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Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man* : Redemption through "Superimposition"

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Your first reading will reveal to you that Bellow's first novel *Dangling Man* has many things in common with his second novel *The Victim* and his fourth novel *Seize the Day*. Before mentioning the close resemblance existing among the three, something must be mentioned about *Seize the Day*. *Seize the Day* was published in book form in 1956 and three stories were included with it. "Seize the Day" itself must have been written much earlier than 1956, and later the three stories must have been added to it. It is quite strange that the novel entitled *The Adventure of Augie March* should have been published before *Seize the Day*, not after it. Irving Malin in his book entitled *Jews and Americans*, quoting what Ralph Freedman wrote in "Saul Bellow : The Illusion of Environment,"[1] said, while he discussed the change from *Dangling Man* to *The Adventure of Augie March* and *Henderson the Rain King*, that "Mr. Freedman is correct in his discussion of the great change—a change so great that we marvel at how the same writer can give us [*Augie March*], *Henderson* and *Dangling Man*."

It is quite natural to think that Bellow wrote "Seize the Day" before he wrote *The Adventure of Augie March* and later added three stories to it, publishing them in book form as *Seize the Day*, because there is a great similarity existing among the three novels—*Dangling Man*, *The Victim* and *Seize the Day*. Chirantan Kulshretha gives the same guess as I in his article entitled "Seize

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the Day and the Bellow Chronology" :

> *Seize the Day* has, thematically, greater affinities with *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, Bellow's first two novels, rather than with *The Adventure of Augie March* and *Henderson the Rain King*. *Seize the Day* may not have been written in the period immediately preceding its publication. No working drafts are available to prove this because B. took little care to preserve manuscript material of his earlier novels.[2]

What makes the resemblance among the three even closer is that unlike the rest of the novels they are short novels—*Dangling Man* with 159 pages, *Seize the Day* with 129 pages and *The Victim* with 238 pages respectively in penguin edition. Again I will emphasize that they may have been written even in a kind of sequel. Last year I wrote an essay about *Seize the Day*, analyzing it in the light of the word "superimposition" I borrowed from "Father-to-Be," one of the three short stories included with "Seize the Day".

Rogin, a protagonist of "Father-to-Be", who is a thirty-one-year old research chemist has an idea about "superimposition" while he waits for a woman in the store to wrap up the shampoo bottle he bought for his tyrannical fiancée :

> Money surrounds you in life as the earth does in death. Superimposition is the universal law. Who is free? No one is free. Who has no burden? Every one is under pressure. The very rocks, the waters of the earth, beasts, men, children—everyone has some weight to carry.[3]

"Superimposition" is just the word for a common theme, if

any, found in almost all the novels written by two typical Jewish American writers, Bernard Malamud and Saul Bellow. Most protagonists in the two authors' work suffer from mental or physical "superimposition." Take Morris Bober and Frank Alpine in Malamud's *The Assistant* for example. Morris Bober even enjoys suffering from "superimposition." On him are superimposed a store which might go bankrupt at any moment and his nagging wife with a pain in the back. He is very peculiar in that he does not try to escape from these "superimpositions" but seems to enjoy them. Almost all the characters in Malamud's and Bellow's fictions are masochists like Morris Bober or aspire to the sublimity Morris Bober attains. Frank Alpine, his assistant, fascinated by Bober's sublime, and self-sacrificing personality, goes to hospital for circumcision and becomes a Jew only to take over Bober's "tomb-like" store. How Frank attains Bober's sublimity is comically described by the fact of his being obliged to endure pain between his legs after circumcision. Tommy Wilhelm in Bellow's *Seize the Day* has his cruel, and demanding wife, and his cold-hearted rich father and a con man Tamkin superimposed on him, but at long last attains *satori*—spiritual awakening after transcending these superimposed persons while he identifies himself with a dead man lying in the coffin in the funeral parlor.

Sarah B. Cohen, referring to bird imagery in *Seize the Day*, mentions some interesting things about "superimposition" :

> According to the folklore of natural history, birds ride on the backs of hippopatami to pull out insects from their hide and to guide them. Tamkin is clearly the bird on Wilhelm's back who is more of a parasite than a guide. When it comes to his wife, Wilhelm immediately grasps the full import of his bitter hyperbole that he is

a "brahma bull" being devoured by piranha fish."[4]

My firm belief is that the most important theme in Bernard Malamud's and Saul Bellow's fictions is "superimposition." My strong determination, though I may not be confident of doing it successfully, is to study Bellow's first fiction *Dangling Man* in terms of "superimposition."

The protagonist of *Dangling Man* is called Joseph, but his last name is not known just like Joseph K. in Kafka's *Trial*. It must be mentioned that affinities are found by quite a few writers between *Dangling Man* and novels such as Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, Sartre's *Nausea*, Camus' *The Stranger* and the above-mentioned Kafka's *Trial*. *Dangling Man* is practically Saul Bellow's first novel, and though it is not a certified fact, he must have drawn on many literary resources.

Helen Weinberg in her book entitled *The New Novel in America*, pointing out the similarity between *Dangling Man* and Kafka's *Trial*, writes :

> In *Dangling Man*, Saul Bellow works with the themes of Kafka's *Trial* : arrest, guilt, self-victimization, alienation, and the inability to use freedom positively and creatively when relieved of routine occupations.[5]

Joseph has been "under arrest" for seven months when the novel which consists of his diary begins. The entries cover the period between 15 December 1942, and 9 April 1943. In the diary entry dated 15 December 1942 Joseph explains how he resigned from his job at the Inter-American Travel Bureau for his induction in the United States Army but that his induction has been delayed by "a sort of bureaucratic comedy trimmed out in red tape." Joseph decides to use his free time to read, to write biographical

essays on the Enlightenment. He fears that he is gradually alienated from his wife Iva and his friends during the period in which he is kept "dangling." The first entry is concluded with his fear of his gradual deterioration :

> There is nothing to do but wait, or dangle, and grow more and more dispirited. It is perfectly clear to me that I am deteriorating, storing bitterness and spite which eat like acids at my endowment of generosity and good will. But the seven month's delay is only one of the sources of my harassment. Again, I sometimes think of it as the backdrop against which I can be seen swinging.[6]

There are many slight indications of his deterioration. Joseph thinks that the maid recognizes that he is "of no importance," for she sweeps the room with a cigarette in her mouth in front of him. His hypersensitive feelings towards the people around him cause him to think that he is disregarded by them. He is sure his wife Iva is disgusted with him and wants him to make his own living. He has a feeling that the Almstadts treat him like a loafer and Mrs. Almstadts affronts him by leaving a chicken feather in his orange juice. He gets furious with Jimmy Burns, who was his comrade when he belonged to the Communist party, because Burns ignores him in the restaurant where they happen to meet. He makes such a scene that everybody around him stares at him. This is his first emotional flare-up. Through this flare-up he makes a step forward towards the final "absurd" determination to get inducted into the army—to submit himself to the army services or to get the army services imposed on him. What I am searching for is a maze of paths towards that decision-making.

Bellow makes clear what is very important in bringing about Joseph's last decision :

> What he [Joseph] wanted was a 'colony of the spirit', or a group whose covenants forbade spite, bloodiness, and cruelty. To hack, to tear, to murder was for those in whom the sense of the temporariness of life had shrunk. The world was crude and it was dangerous and, if no measure were taken, existence could indeed become —in Hobbes's phrase, which had long ago lodged in Joseph's mind—'nasty, brutal, and short'.[7]

"Joseph's outbursts against self-created foes"[8] may seem to be inconsistent with the above-mentioned "colony of the spirit", which Joseph is very anxious to have, but this self-contradiction of his is indispensable in causing him to suffer just as a Jew suffers on such an occasion. "Colony of the spirit" and "the temporariness of life" are the very important themes Bellow has consistently been writing about in his novels. In a long journal entry dated December 22, Joseph reflects on a springtime party given by his friends Harry and Minna Servatius. It is at this party that he realizes how important a "colony of the spirit" is. Though most of his old friends are present, the party is a failure. The hostess, Minna, is an overbearing yet well-intentioned woman whose husband is a philanderer. She drinks too much, laughs too loudly, and tries desperately to induce the others into a sense of communion and a spirit of gaiety. When these attempts fail to produce the desired effect, she compels George Hayza to record on her phonograph one of his poems which used to be popular among them, though he very strongly refuses to. Everybody is tired of hearing it. Finally, Minna coerces Abt Morris, her former sweetheart, into hypnotizing her. What Joseph discovers

from this gathering is the first impetus to make him attain the status of "superimposition" :

> And it came to me all at once that the human purpose of these occasions had always been to free the charge of feeling in the pent heart ; and that, as animals instinctively sought salt or lime, we, too, flew together at this need as we had at Eleusis, with rites and dances, and at other high festivals and corroborees to witness pains and tortures, to give our scorn, hatred, and desire temporary liberty and play. Only we did these things without grace or mystery, lacking the forms for them and, relying on drunkenness, assassinated the Gods in one another and shrieked in vengefulness and hurt. I frowned at this dreadful picture.[9]

The insanity that Joseph witnesses in the gathering is disturbing enough but what really disturbs him is his new awareness of his best friend's capacity for 'nasty, brutish' action. Joseph suspects the capacity when he casually mentions that he could stab Dr. Rood, his college dean ; the suspicion is confirmed when Abt pinches the helpless, mesmerized Minna. The scene of the mesmerized Minna doing obediently just like a puppet as Abt orders her shocks him very much to the recognition that he himself as well as others suffers from "nasty, brutish and short" existence. Joseph asks himself :

> What sort of barrier could one put up against them, these treasons? If, in Abt, cruelty and the desire for revenge were reduced to pinching a woman's hand, what would my own mind give up if one examined its tiniest gaps and runnels? And what about Iva?—and the others,

what about the others?[10]

Joseph begins "to discover one weakness after another in all he had built up around him."[11] As this realization deepens in his mind, the antipathy against his self-created foes skyrockets. Particularly the animosity against Vanaker, his neighbor, runs as an undercurrent throughout the novel from the beginning to the end. Vanaker is a very important character in the novel, who acts as a key persona to transfer Joseph from the state of alienation to that of accomodation at the end. Indeed, Vanaker is Joseph's double, his counterpart.

In the entry dated December 26 Joseph writes about his brother's family. His brother Amos, his senior by twelve years, is a very rich man. He has made a success, beginning his career as a messenger on the Exchange. He called Joseph a fool because he married his wife Iva who does not come from the rich family and "took what to him seemed a menial job at Inter-American."[12] The animosity against the rich brother causes him to refuse to be given anything by Amos. The hatred of "money-making" is very strong in his novels and forms a very important theme there :

> One fact should be clear to you by now. Money-making is agression. That's the whole thing. The functionalistic explanation is the only one. People come to the market to kill. They say, "I'm going to make a killing." It's not accidental. Only they haven't got the genuine courage to kill, and they erect a symbol of it. The money. They make a killing by a fantasy....[13]

Not only Amos but also his wife and his daughter are the objects of his hatred, because they are associated with money-

making. Before his second explosion which is caused by his niece, his brother Amos's daughter, Joseph writes about his beautiful sensation he experiences while listening to the music—a Haydn divertimento for cello :

> It was the first movement, the adagio, that I cared most about. Its sober opening notes, preliminaries to a thoughtful confession, showed me that I was still an apprentice in suffering and humiliation. I had not even begun. I had, furthermore, no right to expect to avoid them. So much was immediately clear. Surely no one could plead for exception ; that was not a human privilege. What I should do with them, how to meet them, was answered in the second declaration : with grace, without meanness. And though I could not as yet apply that answer to myself, I recognized its rightness and was vehemently moved by it.[14]

It is a beautiful passage, affirming the possibility of communication and of human nobility in the face of suffering. Joseph's ideal is to become a moral person or rather a moral mosochist through suffering and enduring humiliation, but he is so far from being such an ideal person. Bellow's theme in this fiction is to become a moral person through suffering, just as Malamud's theme in almost all his fictions is. A moral person here signifies a person putting up with such a great weight of burdens thrown over on his shoulders that he is on the brink of collapsing to the ground. Joseph realizes that everybody is destined to endure suffering, humiliation and meet them "with grace, without meanness," yet ten minutes before, he met the "humiliation" of being handed money by attacking his brother, and five minutes later he will throw a tantrum and attack a teenaged girl for the

humiliation he receives at her hands.[15] He admits that he cannot yet apply Haydn's answer to his own life. *Dangling Man* tells us how Joseph will come to "apply Haydn's answer to himself—to separate himself from alienation and fit himself to accomodation."

Joseph's explosion, when Etta with a close physical resemblance to him flatly refuses to let him use her phonograph, reminds him of one of the family pictures—a picture of his grandfather—kept in the drawer of the table in his own study.

> Then, studying the picture, it occurred to me that this skull of my grandfather's would in time overtake me, curls, Buster Brown, and all. Still later I came to believe ...that the picture was a proof of my mortality. I was upright on my grandfather's bones and the bones of those before him in a temporary loan. But he himself, not the further past, hung over me. Through the years he would reclaim me bit by bit, till my own fists withered and my eyes stared.[16]

Joseph thinks that genes inherited from generation to generation are superimposed on him to make him a vile character like Mephistopheles, as he was called when he visited his boy friend in high school days. His niece Etta also reminds him of the time when he visited his German friend at home in his high school days. For a long time since his mother called Joseph "Mephisto war auch schon," he had believed that "There was a diabolic part to me" and that he "concealed something rotten."[17]

Joseph thinks that the Jefferson Forman listed as having crashed in the Pacific may be the same Jeff Forman he knows. At the news of his possible death he has many kinds of reflections over war and death.

> With all the respect we seem to have for perishable stuff, we have easily accustomed ourselves to slaughter. We are all, after some fashion, the beneficiaries of that slaughter and yet we have small pity for the victims. This has not come with the war, we were ready before the war ever started ; it only seems more apparent now.[18]

Joseph believes that human beings are so cruel that they think nothing of killing others, the fact which, he believes, has nothing to do with the war. However gentle they may try to be, they cannot "hope to escape whipping." Joseph thinks human beings are inexorably brutish. He thinks that Jeff Forman is happy that he died, because "Jeff, under the water, is beyond virtue, value, glamour, money, or future." He has incoherent ideas about things, but what he says about Jeff Forman is the truth, This thought leads Joseph on to the following reflections :

> Myself, I would rather die in the war than consume its benefits. When I am called I shall go and make no protest. And, of course, I hope to survive. But I would rather be a victim than a beneficiary. I support the war, though perhaps it is gratuitous to say so ; we have the habit of making these things issues of personal morality and private will, which they are not at all. The equivalent would be to say, if God really existed, yes, God does exist. He would exist whether we recognized him or not. But as between their imperialism and ours, if a full choice were possible, I would take ours. Alternatives, and particularly desirable alternatives, grow only on imaginary trees.[19]

Going to the army might be Joseph's unavoidable destiny, which

might be the same case with all the young boys of the time who were of draft age. Joseph is the last person to support the war in the ordinary sense of the word. This is an important point which we must consider in order to understand the conclusion of the novel. "Alternatives, and particularly desirable alternatives, grow only on imaginary trees," very accurately describes the state of mind of Joseph who cannot help supporting the war. It does not matter whether Joseph supports the war or not but what is important is how he will bring himself to be called into induction. The army is a kind of thing to submit his burden of selfhood to. He has no notion whatever how to use his free time. He is very eager to superimpose on himself things regulating and controling him. The war is just the thing. R. R. Dutton thinks of the war only as a background :

> In a sense, then, the novel is a war story about what can happen to a man when he is caught in the exigencies of a national military struggle. But the book is about Joseph and World War II only in much the same sense that Huckleberry Finn is a book about Huck Finn and the ante bellum South. The setting of Bellow's work is indeed World War II, but that fact serves only as background for an experience that extends far beyond the confines of any time and certainly of any war.[20]

Joseph engages in two dialogues with the Spirit of Alternatives, dialogues that explore the problem of how to live. The second of these contains an important exchange between the new Joseph and Tu As Raison Aussi, as the Spirit of Alternatives is called. This exchange centers on man's burden of selfhood superimposed on him :

'The mind. Anyway, the self that we must govern. Chance must not govern it, incident must not govern it. It is our humanity that we are responsible for it, our dignity, our freedom. Now, in a case like mine, I can't ask to be immune from the war. I have to take my risks for survival as I did, formerly, against childhood diseases and all the dangers and accidents through which I nevertheless managed to become Joseph. Do you follow that?'

'It's impossible, every bit of it.'

'We are afraid to govern ourselves. Of course. It is so hard. We soon want to give up our freedom. It is not even real freedom, because it is not accompanied by comprehension. It is only a preliminary condition of freedom. But we hate it. And soon we run out, we choose a master, roll over on our backs and ask for the leash.[21]

Joseph's vehement declaration of his submission of freedom presages the several events following each other closely, which will eventually lead to his final determination.

Joseph quarrels with his wife Iva because she insists on his going to the bank to cash her check but he will not. A half year ago he was turned down twice when he went to the bank to cash her check because he had "insufficient identification." Since Joseph had no job, the president of the bank, whom he demanded to confront, refused the service. The point is that Joseph has no identity. Immediately after his wife begins to cry, he hears Vanaker's "several protesting coughs" and now "his footsteps in the hall as he went to the bathroom...." Joseph approaches his shadow and exclaims, "You damned old whiskey-head. By God,

I've had more than I can stand. There's a dying woman downstairs, and you slam around here all boozed up, raising as much hell as you please."[22] There occurs a terrible scene which involves almost every person living in the apartment house. There is a violent exchange of bad words between him and Captain Briggs, the owner of the apartment. After this Joseph walks out in the street and makes his final determination to go to the draft board :

> I believe I had known for some time that the moment I had been waiting for had come, and that it was impossible to resist any longer. I must give myself up. And I recognized that the breath of warm air was simultaneously a breath of relief at my decision to surrender. I was done. But it was not painful to acknowledge that, it was not painful in the least. Not even when I tested myself, whispering "the leash", reproachfully, did I feel painful or humiliated.[23]

Several outbursts of wrath Joseph has directed against several persons because they are "nasty, brutish and short," cause him to surrender his selfhood to the army. He is shouldered with such a heavy burden of his selfhood that he is almost on the point of collapsing and at long length he is obliged to shift the load of his selfhood from his own shoulder to that of the army. Rather it can be said that Joseph has transcended his selfhood by submitting it to the army. This statement can be self-contradictory but we can understand it well, if we remember Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day* transcends his selfhood by identifying himself with the dead man in the coffin. Tommy Wilhelm cries "with all his heart," at the last scene, while Joseph exclaims in a kind

of triumph, " Hurray for regular hours! And for the supervision of the spirit! Long live regimentation!"[24] The last scenes in each novel are very identical in that each end "is kind of drowning."[25]

Tommy Wilhelm achieves a spiritual rebirth by submerging his selfhood under the water, while Joseph dies a spiritual death and loses his selfhood by sinking it under "regimentation" of the army. What makes this rebirth theory more convincing is that Mrs. Kiefer dies after being isolated in her room for a long while and then Vanaker serving all through the novel as Joseph's double moves, leaving a lot of junk. Through these two people's disappearance Joseph achieves a spiritual rebirth.

John J. Clayton in his very interesting book entitled *Saul Bellow : In Defense of Man* states very enlightening things about *Dangling Man* :

> If we look carefully at *Dangling Man*, we do not find a novel in defense of individuality and we do not find a novel ending in mere resignation of freedom. The novel concludes in partial hope for new life—a life based on a loss of selfhood.[26]

Bellow's first novel, as quoted from his first book-form criticism written by Tony Tanner,[27] is in some ways crude. One occasionally has the feeling that problems, preoccupations, and scraps of random reading are tumbled onto the pages rather unrelatedly. Unlike in *Seize the Day* which is one of Bellow's greatest novels, in *Dangling Man* how the protagonist has achieved his redemption by submitting his own selfhood to the army may not be so convincing to the reader, but Bellow must have written this novel to appeal to the reader for the need of the brotherhood in the world which might be created by throwing himself away. I am

going to quote John J. Clayton's words concerning this matter :

> The distinction between giving ourselves and throwing ourselves away is important : to become a mass man, to join, to belong to a movement in which you can eschew personal choice, in which you can avoid thinking and feeling for yourself—this is throwing yourself away ; it is partly what Joseph is doing by putting himself up for immediate induction.... But a different loss of selfhood —a giving yourself away, joining the human brotherhood, longing for such a loss of selfhood, is also implicit in Joseph's giving himself to the army.[28]

Has Joseph collapsed under the weight of "superimposition"? Never. Joseph has transcended his selfhood superimposed on him by giving himself away to the army and joining the human brotherhood. He has ceased to be an apprentice in "suffering and humiliation" and come to the threshold to becoming a master of these two human ingredients for making ideal human beings. It is true that the army services imposed on him necessarily entail daily suffering and humiliation, but Joseph can hope to attain redemption in the end by willingly putting up with the "superimposition" of army services.

NOTES

1 Irving Malin, *Jews and American* (Illinois : Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), p. 150.

2 Chirantan Kulshrestha, "*Seize the Day* and the Bellow Chronology." *LCrit*, XIII, iii (1978), 29–33.

3 Saul Bellow, *Mosby's Memoirs And Other Stories* (Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 138–139.

4 Sarah Blacher Cohen, *Saul Bellow's Enigmatic Laughter* (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 1974), pp. 96–97.

5 Helen Weinberg, *The New Novel in America : The Kafkan Mode in*

Contemporary Fiction (Ithaca, N. Y. : Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 55.

[6] Saul Bellow, *Dangling Man* (Penguin Books, 1963), p. 10.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 32.

[8] Sarah Blacher Cohen, *Saul Bellow's Enigmatic Laughter*, p. 34.

[9] Saul Bellow, *Dangling Man*, pp. 37–38.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 46.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 49.

[13] Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day* (Penguin Books, 1966), pp. 74–75.

[14] Saul Bellow, *Dangling Man*, p. 55.

[15] John J. Clayton. *Saul Bellow : In Defense of Man* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 68.

[16] Saul Bellow, *Dangling Man*, p. 62.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 68.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 69.

[20] Robert R. Dutton, *Saul Bellow* (New York : Twayne, 1971), p. 19.

[21] Saul Bellow, *Dangling Man*, p. 139.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 149.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 152.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 159.

[25] Tony Tanner, *Saul Bellow* (Edinburgh : Oliver And Boyd, 1965), p. 23.

[26] John J. Clayton, *Saul Bellow*, p. 115.

[27] Tony Tanner, *Saul Bellow*, p. 25.

[28] John J. Clayton, *Saul Bllow*, p. 117.

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