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A Retreat from the Chasm of Death : Saul Bellow's *The Victim*

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The story begins with Asa Leventhal returning home after going over to his brother's wife, who phoned him because of her son's sudden illness. Before going on to tell the plot two epigraphs must be mentioned. The first from *Thousand and One Nights* reminds us of the extent to which we are responsible for what we do to others or makes us wonder if we are responsible at all for whatever harm we may do to others without knowing anything about it. This problem may be closely connected with what the second epigraph from De Quincey's *The Pains of Opium* tells us about—"the suffering of humanity at large."[1] The oppressive suffering masses, as aptly mentioned by Keith Michael Opdahl in his book entitled *The Novels of Saul Bellow*,[2] are likely to do harm to one another indiscriminately without knowing it.

The first occasion of the consideration of one's responsibility to others arises when Asa goes to meet his brother's son, who has been stricken with sudden illness. His brother Max has left home to work in Texas. Max's Italian wife Elena stays home, looking after their two sons. She cannot call him back, because he is a long distance away from Manhattan. She phones to ask for Asa's help. When she phones, unfortunately, he is occupied with work. He nevertheless leaves the office, hearing Mr. Beard's complaint behind his back :

"Takes unfair advantage," Mr. Beard continued.

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> "Like the rest of his brethren. I've never known one who wouldn't. Always please themselves first. Why didn't he offer to come back later at least?"[3]

Mr. Beard refers to Asa's Jewishness. Asa's fear of anti-Semiticism is very obvious throughout the story. The fear has an essential effect upon the progress of the plot.

Asa travels to and from Staten Island several times to care for his brother's child Mickey until he dies. His love for Mickey is very deep, but his fear of anti-Semitism may motivate him to worry too much about Mickey's illness. Asa projects his fear of anti-Semitism upon Elena's mother :

> "And the grandmother? If anything happened to the boy she could consider it in the nature of a judgement on the marriage. The marriage was impure to her, yes he understood how she felt about it. A Jew, a man of wrong blood, of bad blood, had given her daughter two children, and that was why this was happening."[4]

His love for his brother's family, whatever it may be, is so profound that every reader must be moved by it. The other child "deserted" by his father strikes Asa's sympathetic chord and he shows his nephew around Manhattan. This is one of the most moving scenes in this novel. Some Japanese readers, perhaps many, find *The Victim* more understandable than any other novel written by Saul Bellow because of the family obligations evident in that novel. This observation is made by Earl Rovit in his book entitled *Saul Bellow*.[5]

The two opposing views of Asa's attitude toward his brother's family can be found in *Saul Bellow's Enigmatic Laughter* and

another *Saul Bellow*. In the former Sarah Blacher Cohen writes :

> When his sister-in-law seeks his aid to care for her sick child, he views it as a most unreasonable request, a presumptuous infringement on his invaluable time.[6]

Cohen further refers to Asa's selfishness in denying kindness to others. In the latter R. R. Dutton writes :

> And, more often than not, at least within the limits of his ability, he abides by his ideals : he is humanly accountable in the best sense of the term. His own effort and his own time, often valuable time are given to help his brother's family. Furthermore, his visits are not perfunctorily passive.[7]

I strongly support Dutton's view. Asa's unselfish love for his brother's family leads him to accept his anti-Semitic friend Kirby Allbee who may be the least likely to be accepted.

Asa feels responsible even for the death of Mickey, who was hospitalized after he persuaded Elena to let him enter the hospital. Mickey was the child of "the brother he hardly knows, who has abandoned his own child."[8] Asa's sense of responsibility for Mickey is combined with his recognition of his responsibility for Allbee's comedown. His encounter with Allbee comes about when he is too anxious about his nephew's serious illness to think about anything else. Therefore he is greatly confused at Allbee's unexpected demands. Allbee "does indeed blame him, accusing Asa of having intentionally cost him his job years before, the loss of which led to poverty, his wife's death, and his degeneration."[9]

Asa is the editor of a small trade magazine. Before finding

his present job and relative security he went through a period of many difficulties—at one time he was on the brink of being down and out—and finally became a civil servant. After a while, however, he gave up this position for what he thought was a better opportunity. He was jobless again. This was when he asked Kirby Allbee to make an arrangement to have an interview with his employer Rudiger. Asa, who had a tendency to become easily infuriated in time of difficulty, as anybody may be on such an occasion, lost his temper with Allbee's boss. Allbee appears before Asa on a hot summer evening several years later to insist that he was fired by Rudiger because of that interview :

> He was ready to accept the blame for losing his head at Dill's. But why had he lost it? Only because of Rudiger's abuse? No, he, he himself had begun to fear that the lowest price he put on himself was too high and he could scarcely understand why anyone should want to pay for his service. And under Rudiger's influence he had felt this. "He made me believe what I was afraid of," Asa thought....[10]

He is made to be convinced that he is worthless during the interview. His feeling of worthlessness and his "persecution complex"[11] warp his own nature and make him behave strangely. He is too much afraid of what he might do to others. He fears too much that he might be injuring others and vice versa. Asa is overconscious of himself. The fact that he is suffering from "persecution complex" can best be understood when we consider his attitude toward Disraeli's rise to prime ministership.

Asa comes across Harkavy, the son of his old boss, in a cafeteria and there meets his brother-in-law Goldstone and some

of Goldstone's friends—Shiftcart, an agent for actors and a Jewish art critic, Schlossberg. This is "one of the most illuminating scenes." They start to argue, and there comes up for a discussion "Disraeli's role in the political life of England"[12] :

> "Why do you have it in for Disraeli?" demanded Harkavy. "I don't have it in for him. But he wanted to lead England. In spite of the fact that he was a Jew, not because he cared about empires so much. People laughed at his nose, so he took up boxing ; they laughed at his poetic silk clothes, so he put on black and they laughed at his books, so he showed them. He got into politics and became the prime minister. He did it all on nerves.[13]

All of his thinking and action is conducted through the channel of defensive Semitism, though he does not notice it. In order to have a complete redemption it is of the utmost necessity for Asa to realize that fact and acknowledge that he has been wrong all along. Will he have full comprehension of his mistakes and will he able to transform himself into a new self? These questions are yet to be answered.

Asa's distorted vision of Elena and Elena's mother comes from his fear of anti-Semitism. His realization of the fact of his being wrong about Elena and Elena's mother leads to his recognition of his being mistaken about Allbee. This important moment comes when his brother Max, returning home at the death of his son Mickey, visits him. What follows is the conversation between Asa and Max, which will shed new light on Asa's fear of anti-Semitism :

"Tell me, is the old woman around much—her mother?"

"Oh, she's in and out all the time."

"For God's sake, throw her out!" His vehemence astonished Max.

"She doesn't have anything to do with it."

"Don't let her get a hold. Protect yourself against her."

Max for the first time began to smile.

"She won't hurt me."

"I'll bet she's telling Elena not to go. How do you know what she tells her? You don't understand what they're saying."

Max looked changed ; he became grave again and his mouth sank at the corners.

"I understand a little," he said, "I guess you think I should have married a Jewish girl."[14]

Keith Michael Opdahl mentions this matter in his book entitled *The Novels of Saul Bellow* :

> When Max shows up, however, Leventhal realizes that he had been mistaken about Elena and the old woman. Wrong about Elena, Leventhal could well be wrong about Allbee. Although it is puzzling, the final action of the chapter—the climax of the novel—suggests that he is.[15]

Is Allbee right in claiming that Asa caused him to lose his job and wife? Is Asa right in insisting that he had nothing to do with Allbee's losing his job and wife? Jonathan Baumbach elaborates on the relationship between Asa and Allbee in his wonderful criticism on *The Victim* in his book *The Landscape of Nightmare* :

> Though he vehemently denies Allbee's accusations, Leventhal feels strangely responsible for Allbee's determination. At one point, after he has already committed himself to Allbee, Leventhal has a flash of selfdeceived insight. He wondered : "Had he unknowingly, that is unconsciously, wanted to get back at Allbee?" He then, unable to face even this possibility, denies that he had, consciously refuses all responsibility for Allbee's fall. Despite the assurance of his denial, Leventhal continues to behave toward Allbee as if he had in some interior confessional already admitted his culpability. Leventhal is not so much Allbee's victim as his own. A kind of materialized ghost from Leventhal's haunted psyche, Allbee is not the cause but the occasion of Leventhal's victimization—the objectification of his free-floating guilt.[16]

Asa and Allbee abhor each other at first, but gradually come to attract each other. It is very interesting to note how "the two seemingly unlike characters"[17] can learn to communicate with each other. At long last it even seems as if the two different persons merged into a whole new one. Asa allows Allbee to stay in his flat, drink and eat from his own refrigerator. At one time he carries to the daybed his drunken friend who is liable to slide out of the chair while sleeping. He even lets Allbee finger his hair. "He is, for the time being, condemned to isolation."[18]

Asa is all alone, his wife Mary being in Baltimore to help his mother move to Charleston. He seems to be a solitary person. He is eager to have someone to talk with. He hears a bell ringing—it turns out later that Allbee touched the button—and "hoped someone had remembered that Mary was away and had come to keep him company."[19]

Another instance of Asa's utter loneliness can be found in the following passage :

> He congratulated himself on having thought of Philip ; he was delighted. He would have passed the time tolerably well, he reflected, until some time toward evening when he realized he had not spoken three words to a living soul and the blues descended on him.[20]

The second epigraph from De Quincey's *The Pains of Opium* describes "the loss of the individual in the oppressive, suffering masses of people"[21] among whom there can be no communication whatever. Asa's loneliness is not so profound as the solitariness Wilhelm in *Seize the Day* suffers from (his loneliness is well depicted as that of a fellow "howling from his window like a wolf."[22]) Asa's feeling of isolation makes him "bear the burden of Allbee alone. Ironically, his victimizer, Allbee, becomes the only one with whom he can communicate."[23]

The city is also depicted as symbolizing the world's destructive power. The stainless steel and glass, the train rushing by setting off metal dust all give people a sensation of solitude, which prevents them from having any communication with others.

In order to have a complete redemption Asa must accept everything as it really is. Asa's fear of involving himself with Allbee means that he fears he might have become an Allbee—"the lost, the outcast, the overcome, the effaced, the ruined."[24] Asa must accept Allbee as he is, but not evade him. Asa is much offended at the absence of his brother Max while his son Mickey is seriously ill. It is quite natural to become sad at a relative's death, but it is maybe necessary to accept death as it is in order to transcend it. Max tries to teach Asa how to transcend death:

"...Mickey wasn't ever a healthy kid like Phil. And then we must have made mistakes, too. But what can you do? It's not like with God, you know, in the Bible, where he blows his breath into Adam, or whoever. I think I told you that I asked a nurse what room he was in, when I got to the hospital. I went in there and he was lying covered up already. I pulled the sheet off and had a look at him."

"Those fools!" Leventhal exclaimed. "Not to have somebody posted there."

Max excused them with a downward wave of the hand. "All the nurses didn't know. It's a big place."[25]

What the art critic Schlossberg says in a cafeteria is very illuminating. Asa learns much from him though he does not seem to agree with him. Schlossberg talks about the nothingness of human life, which leads to the acceptance of death :

And really we study people so much now that after we look and look at human nature—I write science articles myself—after you look at it and weigh it and turn it over and put it under a microscope, you might say, 'What is all the shouting about? A man is nothing, his life is nothing. Or it is even lousy and cheap. But this your royal highness doesn't like, so he hokes it up. With what? With greatness and beauty....'[26]

Allbee also mentions a similar thing about human frailty :

"Well..." he began; but he arrested himself. "All right, never mind. But it's unfair to try to put the blame for my wife's death on me. It's worse than unfair ; it's cruel when you consider what she was to me and what

> I've been through. I don't know how you look at it, but I take it for granted that we're not gods, we're only creatures, and the things we sometimes think are permanent, they aren't permanent. So one day we're like full bundles and the next we're wrapping paper, blowing around the streets."[27]

The most important way to accept everything as it is to recognize thoroughly that our life is very fragile and that "we're wrapping paper, blowing around the streets." Asa falls short of this recognition, and finds it very hard to accept Mickey's death and Elena's mother. The most peculiar example of "his refusal to accept himself is his fear of sexual indulgence."[28] John J. Clayton elucidates Asa's fear of sexual indulgence by mentioning his desire for Elena and Mr. Nunez.

Asa naturally gets exasperated to find his bed sullied by his friend Allbee and asks him why he was able to do such a thing while he was crying for his dead wife :

> "Not that, for sure!" Allbee said harshly. His face was inflamed ; his cheekbones looked as if they had been branded. But he checked himself and slowly the color retreated. Only a few refractory spots remained. He seemed to force himself to make a gesture of retraction. "I mean," he said, "she's dead. What does she have to do with it? I have needs, naturally, the same as anybody else."[29]

M. Gilbert Porter mentions a very enlightening thing regarding the matter :

> Underworld as a region of the dead is not really Leventhal's main problem. He is troubled by Mickey's death and vaguely uneasy about his own end, but death is one of those "antique horizons" with which he, as an able editor of the journal by that name, becomes competent to deal. Mrs. Harkavy seems to speak for Leventhal when she admits she sometimes feels "wicked still to be here at [her] age while children die" but concludes philosophically that she is "not taking it away from anybody" (216). Leventhal also knows, with Schlossberg, that to be fully human is to "somebody who dies." He learns much from the old Jewish patriarch. But the underworld as place of punishment for the guilty, a manifestation of evil, is a more serious problem for Leventhal, and evil surrounds him in many forms.[30]

But does Asa learn enough to accept the reality of death or life? Ejecting Allbee and the whore from his bed means to deny the man's natural desires for the woman. It also means that paper grass in the grave, as Schlossberg says, makes all the grass paper....[31] As a matter of fact, Asa projects his own desires on Allbee, which means that he "cannot accept the darkness in himself."[32]

A short while after having been ejected from Asa's flat Allbee sneaks into his kitchen and attempts to kill himself with gas, but Asa wakes up in time to prevent his death and save his own. Allbee disappears out of sight only to show up before him in the theater lobby a few years later, when both are in a relatively secure position, Asa being the editor of *Antique Horizons*, Allbee gigolo of a famous elderly actress.

How can we analyze the suicide attempt and the last scene several years later? Many critics have different opinions concerning

the matter, but the views are roughly divided into two. One is that the last chapter is "disastrously out-of-key," which is represented by Opdahl, and the other which is presented by Clayton, is that it is not, but implies the protagonist's redemption. Which view is more correct or more persuasive? That depends on the individual reader. Keith Michael Opdahl mentions concerning the matter :

> Such is the story Bellow seems to have planned. That many have felt the novel to be more than this suggests the presence of other levels of meaning. So too does the feeling that the last chapter—in which Bellow states his theme—is "disastrously out-of-key." We might explain this charge by the sudden leap in years after an almost day by day narration, or by the purgation or relief that follows the suicide scene.... Bellow uses his leap in time to introduce—and justify—a change in character. He introduces this change partly out of emulation of Dostoevsky's tone, partly out of his insistence against despair, but also, I think, partly out of doubts about his clarity. Having denied Leventhal and Allbee any perception of this fault as a result of their experience, he uses an unjustified change in character to insure our perception of it.[33]

Clayton states his view, which is quite opposite to Opdahl's :

> But in both cases [*The Victim* and Dostoyevsky's *The Eternal Husband*] there is the need for the attempted murder, the physical scuffle, the expulsion. Afterward each hero is healed. Velchaninov is no longer sick, no longer depressive ; Leventhal's health is also improved, and he is happier, less burdened. Both encounter their

> doubles again, but greet them now as whole men who have gained their dignity.[34]

It is very interesting to note that Keith Michael Opdahl and John J. Clayton have reached their opinions, which are poles apart, by comparing *The Victim* with *The Eternal Husband* from which Saul Bellow is generally believed to have borrowed. Brigitte Scheer-Schäzler supports Clayton's view, though she admits that the reader may feel some disappointment for such a conclusion :

> Any disappointment the reader may feel toward such an unresolved conclusion, however, does not take into consideration the nature of the events described. What we have witnessed is similar in kind to an initiation, a deepening of the understanding ; the important thing is not so much the outcome but the process.[35]

Several critics, on the other hand, complain of the last chapter. Some of them are Diana Trilling, Rueben Frank, Alan S. Downer, and Leslie Fiedler. For more detail, the reader is advised to refer to Opdahl's *The Novels of Saul Bellow*.[36]

The Victim is, as Bellow himself said in the interview with Gordon Harper,[37] 'letter-perfect' by Flaubertian standards, but is more letter-perfect than we think the 32-year-old novelist can make it. The Japanese reader can surely understand this novel better than any other written by Saul Bellow.

Repeated reading, however, may convince him that the last chapter is unnecessary. Why do many readers have such a feeling after they finish reading it?

In order to be reborn, the protagonist must confront the darkness in himself and accept the end of himself. He must

not avoid facing death. Asa, however, cannot confront the darkness in himself when he throws Allbee and the whore sleeping on his bed out of the house. Asa is not courageous enough to admit that he has natural needs. If he were, he could forget Allbee for that. His eviction of Allbee from his house causes him to use his kitchen to commit suicide. Asa might be killed with him if he does not wake up in time to stop him. Asa has a chance to face death now, but is he courageous enough to accept it? Far from it. He fears death, for he grapples with Allbee, pushes him away from the kitchen and even throws a milk bottle as he is running for his life into the foyer.

Can such a person be said to have had a rebirth? No. Bellow cannot end the story like this. That's the reason why he is obliged to let several years elapse before concluding the story. Even then he cannot finish the story satisfactorily. Asa hasn't learned to face death and confront the darkness in himself as Tommy Wilhelm has in *Seize the Day*. Tony Tanner, who is the author of the first book ever written on Saul Bellow—this book has had a great influence on many critics—sums up the end of the book very skillfully.

> At the end of the book, Leventhal is portrayed as a stranger, more relaxed, open figure.... A man gains such a strength after his way of life has been exposed to an anarchic threat and has survived, enhanced by a deeper wisdom. Yet there is something muffled and disappointing as well. Leventhal still embraces a view of the world as pure chance ; "It was a shuffle, all, all accidental and haphazard," and Bellow does not really show us a changed and wiser man, so much as merely a more confident, less neurotic man.... There is, however, a hint as to where Bellow's subsequent interests might take him after the

slightly exhausted, low-keyed ending of this powerful book.[38]

I quite agree with Tony Tanner. We must wait a few years before we are to find a wonderful and powerful ending in *Seize the Day*.

NOTES

1 John J. Clayton, *Saul Bellow : In Defense of Man* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 139.
2 Keith Michael Opdahl, *The Novels of Saul Bellow* (University Park : The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1970), pp. 59–60.
3 Saul Bellow, *The Victim* (New York : The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1947), p. 5.
4 *Ibid.*, p. 62.
5 Earl Rovit, *Saul Bellow* (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press), p. 10.
6 Sarah Blacher Cohen, *Saul Bellow's Enigmatic Laughter* (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 1974), p. 44.
7 Robert R. Dutton, *Saul Bellow* (New York : Twayne, 1971), p. 39.
8 Irving Malin, ed., *Saul Bellow and the Critics* (New York : New York University Press, 1969), p. 14.
9 Clayton, p. 140.
10 Saul Bellow, *The Victim*, p. 120.
11 Robert R. Dutton, p. 37.
12 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
13 Saul Bellow, *The Victim*, p. 130.
14 *Ibid.*, pp. 239–240.
15 Opdahl, p. 57.
16 Jonathan Baumbach, *The Landscape of Nightmare : Studies in the Contemporary American Novel* (New York : New York University Press, 1965)
17 Brigitte Scheer-Schäzler, *Saul Bellow* (New York : Unger, 1972), p. 21.
18 Baumbach, pp. 42–43.
19 Saul Bellow, *The Victim*, p. 23.
20 *Ibid.*, pp. 97–98.
21 Opdahl, p. 60.
22 Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day* (Penguin Books, 1956). p. 73.
23 Baumbach, p. 43.
24 Saul Bellow, *The Victim*, p. 20.
25 *Ibid.*, p. 242.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 134.
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 76.
[28] Clayton, p. 149.
[29] Saul Bellow, *The Victim*, pp. 271–272.
[30] M. Gilbert Porter, *Whence the Power? The Artistry and Humanity of Saul Bellow* (Missouri : University of Missouri Press, 1974), pp. 51–52.
[31] Saul Bellow, *The Victim*, p. 256.
[32] Clayton, p. 154.
[33] Opdahl, pp. 58–59.
[34] Clayton, p. 142.
[35] Scheer-Schäzler, p. 22.
[36] Opdahl, p. 52.
[37] Gordon L. Harper, "The Art of Fiction XXXVII : Saul Bellow," *Paris Review*, 9 (1966) : 48–73.
[38] Tony Tanner, *Saul Bellow* (Edinburgh : Oliver And Boyd, 1965), p. 36.

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