a bureaucrat's comedy of self-insulation—clever but cautious, articulate but apathetic. What masquerades as wisdom is merely survival. What passes for subversion is a coping mechanism dressed in wit.

This inversion of the trickster archetype becomes clear when one compares Mosby to Shakespearean jesters or folkloric figures who expose truth by inhabiting the absurd. In those traditions, kings become clowns and clowns kings in an effort to mock power and open the space for renewal. Mosby, however, parodies nothing beyond his own small circle of rivals. He constructs a world in which bureaucracy reigns, not to undermine it, but to showcase how fluently he navigated its corridors.

Moreover, this narrative stance stands in tension with Martin Buber's concept of the I–Thou relationship, where the ethical self emerges in genuine encounters with others. According to Buber, "All real living is meeting" (Buber 1970, 11). Such meeting demands openness and vulnerability—qualities absent in Mosby's prose. He engages with no person as a "Thou," only as "It"—categories to be assessed, judged, and filed away. Even the reader becomes a spectator to a performance, rather than a partner in ethical dialogue.

Philosopher Paul Ricoeur also stresses the role of narrative in constructing ethical identity. He proposes that the self unfolds through stories that admit the possibility of change, remorse, and otherness (Ricoeur 1992). Mosby offers none of these. His memoir is circular and self-affirming. Rather than a narrative of moral becoming, he presents a procedural self already fully formed—confident, defensive, and immune to

doubt. He does not interrogate his past so much as catalog it. The result is not ethical memory, but institutional closure.

Mosby's entrenchment within the language of systems echoes Walter Wink's analysis of the Powers. In Wink's theological-political framework, institutions possess both visible and invisible dimensions—the latter shaping consciousness and structuring how individuals internalize roles within systems of domination (Wink 1992, 10). Mosby functions as a literary embodiment of this internalization. His memoir does not expose the system's absurdities; it reenacts them with bureaucratic fidelity. Rather than confessing failure or reckoning with power, he audits his life like a procedural case file—controlled, polished, and emotionally detached. His irony, far from undermining the system, becomes its camouflage. The bureaucrat survives, not by resisting power, but by mastering its language so thoroughly that no deviation remains.

Bellow is often recognized for a distinctive kind of humor—one that emerges from the playful vitality of his characters, their verbal exuberance, and their philosophical entanglements. Thus far in "Mosby's Memoirs," the humor, while present, does not radiate joy or intellectual freedom. It takes a darker, more disquieting form. The source of this humor lies in the stark contrast between the gravity of Mosby's life experiences and the clipped, procedural language he uses to recount them. His reflections on betrayal, love, and professional ambition are rendered with the same tone one might use to draft an office memo. Near the conclusion, he remarks with deadpan pride that "Mosby had a profound effect on people" (Bellow 1968, 158), a line that drips with irony. What was once gravitas is now rendered as personnel report; what should provoke introspection becomes comic veneer. The result is a humor that stiffens rather than liberates—a laughter drawn not from life's richness but from its bureaucratic flattening.

This humor arises through **tonal dissonance**—an ironic mismatch between what is felt and what is said. Bellow constructs it through Mosby's compulsive formalism, his relentless conversion of the personal into the bureaucratic. The result is not release but estrangement. We laugh, but uneasily, because the humor functions as a defense mechanism rather than a form of revelation. Mosby entertains by showcasing his verbal control, yet that very control dramatizes his spiritual and emotional impoverishment.

The reader is not drawn into empathy or ethical reckoning, but instead made to witness the performance of a man fully adapted to moral emptiness. His memoir offers satire without subversion, elegance without intimacy. What remains is the shell of a self: coherent, witty, and hollow.

Paradoxically, the very qualities that make Mosby's humor feel corrosive and estranged also attest to Bellow's brilliance as a literary craftsman. The bleakness of tone, the bureaucratic irony, and the emotional sterility are not flaws of characterization, but carefully engineered elements of narrative design. Bellow transforms humor into a diagnostic tool—revealing the collapse of inner life beneath the polished surface of institutional speech. This is not the liberating humor of comic relief, but a deeper, more unsettling invention: a voice that mocks while it mourns, that dazzles with wit even as it discloses spiritual exhaustion. In this sense, "Mosby's Memoirs" expands the expressive power of fiction, demonstrating how language, even in its most emotionally distant form, can bear the full weight of existential critique. That we laugh at Mosby is part of the achievement; that we feel unease while laughing is the measure of Bellow's moral and artistic control.

Section III: Memory as Mausoleum – The Comic Subversion of Legacy

While Mosby's ironic tone functions as comic containment in the earlier parts of the memoir, what emerges by the story's end is a different kind of collapse—shifting from rhetorical insulation to metaphysical exhaustion. If humor earlier masked emotion, here it becomes the architecture of decay itself. In "Mosby's Memoirs," Bellow stages the failure of the memoir not as a failure of existential vision more than of craft. The comic mode intensifies the existential weight; it becomes the very medium through which Bellow exposes the collapse of legacy itself. Mosby, ostensibly writing to preserve his life for posterity, is in fact entombing it. His memoir resembles a mausoleum of facts, embellishments, and evasions, where memory stands embalmed in ritual form, divorced from the vitality of lived experience. The voice takes on the

posture of a curator—precise, selective, and emotionally remote. "He was complete," Bellow writes in the climactic scene at Mitla. "He had completed himself in this cogitating, unlaughing, stone, iron, nonsensical form" (Bellow, 184). The description evokes a self frozen in time—a sealed monument to identity, rigid and sterile.

Where memory traditionally serves as a bridge between self and world, here it is rendered an object of aesthetic display. Mosby approaches memory as an editor, shaping episodes into polished arrangements that privilege aesthetic balance over moral insight. "Dr. Mosby really; erudite, maybe even profound; thought much, accomplished much—had made some of the most interesting mistakes a man could make in the twentieth century" (157). The line reads like a mock-epitaph, a bureaucratic summation disguised as praise. Intimacy and consequence are displaced by style and inventory. As a result, memory no longer functions relationally. It becomes static, privatized, ornamental—a sculpture rather than a speech act.

The reader, like a visitor to a mausoleum, receives no invitation to emotional communion. What is offered, instead, is a gallery of portraits—images carefully composed, expressive in detail, but frozen in form. Characters are not encountered in flux or vulnerability; they are presented as finished studies, each framed in irony or satire. Hyman Lustgarten, for example, is rendered not as a companion in adversity but as a figure caught in narrative amber. Mosby recounts his many failures—financial, political, romantic—with the amused detachment of a caricaturist: *"*He made a kind of living in Algiers with a partner named Klonsky. They operated a coin-laundry. Later he married Klonsky's sister. He had a few children. And then, bang! the Algerians chased out the French and the Jews" (Bellow, 180). The summary is vivid and efficient, but it reduces an entire life's arc to comic compression. Lustgarten is presented as a specimen of postwar absurdity—a Jewish Marxist turned capitalist, then immigrant, then exile again. There is wit in the description, even rhythm, but little grief. Mosby installs him as an emblem of collapse, not as a man still in motion.

There is, to be sure, an aesthetic richness to these portraits. They allow for inspection, even admiration, much as a painting reveals features the eye might miss in motion. But this precision comes at a cost. A portrait may preserve likeness; it still separates. The viewer contemplates from a distance. Mosby, as narrator, arranges people like artifacts in a gallery—selected, labeled, and stripped of ambiguity. The effect is a kind of emotional still life: composed, deliberate, and ultimately inaccessible.

Even Mosby's physical surroundings mirror this aesthetic of death: "Bougainvillaea poured down the hillside, and the hummingbirds were spinning. Mosby felt ill with all this whirl" (157). The world turns, beauty persists, but Mosby—the memoirist—is already disassociated, spiraling inward toward narrative finality. His self-presentation is not an evolving memory but a closed-loop, an echo chamber of rhetorical control, sealed off from intimacy and change.

Such rhetorical control, however, reveals its hollowness in the story's final scene. In the tomb at Mitla, Mosby's composure fractures. Surrounded by ancient remnants of sacrificial ritual, he experiences an acute collapse of breath and meaning: "Jesus! I cannot catch my breath! To be shut in here! To be dead here!" (184). The architectural metaphor of the memoir gives way to literal enclosure. The narrator, who has spent the story rehearsing the past in perfect diction, finds himself voiceless—trapped within the very silence he sought to forestall with language. "I must get out," he tells the guide. "Ladies, I find it very hard to breathe" (184). This breathlessness is more than physical—it is metaphysical, signaling the exhaustion of narration itself.

Herein lies Bellow's radical critique of the memoirist ethos: the belief that narrative preserves, that language redeems. Mosby's failure, no doubt rooted in his evasions and half-truths, rests more profoundly in his conviction that form itself can sustain meaning—that style, structure, and rhetorical control are enough to redeem the void beneath. "Having disposed of all things human, he should have encountered God. Would this occur?" the narrator asks (184). But no divine presence appears. Only the silence of stone, the irony of style.

This is the comic tomb—Bellow's late narrative mode in which humor, traditionally a force of liberation, becomes instead an instrument of entombment. What once served to release tension or subvert authority now seals experience within a ceremonial structure of loss. The comic surface no longer conceals depth; it **is** the depth—a polished void. Bellow transforms the act of remembering into a paradox: an effort to preserve the self through forms that ultimately **expose its disappearance**.

Section IV: The Shadow of Mortality – Death, Futility, and Bellow's Late Style

In "Mosby's Memoirs," Bellow turns away from the vitalistic striving of his early protagonists and adopts a late style marked by philosophical weariness and narrative entropy. Unlike Joseph in *Dangling Man* or Herzog in *Herzog*, who are galvanized by crisis, Mosby responds with immobilizing reflection. He becomes a figure suspended in posthumous irony, no longer animated by existential action but by the residue of a role once fully lived. As Herzog once asked in a state of agitated searching, "What sort of character was it?" (Bellow 1964, 4), Mosby offers no such inquiry, only rote and residue.

From the outset, Mosby's voice signals a self-conscious diminishment of grandeur—couched not in remorse, but in polished irony. Rather than proclaim heroic failure or tragic loss, he renders his life as a portfolio of well-articulated missteps. "Mr. Mosby—Dr. Mosby really; erudite, maybe even profound; thought much, accomplished much—had made some of the most interesting mistakes a man could make in the twentieth century" (Bellow 1968, 157). This sentence, with its cadence of qualifications and equivocations, sets the tone for a memoir in which identity is filtered through bureaucratic detachment and rhetorical control. The grandeur of thought is acknowledged only to be undercut by the strange valorization of error.

What might have been introspection is stylized into a résumé of failure, delivered with the poise of a retired functionary. The existential stakes of Bellow's earlier protagonists—Joseph's moral probing in *Dangling Man*, Wilhelm's raw desperation in *Seize the Day*—are replaced here by administrative wit and self-administered footnotes. Even Moses Herzog's neurotic metaphysical outbursts—scribbled letters to the living and the dead—are a far cry from Mosby's procedural self-curation. Where Herzog was "so stirred by these letters that from the end of June he moved from place to place with a valise full of papers" (Bellow 1964, 1), Mosby moves only between clauses, his crises of being transposed into paperwork. The tragedy here is not collapse, but the refusal to engage with collapse at all—a refusal made civil, articulate, and sterile.

Death in this story arrives less as an event and more as a condition. Mosby exists in a liminal state—still breathing, but narrating as though from within a mausoleum of public irrelevance. Mosby presents himself as a man whose presence once left a mark—an individual of modest achievements but exaggerated promise. He implies that his influence on others was notable, that he possessed more than one talent, but that circumstance stifled the full flowering of any single gift. Bellow undercuts these claims with irony. The world, it seems, had already forgotten Mosby long before he began chronicling his career. His memoir reads less as a legacy than as an elegy to potential—one polished and staged by its own subject. What begins as self-justification shades into a rehearsal of vanished significance, where rhetorical control replaces inner reckoning.

What distinguishes Bellow's late style here is its simultaneous use of elegy and mockery. The comic grave, as one might call it, becomes a site of performative futility rather than a place of rest. Mosby mourns himself while trying to preserve a sense of bureaucratic dignity. The tragic losses in his life—including the suicide of his daughter—are acknowledged only in passing, stripped of emotional texture and rendered in procedural tones. Rather than explore grief, Mosby registers it with the same detachment he applies to professional setbacks. The death of a child becomes a line item in the archive of his life—acknowledged, recorded, and promptly filed away. Grief becomes a bureaucratic memo; feeling becomes protocol.

Critic Judith Shulevitz (2000) captures this tonal duality by describing Bellow in these later stories as a "satirical elegist"—a writer who neither consoles nor condemns, but lingers in the irony of decay. In

"Mosby," Bellow constructs a figure whose mourning takes the shape of formality, stripped of pathos, with grief as rehearsed as his memoir. His emotional inertia resists catharsis and instead breeds parody.

This reading aligns with Philip Roth's assessment of Bellow's emotional and philosophical trajectory. In comparing *Herzog* to Bellow's earlier and later works, Roth notes that its greatness lies in "its capacity for a brand of suffering… largely precluded" from the rest of the oeuvre (Roth 1981). If *Herzog* could suffer with philosophical clarity, Mosby is unable—or unwilling—to feel at all. His slide into irrelevance is not marked by existential collapse but by a slow suffocation of purpose—a conflict between the fading romantic self and the impingements of a fallen world, as Harold Bloom puts it (Bloom 1986, 9).

To deepen this understanding of Bellow's method, one might turn to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the *carnivalesque*—the inversion of authority, the grotesque parody of sacred norms (Bakhtin 1984). Bellow's tonal palette borrows from this world of distorted ritual, but with a crucial difference. Unlike Rabelais, who uses the carnivalesque to liberate and renew, Bellow deploys it to underscore entropy. Mosby is not a jester reclaiming power; he is a relic of collapsed hierarchies, unaware that the joke now runs through him. As a review in *Publishers Weekly* observed of Wood's *The Irresponsible Self* (which includes an essay on Bellow), his critical approach suggests the comic in serious fiction becomes "indeterminate," replacing clarity with uncertainty and masking depth with irony.

This failure resonates with Emmanuel Levinas's (1969) notion that the ethical self is constituted in relation to the Other. But Mosby sees no such Other; his perception is a closed circuit of self-reference, and his memoir becomes an echo chamber of his own voice, absent of ethical encounter or transcendence.

The story's structure mirrors this collapse. There is no climax, no redemptive insight—only the slow erosion of relevance. Mosby becomes a kind of metaphysical clerk, itemizing his life like a dull résumé. The final pages do not elevate him; they flatten him. His concluding remarks function like an elegy without a mourner, a philosophy emptied of conviction.

In his influential introduction to *Modern Critical Views: Saul Bellow* (1986), Bloom reflects on how Bellow's later protagonists often lose their heroic intensity and instead drift into reflective exhaustion. They shift from striving to sorting, from vitality to annotation. In this light, "Mosby's Memoirs" ceases to function as confession or narrative—it becomes a filing cabinet of slow decay. Bellow's achievement in this story lies in exposing the uneasy coexistence of the comic and the grave in the soul of a man who has ceased to inquire. If Bellow's protagonists—like Joseph, Tommy Wilhelm, and Moses Herzog—sought to know how a person should live, "Mosby's Memoirs" quietly wonders what becomes of the man who forgets how to ask. The silence that follows is not void but echo—a mournful mockery of what once mattered (Chapman 1967, 285; Halperin 1979, 475).

Conclusion: Grave Reflections – Mosby, Bellow, and the Vanishing Self

"Mosby's Memoirs" stands as a masterclass in tonal dissonance. Its protagonist is articulate yet aimless, intelligent yet morally inert, wry yet never truly amused. In "Mosby," Bellow crafts a figure through whom the limits of narrative, memory, and identity are not merely represented but exposed. The memoir form, traditionally a site of coherence and legacy, is here hollowed out, leaving behind a residue of self-rehearsal masquerading as meaning.

Mosby's mockery offers no comic relief—it registers as ontological distress. His irony functions less as wit and more as echo: the sound a soul makes when it has forgotten how to pray, or no longer believes anyone is listening. In place of redemption or tragic nobility, Bellow offers clarity. What emerges is not a unified self, but a palimpsest: part archive, part erasure. Mosby is both narrator and ruin, a man whose life has congealed into style without substance.

In this bleakly eloquent portrait, Bellow locates the tragicomic self at the edge of modernity—where bureaucracy replaces belief, memory collapses into self-curation, and irony becomes the last trace of presence. What remains is not consolation but precision: a monument to forgetting, built from the very language meant to preserve.

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