

A SEAT IN HUMANITY:
SAUL BELLOW'S *THE VICTIM*

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Saul Bellow opens his second novel, *The Victim*,¹ first published in 1947, with a description of the weather and the people of New York:

On some nights New York is as hot as Bangkok. The whole continent seems to have moved from its place and slid nearer the equator, the bitter grey Atlantic to have become green and tropical, and the people, thronging the streets, barbaric fellahin among the stupendous monuments of their mystery, the lights of which, a dazing profusion, climb upward endlessly into the heat of the sky. (p. 9)

The claustrophobic setting, apart from being realistic, remains a symbolic manifestation throughout the novel. The New York here, very much a Dreiserian city, does not function merely as a physical place, but has become a key actor in the drama of Asa Leventhal, the protagonist of *The Victim*.² With its windless air, stifling aura, and suffocating oppressiveness, New York, in *The Victim*, is more than a technological jungle; it not only functions as the objective correlative to the psychological dislocation or misplacement of our protagonist, but also serves as a reminder of the death-in-life situation he is in.

Like Joseph in *Dangling Man*, Leventhal, an editor of a trade magazine, is suffering from alienation. His wife Mary has gone to the South to accompany her newly-widowed mother,

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¹ Saul Bellow, *The Victim* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1977). All references to the work in this paper are from this edition and will be noted parenthetically with page number in the text.

² For an interesting treatment of the city as a thematic symbol in Theodore Dreiser's fiction, see Blanche Housman Gelfant, *The American City Novel*, 2nd ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), pp. 42-94.

so he is left alone to experience a life deprived of companionship. During Mary's absence, Leventhal is unexpectedly driven into a set of circumstances which almost destroy him. One hot summer evening, when strolling in the crowded, noisy, neighboring park, he is suddenly approached by a shabby derelict by the name of Kirby Allbee. Allbee is jobless, and the loss of his job has caused him to lose his wife, first by separation, then by tragic death in a traffic accident. Allbee, haunted by a feeling of guilt, begins to indulge in drinking, hoping that he might be relieved from that feeling. When he is able to hunt for the roots of his failure, he suspects that Leventhal is the one responsible for his present downfall. Several years before, Allbee had got Leventhal an appointment with Rudiger, the owner of *Dill's Weekly*, the trade magazine Allbee was then working for. The interview turned out to be calamitous because Leventhal responded indignantly to the boorish insult of Rudiger. Soon after that Allbee was dismissed from *Dill's Weekly*.

Allbee lays the blame on Leventhal for maliciously contriving the scene with Rudiger as a vindictive punishment for his anti-Semitic remarks which he directed towards Daniel Harkavy, a friend of Leventhal's, during a party which Leventhal had attended. Allbee complains:

'You try to put all the blame on me, but you know it's true that you're to blame. You and you only. For everything. You ruined me. Ruined! Because that's what I am, ruined! You're the one that's responsible. You did it to me deliberately, out of hate. Out of pure hate!' (p. 68)

Leventhal, though refusing to accept Allbee's accusation, becomes rather confused by such a ridiculous indictment. Allbee then works on him step by step, following him, scrutinizing him, so much so that one night when he has been thrown out by his landlord, he insinuates himself into Leventhal's apartment to stay with him. Optionless, Leventhal decides to see if he can give some help to Allbee. " 'I'll show my good intentions and return the favour' " (p. 203), he says to himself. But one afternoon when "summer seemed to have ended prematurely in chill and darkness" (p. 216), and when Leventhal

returns home from the Harkavy's, he finds that Allbee is in bed with some whore he picked up in the street. Horrified and shocked, he angrily orders Allbee to leave his house. That very night Allbee slides into Leventhal's apartment again and attempts to commit suicide by gas. Fortunately Leventhal wakes up in time and manages to save his own life and to stop Allbee from killing himself. This outrageous scene climaxes the action of the novel. Allbee finally gets away, and Leventhal almost assures himself that Allbee will not come back again. "He would sleep undisturbed; he cared about nothing else" (p. 230).

Who, then, is Allbee? What is his relation with Leventhal? Or are they related? Perhaps these problems, with many others, make *The Victim* one of Bellow's difficult works. The problems *The Victim* presents have drawn a great deal of critical interest and the diverse approaches provided by the critics have in one way or another suggested its ambiguity and complexity. Among the various interpretations of their relationship, most critics tend to look at Allbee as the alter ego of Leventhal.³ Their conversations, on some occasions, very much resemble those occurring between Joseph and the "Spirit of Alternatives" in *Dangling Man*. In other words, when Allbee is not tormenting Leventhal he is almost another "Spirit of Alternatives," helping Leventhal to see his own true self.

Bellow, by citing an epigraph from "The Tale of the Trader and the Jinni" in *The Thousand and One Nights*, seems to imply that Leventhal is by no means an innocent victim. The tale relates how a traveling merchant, oppressed by heat, sits beneath a tree and eats some broken bread and dried dates.

³ Among the critics, Jonathan Baumbach has perhaps made the most thorough examination of Allbee as Leventhal's alter ego. See his *The Landscape of Nightmare: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), pp. 35-54. Baumbach sometimes calls this alter ego the "double," or the "distorted image." Another critic, Irving Malin, using the Freudian terminology, labels Allbee as the "superego" of Leventhal. See his *Saul Bellow's Fiction* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), p. 61. Whereas in a recent article, Andrew Gordon suggests that "Allbee is Leventhal's anti-self." See his "'pushy Jew': Leventhal in *The Victim*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1 (Spring 1979), 132.

When he has finished eating, he throws the stones of the dates away. Suddenly an Ifrit appears and charges the merchant with killing his son. The merchant is puzzled by the accusation; however, the Ifrit answers, "When thou atest dates and threwest away the stones they struck my son full in the breast as he was walking by, so that he died forthwith." It has of course never occurred to the merchant that he would kill the son of the Ifrit with the date stones he casts off, but he hits him all the same. So does Leventhal. He might have had no intention to enrage Rudiger and cause Allbee to be fired; Allbee was fired nonetheless. Therefore when Leventhal claims that "he had been singled out to be the object of some freakish, insane process" (p. 31), to be victimized, Bellow somehow implies, he himself also has a share in the victimizing business.

But Bellow's implication should not be interpreted as a testimony that Allbee could be exempt from his guilt as a victimizer. Ever since their meeting in the park, he has been haunting Leventhal like a thriller in the Gothic tale of horror. He has gone so far that he turns Leventhal from a victimizer, if he has ever been one, into a victim. Judged from the way he menaces and works on Leventhal—he sleeps in Leventhal's apartment, wears his clothes, eats his food, reads his letters from Mary, forces him to favor him with recommendations for jobs, and even sleeps with a whore in his bed—, he has become, if I may borrow the term Lynn Gartrell Levins uses to label Thomas Sutpen of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, a Gothic villain.⁴ He belongs to that long list of terrible figures best exemplified by Chillingworth, Claggart, Heathcliff, and Dickensian villains, who, in one way or another, have "violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart."⁵ Allbee himself does not conceal his own fallen nature. On one occasion, when he is defending himself for his drinking, he admits that he and those alcoholics are "the sons of Belial" (p. 67). In Christian

⁴ *Faulkner's Heroic Design: The Yoknapatawpha Novel* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1976), p. 9.

⁵ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter and Selected Tales*, ed. Thomas E. Connolly (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1974), p. 212.

mythology the phrase simply means those who dissipate or rival God as in the stories of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.⁶ Once when Allbee refers to the Book of Job with disapproval of the argument of Job's friends, he tells Leventhal that "there's no denying that evil is as real as sunshine" (p. 123). Even if Allbee has once been victimized by Leventhal, judged from how he calculates upon Leventhal, he himself has now usurped the role of a victimizer, just like Chillingworth, who turns from one who has been wronged into a wrongdoer by prying into a human heart in that nineteenth-century "American myth of guilt, of sin and redemption."⁷

Various hints in the novel lead us to associate *The Victim* with the Old Testament myth of Job. There is, for example, Allbee's allusion to the Book of Job. Allbee's Satanic nature also makes him comparable to Satan who, with the acquiescence of God, persecutes Job. What is more, when Leventhal realizes that he has become the prey of oppression, he asks in perplexity, "Why me?" "Why pick on me?" (p. 69)? Leventhal's questions seem to have come from Job who, being unable to bear his bitterness and sick of living, demands of God the why and wherefores of his sufferings.⁸ Leventhal's

⁶ Genesis 18: 20-33; 19: 1-29. John Milton alludes to "the sons of Belial" in *Paradise Lost* to describe the character of Belial, one of the fallen spirits: "And when night/Darkens the Streets, then wander the Sons/ of Belial, flown with insolence and wine." See *Paradise Lost*, in Merritt Y. Hughes, ed., *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose* (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1957), Book I, ll. 500-03.

⁷ M. Gilbert Porter, *Whence the Power? The Artistry and Humanity of Saul Bellow* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1974), p. 52. Porter means *The Scarlet Letter*. For an interesting study of *The Scarlet Letter* as an American myth, see Viola Sachs, *The Myth of America: Essays in the Structures of Literary Imagination* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), pp. 13-45. Sachs interprets *The Scarlet Letter* as a myth of "the painful birth of the new world." Some critics have seen the similarities between *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Victim*. Among them Porter has perhaps given the fullest space to the comparison of the two books. However, it has been commonly accepted that Leslie A. Fiedler is the first critic to see the Chillingworth-Allbee and Dimmesdale-Leventhal parallels in his study of what he calls the "sinister relationships" in American fiction. See his *Love and Death in the American Novel*, new rev. ed. (New York: Stein and Day, 1966), pp. 363-64.

⁸ Job 10: 2-7.

catastrophe is of course incomparable to Job's; however, he is in Job's situation all the same, and he believes, like Job, that he suffers without a cause. He is a Billy Budd, a persecuted victim who appears again and again in stories about Jews or Negroes. Northrop Frye calls this victim archetype "the *pharmakos* or scapegoat."⁹ Frye writes:

The *pharmakos* is neither innocent nor guilty. He is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes, like the mountaineer whose shout brings down an avalanche. He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence.¹⁰

I have suggested in the beginning of the present paper that Bellow sets the story of *The Victim* metaphorically in claustrophobic New York to remind the reader of the psychological condition of his protagonist. Leventhal, says one critic, "seems to live on Matthew Arnold's 'darkling plain, swept with confused alarms . . . where ignorant armies clash by night.'"¹¹ Like Joseph of *Dangling Man*, he is living in a world of chaos. Isolated and deprived of female support, his life is a turmoil. Not only that, the absence of feminine strength has also weakened his vitality and made him feel insecure:

Since Mary's departure his nerves had been unsteady. He kept the bathroom light burning all night. Somewhat ashamed of himself, he had yesterday closed the bathroom door before getting into bed, but he had left the light on. This was absurd, this feeling that he was threatened by something while he slept. And that was not all. He imagined that he saw mice darting along the walls. There actually were mice in the apartment. The building was old; there were bound to be some nesting under the floors. He had no dread of them, and yet he had begun to jerk his head around at the suspicion of a movement. And now he had been unable to fall asleep. Heat had never hitherto interfered with his sleep. He was sure he was unwell. (p. 26)

Leventhal finds his tumultuary life becoming more serious following the intrusion of Allbee. The accusation, though he

⁹ *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 41.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Robert R. Dutton, *Saul Bellow*, Twayne's United States Authors Series (Boston: Twayne, 1971), p. 35.

feels irrational and baseless, has somehow affected him and begun to oppress him psychologically. He therefore quests in the city for the truth or the validity of the accusation ever since he has been buttonholed by Allbee in the park. He looks for the answer from his best friend Harkavy and even from Williston, a friend he had not seen for years. He realizes too his job is under great threat because Allbee has proposed that he arrange an interview for him with his boss. Although the proposal has been turned down unhesitatingly, Allbee still goes to his office and makes him feel uneasy. Leventhal is further harassed by Allbee's success in insinuating himself into his house to live with him. Allbee turns the whole house into a mess: "The dirt and disorder of the place sickened Leventhal. There was rubbish on the kitchen floor and the remains of a meal on the table" (p. 199). It is evident that with the appearance of Allbee, the chaotic situation of Leventhal's life has become more complicated.

In his study of contemporary Jewish-American novelists, Max F. Schulz points out that Bellow's heroes "confront death either literally or symbolically."¹² John Jacob Clayton puts it the other way round; for him Bellow's characters, like their counterparts in Sartre's works, "cannot face the terror of their own being or of the death they feel they deserve."¹³ Whether or not they are capable of facing death, they face it nevertheless. This is precisely what happens to Leventhal.

Among the various things Allbee epitomizes for Leventhal, one is death which Leventhal is now facing. Keith Michael Opdahl suggests that Leventhal "is paralyzed by a figure of death."¹⁴ He means Allbee. Schulz calls Allbee the "most dissolute of Bellow's fictional creations."¹⁵ The dissoluteness of

¹² *Radical Sophistication: Studies in Contemporary Jewish-American Novelists* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1969), p. 122.

¹³ *Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 97.

¹⁴ *The Novels of Saul Bellow: An Introduction* (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1970), p. 57.

¹⁵ *Radical Sophistication*, p. 121.

Allbee suggests his potential depravity. When Leventhal meets Allbee for the first time in the park after years of departure, he notices

how seedy he looked, like one of those men you saw sleeping off their whisky on Third Avenue, lying in the doorways or on the cellar hatches, dead to the cold or the racket or the straight blaze of the sun in their faces. He drank, too; that was certain. (p. 29)

Allbee's wretchedness and indulgence in alcohol are signs of his depravity and degeneration, suggesting a death in him. Leventhal is aware that Allbee is like someone who approaches him from "a depth of life in which he himself would be lost, choked, ended. There lay horror, evil, all that he had kept himself from" (p. 224). Leventhal seems to imply that Allbee is the messenger of death who turns out to be his greatest threat. Even if Leventhal is afraid of facing this greatest evil, with the insinuation of Allbee into his house, he finds no way to shun it. Death is there, living in his own house, threatening him day and night. The threat reaches its climax in the kitchen scene when Allbee attempts to kill himself but is stopped by Leventhal. Had he succeeded or had not Leventhal discovered the attempt, the gas might have poisoned Leventhal too. It is in this climactic scene that the real face of Allbee as death becomes especially clear. However, if we accept Jonathan Baumbach's suggestion that Allbee is Leventhal's alter ego, then Allbee's trying to kill himself may also be seen metaphorically as Leventhal's death wish.

Thus Allbee is the epitome of many things for Leventhal. After several efforts to reject or to avoid these many things, Leventhal finds his attempts fruitless. He is, therefore, compelled to accept them. The acceptance is symbolized by his admitting Allbee into his apartment. Moreover, even in his own behavior, Leventhal seems to imitate Allbee. For instance, at the birthday party of Harkavy's daughter, he drinks so much that he has to spend a night at the host's house. What he does is exactly what Allbee has done to him.

The significance of Leventhal's acceptance of Allbee is rather complex. In a sense, the acceptance indicates Leventhal's

own degeneration. I have pointed out how Leventhal is deprived of female support; this deprivation, as a matter of fact, also hints at his lack of virility. He has been married for years, but still has no children—a sign of his infertility. There are other signs in the novel which suggest that Leventhal is suffering from degeneration, notably, his neurotic sense of suspicion. For example, he suspects that there are black lists against him, and then he is so occupied by these black lists that he keeps on investigating their existence. There is a sub-plot in *The Victim* which relates the death of Leventhal's nephew Mickey. When Mickey suddenly falls sick, the mother of the child appeals to Leventhal for help since her husband, Leventhal's brother Max, is away from home. Leventhal demands that the child be sent to the hospital. But that does not help; the child dies in the hospital. Then Leventhal begins to suspect that Elena, the mother of the child, will blame him. His suspicion has so checked his natural feeling that he refuses to stay to console his brother's family after the funeral. He wants to shun Elena, thinking that she will hold him responsible for the death of the child. Besides, he has a strong feeling that Elena's mother is hostile to him and to his brother. After Mickey's death, he tells Max that "It's as clear as day to me that she thinks the baby's death was God's punishment because Elena married you" (p. 195). Max becomes indignant at Leventhal's irrationality, warning him that he surely has "turned into a suspicious character" (p. 195). Max is right. Leventhal's suspicion unfolds the darkest corner of his personality and suggests an inner degeneration or spiritual malaise.

One of the functions of the sub-plot of *The Victim* is to help reveal the kind of situation Leventhal is in. During the period of time when Leventhal is being confounded by the Allbee affair, he also has to attend to the illness of his nephew. The fact has inevitably added confusion to his already chaotic life. On the metaphorical level, the episode also reminds us of Leventhal's confrontation with death, which finds its personification in Mickey, who is fatally sick.

On another level, the sub-plot also serves to bear out the

spiritual malaise of Leventhal. It adds a footnote to Chester E. Eisinger's claim that Leventhal is "a man who falls short of love and understanding and humanity."¹⁶ The episode shows how Leventhal has mistaken his sister-in-law Elena and her mother. When he is called upon to give help to Elena whose husband is not at home, Leventhal is "bitterly irritated" (p. 9). Reluctantly he goes to see the child; he is impatient and feels that everyone and everything there oppress him—everyone and everything, "the house, his sister-in-law, the sick child" (p. 15). As a matter of fact, "for a long time, Leventhal had had very little to do with his brother and his brother's family" (p. 10). The fact not only indicates his isolation, but hints at his lack of love for and understanding towards his brother. This explains why Leventhal can be so impatient at his sister-in-law's appeal for help and be angry at his brother's absence in time of the family crisis.

He began to wonder how long Max was going to put off coming home. 'Maybe he's afraid of being tricked into returning,' he thought. 'I'll have a thing or two to say to him when I see him. For once in our lives. It's time somebody called him down. Elena won't, so he's used to doing whatever he wants.' And what would Max have to say for himself? Something simple-minded and foolish, he was certain. Because he was foolish. Philip [Max's elder son] already had more common sense than his father. Leventhal visualized his brother's strongly excited face and imagined his incoherencies. 'He sends them money and that makes him a father. That's the end of his responsibilities. That's fatherhood,' he repeated to himself. 'That's his idea of duty.' (p. 115)

Leventhal's complaint about or accusation of Max is sound on the surface. Yet the reality of Max does not tally with such an accusation. Instead, we see in Max a pitiable father, a dutiful husband, and a man who has been painfully struggling with life. When Leventhal encounters his brother, he is almost ready to rebuke him. However, Max's situation ultimately touches him:

... instead of speaking, he took in his brother's appearance, the darkness

¹⁶ *Fiction of Forties* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 350.

and soreness of his swollen face, the scar at the corner of his mouth from a cut received in a street fight years ago in Hartford. Outdoor work has weathered him; the loss of several teeth made his jaw longer. His suit—it was a suit such as labourers used to buy in his father's store. His new black shoes were dusty. (p. 149)

Note also that Leventhal does not accept Allbee at once. Efforts have been made to reject Allbee. At first to Leventhal, Allbee is "no more human . . . than a fish or crab or any fleshy thing in the water" (p. 67). He is apathetic to and feels no sympathy for Allbee's helpless state; he blindly rebukes Allbee for his drunkenness and attributes Allbee's present situation to it. Leventhal's rejection is thematically significant. It is a denial of his own self, his alter ego, and testifies to his inhumanity, his sin of apathy. More than that, it also signifies Leventhal's inability to perceive his own true self and to face his own reality at the beginning of the novel. His sin and his inability finally drag him towards his deterioration and put him into a death-in-life plight.

Until now I have mainly discussed the Allbee-Leventhal relationship and the suffocating, decaying condition Leventhal falls into. It is in this complicated relationship and almost hopeless state that Leventhal performs his quest which ultimately leads to his redemption and rebirth.

Leventhal's quest involves a search for the origin and validity of his sufferings. He wanders day after day, looking for his friends, asking himself, hoping to unearth the roots of his victimization. He is unable to see that whether he should be liable for Allbee's fall is unimportant. What is of importance is that Allbee has fallen and is suffering. Leventhal may not be responsible for the present situation of Allbee; yet as a fellow human being, he should not turn away from his obligation since Allbee has already appealed to him for assistance. That whether Leventhal's quest may or may not result in anything is of no consequence; what matters is that the quest represents his efforts to understand, a preliminary to his acceptance of Allbee. On the symbolic level, Leventhal's acceptance, though reluctant, is a sign of his identification with Allbee, of his

sharing Allbee's misfortune, and of his embracing humanity.

By now it is clear to us that Leventhal's quest is a quest for a seat in humanity. The quest means to him an opportunity to end his dislocation, his disoriented and death-in-life condition. But unless he has become genuinely human, the quest will not be successful.

For the most part, Sigmund Freud's conviction that "Most of the artificial dreams constructed by imaginative writers are designed for a symbolic interpretation"¹⁷ is valid and verifiable. In my discussion of *Dangling Man*, I have shown how Bellow utilizes dreams as a thematic manifestation.¹⁸ The technique of this kind is used again in *The Victim*. In one of Leventhal's dreams, we see how his yearning is symbolically dramatized. The dream relates how "he was in a railroad station, carrying a heavy suitcase, forcing his way with it through a crowd the sound of whose shuffling rose towards the flags hanging by the hundreds in the arches." He has missed his train and tries to get to the second section of it. "There was a recoil of the crowd . . . and he found himself in a corridor which was freshly paved and plastered" (p. 138). He runs down the corridor which seems to lead down to the tracks, but is checked by a barrier, something like a sawhorse. He then pushes the barrier aside. Two men stop him. "Leventhal turned and a push on the shoulder sent him into an alley. His face was covered with tears" (p. 139).

Clayton sees in Leventhal's dream a defeat, one which is "analogous to death—there is no way out; one cannot cheat the rules."¹⁹ This is exactly the plight of Leventhal. But on the other level, the dream also offers an illustration of Leventhal's quest for a place in humanity. It is doubtless a quest. He is, at first, in a railroad station, carrying a suitcase. In other words, he is going somewhere. Unfortunately he misses his

¹⁷ *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1953; rpt. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1978), p. 170.

¹⁸ "Death and Rebirth: Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man*," *American Studies*, vol. XI, no. 1 (March 1981), 75-91.

¹⁹ *Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man*, p. 163.

train. That is, he is unable to get a seat in the train filled with passengers. And when the crowd recoils, he is pushed away into a corridor—a metaphorical exile from humanity. However, he does not give up. Instead, he runs down the corridor, hoping that he may find another way to the second section of the train where he may obtain a seat. Again his efforts prove fruitless as he is stopped first by a barrier, then by two strangers. When he is sent into an alley, he is then farther away from humanity. His failure drives him to fall into utmost helplessness and frightful alienation. His tears are most likely tears of fear, a feeling which has been haunting him repeatedly. However, even if he fails, his efforts remain impressive. So long as he maintains his efforts, the hope, as well as the chance, of finding his place in humanity still exists. This may explain why “he had a sense of marvellous relief at the end of the dream” (p. 139). The relief he senses here impresses us more of a catharsis than a relaxation. Far more than that, what happens in the dream seems to have led Leventhal to some kind of realization or understanding:

He was, it seemed to him, in a state of great lucidity, and he experienced a rare, pure feeling of happiness. He was convinced that he knew the truth, and he said to himself with satisfaction, ‘Yes, I do know it, positively. Will I know it in the morning? I do now.’ . . . His heart was jolting painfully; nevertheless he felt confident and happy. What was it? What did he and others do? Admittedly, like others, he had been in the wrong. That was not so important, either. Everybody committed errors and offences. But it was supremely plain to him that everything, everything without exception took place as if within a single soul or person. (p. 139)

The last clause here echoes very much like an epiphany because it suggests that Leventhal has somehow become aware of the common fate of humanity. It is this awareness that paves the way to his redemption and makes possible his rebirth.

More than anything else, *The Victim*, I think, is a novel about how to be human. The message is clearly stated by Schlossberg, a wise old man archetype, to use Jung’s term.²⁰

²⁰ Carl G. Jung, “The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales,” in *Four Archetypes*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, Bollingen Series XX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 93.

Schlossberg appears almost as a spiritual guide for Leventhal who feels himself "strongly drawn to him" (p. 105). He is an aging journalist, who writes mostly theater reminiscences for the Jewish papers. Leventhal meets him through the introduction of Harkavy in a cafeteria. In his cafeteria discourse, Schlossberg clarifies to his younger audience the meaning of good acting. To him, "it's bad to be less than human and it's bad to be more than human. . . . Good acting is what is exactly human" (p. 112). It is obvious that the message does not mean acting superficially. It is also applicable to good life. "I try to give everybody credit," declared the old man, 'I am not a knocker. I am not too good for this world'" (p. 112). Bellow seems to imply that only through sympathy, understanding, and humble acceptance of oneself and others, is one able to become human.

Leventhal rejects Allbee at the beginning simply because he is unable to share the fate of Allbee. He wants him to be more than human. He does the same thing to his brother. He accuses him of being away from home without an understanding of his brother's difficulty. Again, he demands that Max be more than human. What Bellow tries to show is that Leventhal, in so doing, is gradually moving towards the inhuman. Only by accepting Allbee, or symbolically accepting his own self and the inhuman quality within and without himself, is Leventhal then capable of becoming human.²¹ Likewise, only by sharing his brother's destiny, by offering help to him, is he likely to put an end to his inhuman quality and be born a new man.

The death and rebirth motif has been dramatized again and again in Leventhal's crossing to the Staten Island where Max's family live. The ferry ride is a mythic voyage to the land of the dead which finds its symbolism in Mickey, Leventhal's dying nephew. When Leventhal is called upon to help and takes the

²¹ Some critics have pointed out the allegorical properties of the name Allbee (Allbee)—a universal being, an Everyman. See Brigitte Scheer-Schazler, *Saul Bellow* (New York; Frederick Unger, 1973), pp. 20, 26; also Howard M. Harper, Jr., *Desperate Faith: A Study of Bellow, Salinger, Mailer, Baldwin and Updike* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1974), p. 22.

Staten Island ferry for the first time, Bellow gives an almost naturalistic account of the things and people Leventhal sees along his trip:

The rain had gone out to the horizon, a dark band far overreaching the faint marks of the shore. On the water the air was cooler, but on the Staten Island side the great tarnished green sheds were sweltering, the acres of cement widely spattered with sunlight. The disembarking crowd spread through them, going towards the line of buses that waited at the kerb with threshing motors, in a shimmer of fumes. (pp. 11-12)

In another crossing, when he is supposed to take Mickey to the hospital, Leventhal, riding on the ferry, catches sight of a hellish scene which Porter associates with O'Neill's Yank of *The Hairy Ape*.²²

A tanker, seabound, went across the ferry's course, and Leventhal stared after it, picturing the engine room; it was terrible, he imagined, on a day like this, the men nearly naked in the shaft alley as the huge thing rolled in a sweat of oil, the engines labouring. (p. 47)

Porter suggests that the scene is a modern Inferno.²³ In his return to Manhattan after hospitalizing Mickey, Leventhal witnesses another scene which again leads us to associate it with the underworld and the damned:

The ferry crawled in the heat and blackness of the harbour. The mass of passengers on the open deck was still, like a crowd of souls, each concentrating on its destination. (p. 57)

This scene, along with others, brings us back to the second epigraph of *The Victim* which Bellow quotes from De Quincey's *The Pains of Opium*:

. . . now it was that 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 generation . . .

According to Brigitte Scheer-Schätzler the epigraph is Bellow's reminder to his reader that New York City, where *The Victim* is set, "with its teeming millions, is imbued with the quality of

²² *Whence the Power?*, p. 50.

²³ *Ibid.*

De Quincey's opium dream."²⁴ Nevertheless, the scene described in the epigraph, like those infernal scenes Leventhal sees during his ferry crossing, is just another hellish picture.

The mythic implication of Leventhal's ferry ride is particularly clear in its allusion to Aeneas's epic journey to the underworld. Led by the Sibyl, the Trojan hero implores Charon the ferryman to get him across the waters of Acheron. Virgil depicts the throng of souls Aeneas beholds on the bank of the underworld river:

Matrons and men were there, and there were great-hearted heroes
 Finished with earthly life, boys and unmarried maidens
 Young men laid on the pyre before their parents' eyes;
 Multitudinous as the leaves that fall in a forest
 At the first frost of autumn, or the birds that out of the deep-sea
 Fly to land in migrant flocks, when the cold of the year
 Has sent them overseas in search of a warmer climate.
 So they all stood, each begging to be ferried across first,
 Their hands stretched out in longing for the shore beyond the river.²⁵

Leventhal's symbolic voyage to the land of the dead is an illustration of his obsession with death. The voyage, which Leventhal undertakes again and again, tends to intensify his constant fear, but on the other hand, it also evinces his effort to face his own reality, his fear. Only by doing so, he may have a chance to be rejuvenated. John S. Dunne, in analyzing Odysseus's visit to the underworld, suggests that "it is the dread of death that can harden him [Odysseus], driving him to despair, or that can soften him, teaching him compassion."²⁶ For Maud Bodkin, the underworld journey of Aeneas is a symbolic introversion, "a plunging into the depths, to gain knowledge and power over self and destiny."²⁷ Does Leventhal's metaphorical experience exert the same effect upon him? Bellow

²⁴ *Saul Bellow*, p. 18.

²⁵ *The Aeneid of Virgil*, trans. C. Day Lewis (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1953), Book VI, 11. 305-14.

²⁶ *Time and Myth: A Meditation on Storytelling as an Exploration of Life and Death* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), p. 18.

²⁷ *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies in Imagination* (1934; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 125.

does not supply the answer explicitly. Anyhow, as the story proceeds, Leventhal does become more and more compassionate and understanding. Vaguely he begins to be conscious of his own plight and his delicate relationship with Allbee: "he had a strange, close consciousness of Allbee, of his face and body, a feeling of intimate nearness" (p. 133); "he had a particularly vivid recollection of the explicit recognition in Allbee's eyes which he could not doubt was the double of something in his own" (p. 139). This kind of feeling is certainly foreign to Leventhal in his first confrontations with Allbee. Moreover, when the story approaches its climax, Leventhal seems to begin to be able to tolerate Allbee and to share the sorrow and difficulty of his brother. Here again we see the light of Leventhal's possibility to become human, which in turn anticipates his ultimate rebirth.

The death and rebirth motif is also dramatized in the attempted suicide of Allbee. The suicide, if it works out successfully, may have killed Leventhal simultaneously. Therefore, be it a suicide or a murder, it is evident that Allbee's attempt involves a symbolic death on the one hand. But on the other hand, the attempt also symbolizes an act of redemption, and the grace of this redemption ultimately paves the road to the salvation of both men, which in turn is symbolically seen in their escape, an escape analogous to a rebirth. Note that the escape is ritualistically enacted, and the account of the escape is described in great detail: Leventhal rushes into the kitchen, collides with Allbee, and then both of them grapple, drag and seize each other. Allbee finally flings out of the kitchen, and Leventhal chases after him. He throws a milk bottle which he took from a neighbor's sill at Allbee, but the bottle smashes on the tiles. He races back to the kitchen to turn off the gas, and then quickly opens the front-room window to get enough fresh air. At last he limps to the bathroom and rinses his mouth with peroxide. The episode ends with his totally relaxing sleep: "He would sleep undisturbed; he cared about nothing else" (p. 230). A sleep proclaims his symbolic rebirth.

Some critics regard the last chapter of *The Victim*, which

serves almost as an epilogue to the novel, as unsatisfying.²⁸ Yet in the context of the present study, the last chapter is not only necessary, but also thematically significant. The episode takes place several years after the main action of the novel. Leventhal finds a better job in Harkavy's paper, *Antique Horizon*, and things go well with him:

His health was better, and there were changes in his appearance. Something recalcitrant seemed to have left him; he was not exactly affable, but his obstinately unrevealing expression had softened. His face was paler and there were some grey areas in his hair, in spite of which he looked years younger. (p. 230)

The regenerative overtones here need no elaboration. What is more, "Mary was pregnant; she was expecting the baby in a month" (p. 232). This is the first time Leventhal is about to become a father; again, the pregnancy suggests his generative power, his potency, and promises a new life. He has regained female support since Mary has returned to him, and he again is able to live an orderly life. Leventhal at last comes to realize that "a man suffered when he did not have a place" (p. 230). He means a job. But it also implies a place in the world, a seat in humanity.

After years of disappearance, Allbee shows up again and Leventhal incidentally meets him in the lobby of a theater where a play about "a complicated love affair in a Renaissance palace" (p. 233) is being staged. Here again Bellow proves himself to be a skillful and delicate novelist. That the play is about love, about Renaissance, unmistakably echoes the prevailing motif of *The Victim*. So Allbee appears again, somewhat ameliorated, despite Leventhal's belief that he might have been "in an institution, perhaps, in some hospital, or even already lying in Potter's Field" (p. 232). Allbee is now doing advertizing in radio. When he squires Yvonne Crane, a star whose popularity has already died down, to the theater, he looks "more than moderately prosperous in the dinner jacket

²⁸ Jonathan Baumbach, for example, criticizes that the last chapter, "for the most part, unnecessary," See *The Landscape of Nightmare*, p. 46.

and the silk-seamed formal trousers” (p. 235). Nevertheless, Leventhal still perceives in Allbee’s color an unhealthy quality; he feels that it is “the decay of something that had gone into his appearance of well-being” (p. 236). Obviously Allbee has attained some kind of rebirth; but as Baumbach has rightly observed, his rebirth is one “made possible by some kind of interior death.”²⁹

Bellow ends *The Victim* almost with an apocalyptic vision. Both Leventhal and Allbee have to stop their intermission discourse at the lobby since the curtain bell has rung. “The bell continued its dinning, and Leventhal and Mary were still in the aisle when the house lights went off. An usher showed them to their seats” (p. 238). The curtain bell, “with its suggestion of death,”³⁰ is another thematic symbol. It reminds us on the one hand of John Donne and Hemingway’s bell which calls for an embrace of humanity, and on the other hand of the death of Leventhal’s old self. Thus, Leventhal and Mary are led to their seats in the audience, and analogously, in humanity. In other words, they move towards humanity in finding their seats symbolically in the audience. The action is especially significant for Leventhal. His quest not only leads him to his rebirth, but inspires him to become human. And as we behold Leventhal and Mary being led towards humanity, we are reminded of the classic vision Milton describes at the close of *Paradise Lost*:

The World was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide.
They hand in hand with wand’ring steps and slow,
Through *Eden* took their solitary way.³¹

²⁹ *The Landscape of Nightmare*, p. 46.

³⁰ Harper, *Desperate Faith*, p. 19.

³¹ *Paradise Lost*, Book XII, ll. 646-49.

紛擾人世中的自處之道：
論索爾貝婁的受害者

李有成

摘 要

受害者 (*The Victim*) 向被視為索爾貝婁最難懂的小說。其難懂不在於小說的文字或結構，而在於其主角雷文薩爾 (Asa Leventhal) 和對手奧爾比 (Kirby Allbee) 之間看似單純，實則複雜的關係。細察這兩個人之間的層層關係，即不難了解究竟誰是誰非。依小說的情節——特別是牽涉到兩個人的意圖與行為的部份——看來，本文作者認為兩人既都是受害者，也都是傷害對方的人。實則兩人的關係幾不可分，此之所以有些批評家認為奧爾比就是雷文薩爾的「他我」 (alter ego)。

這本小說其實是在探討一個問題：在紛擾人世中，人應該如何自處？這個問題的部份答案蘊藏於雷文薩爾和奧爾比的關係中。索爾貝婁似乎有意藉兩人的複雜關係暗示，自處之道端在於如何與他人相處。也就是說，想要避免受害，首先應該避免傷害他人。索爾貝婁又藉一位猶太老報人史格洛斯伯 (Schlossberg) 的話來闡明這個觀點。史格洛斯伯一向替猶太人的報紙撰寫劇壇憶往之類的文章；終其一生的觀察，一流的演技應該恰到好處，既非矯枉過正，亦非過猶不及。自處或與人相處莫不如此；既不可責人以嚴，也不可律己以寬。換句話說，關懷、諒解與同情仍是處世的不二法門。也只有這樣，一個人在紛擾人世中才能找到自己適當的位置。