

## CHAPTER – III

### THE VICTIM AS SURVIVOR

Bellow's metaphor in *"Dangling Man"* went far towards expressing the era, and his protagonist was decidedly alive. In creating a living situation and character, however, Bellow had sacrificed qualities, which were less important than his achievement and yet essential to a polished novel. The journal form by which he examined Joseph permitted him to avoid the development of a real plot. Except for a very general pattern, he had treated each entry as a separate entity without sub-ordinating it to a preconceived design of the whole. Joseph stood out in part because the other characters were a pale background for the sharp lines of his own character. The novel's striking flashes of colour and texture contrasted with a dominant black and white of abstraction. Bellow had to show that he could tell a more inclusive, varied story, that he could breathe life into more than one character and evoke a physical world larger than a single room. He had to tighten his control over his imagination and broaden its scope.

In accomplishing his second task, broadening the scope of his imagination, Bellow intensely evoked the city. "On some nights New York is as hot as Bangkok, *The Victim* begins, "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, barbario fellahin among the stupendous

monuments of their mystery." (Bellow: 1947 : 3) Bellow expanded the use of metaphor in *The Victim* to use the city, the way earlier American writers used the forest or sea: the city symbolises the world's destructive power. The city, having "slid near the equator", reflects the tropical intensity of too much life. Having planned the hallucinatory quality of his city to be a reflection of Leventhal's suspicious state of mind – a creation of his sick imagination, Bellow shifts to an urban primitivism in which the city represents reality itself.

The physical description is, I think, one of Bellow's finest achievements in the novel. He never lets us forget the shifting heat or the mute, pressing crowds. If we take Schollossberg's comments as Bellow's own, we might assume a relationship between this physical evocation and one of Bellow's recurrent affirmative themes – the peace man finds in accepting the physical world. Man's gloomy struggle is unnecessary, Bellow suggests, because man can obtain salvation by merely accepting the richness and multiplicity of the physical world. Schollossberg claim that paper grass in the grave makes all grass paper, holds out the promise that real grass in the grave makes all grass real, that man may find a home in the world if he accepts its inevitable limitations. As he does in *Dangling Man*. Bellow argues for the acceptance of the world, but creates one, which can hardly be accepted. He passes not only from Leventhal's imaginary fear to the need to accept evil as real, but from the wisdom of acceptance to the need for transcendence. Although Bellow does not conclusively affirm religious experience in *The Victim*, he comes

much closer to it than in his first novel. Here too the final chapter provides a focal point for the issue. Among the many reasons for an impression of a shift in tone is the fact that Leventhal cautiously affirms transcendence.

Everyone in our society, Leventhal thinks assume that a promise had been made entitling him to a particular economic position or seal in the social theatre. Most people either feared they didn't deserve their ticket, as he had, or were frustrated like Allbee at not receiving the ticket they felt they deserved. Many feared they would get no ticket at all. But the reality was different. For why should tickets, mere tickets be promised if promises were being made, tickets to desirable and undesirable places. There were more important things to be promised. Leventhal loses his fear of ruin when he sees that the real promise of life lies deeper than social arrangements. Having made this leap, he concludes that "possibly there was a promise, since so many felt it. He himself was almost ready to affirm that there was." (Bellow: 1947 : 286)

This promise refers in part to the serenity Schlossberg finds in acceptance of our limited humanity. But stating it in the theological terms, however, as a promise that is more than the potential of the given world, one that "had been made... at the start of life, and perhaps even before." Leventhal implies a larger reality behind the physical. (Bellow: 1947 : 286 - 287)

Levanthal is also Bellow's typical hero in that he is called

upon to be a good man in the face of great difficulty. Leventhal suffers, like Henderson, from "the good that I would that I do not." (Bellow: 1959 : 124) Creating heroes who desire or are forced to act compassionately, Bellow tests that compassion by a threatening world.

"Leventhal is called upon not to be kind or decent, but to be moral – to risk his own interest for the sake of another who is not only obnoxious but who may be beyond help." (Opdahl: 1967 : 69)

Leventhal discovers in his difficulty like the hero of the story "*By the Rock Wall*", that "everything that was not firm, everything the least bit false, not strict – the being loosely humane, relatively considerate, fairly decent – everything like that was knocked down on the first serious consideration" (Bellow : 1951 : 215) Whether he is to dispose of Allbee or risk his own security to help him, Leventhal needs the same sense of self as Joseph, one which is "strong in itself" rather than in its social role and which can accept or reject the world as it wills. Leventhal too finds that an externally derived identity is inadequate: the real threat is Allbee's hatred, the fact that his claims are unreasonable, and the fact that the highest morality requests that Leventhal help him – all these factors raise the issue above our practical social standards and require a morality and strength that lie deeper than the external world. Allbee himself of course needs a similar confidence in his identity. In that Leventhal retreats from the world to his secure but limited existence, and Allbee would "be all", - asserting an unlimited

will – the two characters play out the drama implicit in the boy and the gambler in Bellow's first short story. They also play out the two sides of Joseph's character and they also suggest, more directly than the previous works, the necessity for an essential self, which accepts inevitable victimisation because it glimpses something higher.

Like Joseph, Asa Leventhal is a solitary with few friends, and a depressive. He feels burdened by a constant struggle against the world, because of a difficulty, which is at once psychological and moral, as in the case of Joseph. The theme of this book is the casting off of his self-imposed burdens by learning to accept himself and others rather than to judge and blame, by learning to have an open heart. Asa's chief burden, like Joseph's, is his pride, which is the very antithesis of true dignity. Bellow wishes to reveal the true beauty and dignity of the human being, but his beauty and dignity can be realised only by admitting that you are nearly human by accepting rather than blaming yourself and others. "The Victim also concerns that obligation of the human being to others." (Clayton: 1968 : 31) The relationship of the individual and the mass, is partly the question of *Dangling Man*. The image of futility, immensity, helplessness of humanity's suffering, what can you do to stop all this suffering? Many are called, few are chosen, why one and not another? These precisely are the problems raised in *The Victim*.

Asa Leventhal, a city Jew of guilts and duties – the city, his job, his brother's family are all weights on his back – blames everyone

and assumes that everyone is blaming him. Kirby Allbee, another victim and anti semite, 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.

Two plot strands develop. In the first, guilty Asa tries to deal with Allbee, to get rid of him, to understand him, to help, him, to beat him up. Allbee, not revealing what he is after, insinuates himself more and more deeply into Asa's life – visiting him, following him, living with him, locking him out of his own house while Allbee has sexual relations with a pick up, finally trying to kill Asa and himself. Asa begins by refusing to acknowledge responsibility, moves toward helping Allbee, and ends by expelling him, no longer quite so afraid of Allbee as an image of his own possible failure and a projection of his own self hatred. As in Malamud's *Last of the Mohicans*, a stranger forces the hero to see his own spiritual failings – and departs. Now Asa can call his wife, who has been south with her mother, and asks her to come home.

If Asa is healed, it is due partly to the second plot strand. Out of a sense of duty, he takes charge of his brother's family when Max is away. Partly on Asa's responsibility, Max's son Mickey is sent to the hospital, where he dies. Asa's emotional involvement here – his change from blame of Max for being away from his family to love of Max, and from duty to concern – helps make Asa aware that a man is not flawless, that in humility he must take responsibility even for what he is hardly responsible.

The last chapter of the novel occurs years later Asa, however, looks younger. The burden of guilt and so of struggle is lighter now. Meeting Allbee Asa no longer sees him as the persecutor. They have both changed: Allbee is now externally happy and semi-successful but essentially the same; Asa is externally the same but essentially changed, owing to an "expansion of the heart" and a recognition of his merely human status.

Saul Bellow's dramatic plot – dramatic in that it is founded on an active conflict between individuals is based directly on a novella by Dostoievsky, *The Eternal Husband* Bellow himself says that the parallel is obvious to him now, although not at the time he wrote the novel. (Nashesoffen: 1964 : 10) I shall not compare the two works in depth; but I will point to a number of similarities and differences which show clearly the influence of Dostoievsky on Bellow's early fiction how much he was working in the Russian's moral, psychological mode, and, more important, the changes Bellow makes, changes which significantly aid him in celebrating the dignity of the human being.

The theme of Dostoevsky's novella is the dignity of a man. Like Asa Leventhal, Alexey Velchaninov is unwell physically and burdened with guilt. To each comes a double, a projection of his guilty nature, when Leventhal and Velchaninov have hurt in the past. The heroes reject these doubles as wild animals, as less than human. The victims, Trusotsky and Allbee, prey on the guilt ridden heroes with a combined hatred and love. Trusotsky tells Velchaninov that he had

loved him and looked up to him, he begs Velchaninov to drink with him, he kisses his hand and he cares for Velchaninov like a mother when Velchaninov is sick. Allbee wants to rub his fingers through Asa's kinky "Jew" hair, he feels hurt that Asa is not intimate with him, finally he brings a woman into Asa's bed not only, it seems to take Asa's place but bind himself to Asa. Fiedler says, "Allbee... is Leventhal's beloved as well as his nightmare..." (Fiedler: 1964 : 99)

Nightmare : for at the same time, each victim hates enough to kill; not only do Trusotsky and Allbee wish to kill their enemies, but Leventhal and Velchaninov also threaten a number of times to kill their persecutors; at the end, both antagonists indeed try to kill. In each case this attempt cuts the cord between the doubles. The hero is freed. The process of becoming free in each case is quite complex and nearly the same Velchaninov and Leventhal must draw close to their enemies, identify with them, pity them. Asa acknowledges his responsibility, offers help, and understands that Allbee is a suffering human, not merely his persecutor; Alexey acknowledges his kinship with Trusotsky – "We are both vicious, underground, loathsome people" (Garnett: 1951 : 443) and then, in humility, tells him, "You are better than I am: I understand it all; all..." (Carnett: 1951 : 455)

But in both cases there is the need for the attempted murder, the physical scuffle, the expulsion. Afterwards 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 regained their dignity.

Yet in spite of all the similarities, Bellow has written his own novel, but only in its creation of an American urban environment – where else is there so brilliant an evocation of the deadly weight of a metropolis in summer? – or in its added complexity and integration of material, the substitution of Leventhal's brother's family for Velchaninov's friends in the country is a fine move, but especially in its development of the theme of human dignity.

The theme has its central expression in the two-page speech of the old Yiddish journalist, Schlossberg. It is a speech which has no parallel in the *Eternal Husband* and, like most of Bellow's important choral speeches, has no function in the plot. It is, perhaps, the central speech of Bellow's fiction.

"I try to give everybody credit", declared the old man.

"I am not a knocker. I am not too good for this world."

No one contradicted him.

"Well", he said, "and what am I kicking for?" He checked their smiles, holding them all with his serious warm, blue gaze. "I'll tell you. It's bad to be less than human and it's bad to be more than human. What's more than human? Our friend" he meant Leventhal, "was talking about it before. Caesar, if you remember, in the play wanted to be like a God. Can a God have disease? So this is a sick man's idea of God. Does a statue have wax in its ears? Naturally not. It doesn't seat, either, except may be blood on holidays. If I can talk myself into

it that I never sweat and make everybody else act as if it was true, may be I can fix it up about dying, too. We only know what it is to die because some people die, and, if we make ourselves different from them, may be we don't have to? Less than human is the other side of it. I'll come to it. So here is the whole thing, then. Good acting is what is exactly human. And if you say I am a tough critic, you mean I have a high opinion of what is human. This is my whole idea. More than human, can you have any use for life? Less than human, you don't either."

He made a pause – and it was not one that invited interruption – and went on.

"...If a human life is a great thing to me, it is a great thing. Do you know better? I'm entitled as much as you. And why be measly. Do you have to be? Is somebody holding you by the neck? Have dignity, you understand me? Choose dignity. Nobody knows enough to turn it down..." (Bellow: 1947 : 133-135)

The wisdom of Schlossberg is that human life has dignity; human life has greatness and beauty – but only on condition that it is human life, not sub-human or more than human. Schlossberg's attack on the "more than human" was seen earlier in Bellow's assault on greatness and ideal constructions in *Dangling Man*: Man tries to make himself into a God, de-humanising himself to remove himself from humanity and hence from mortality. It is a perfect description of the roots of Joseph's alienation. If this is wisdom that Asa Leventhal already possesses (it was he who pointed to Caesar as a false ideal of greatness,

“he must learn how it applies him, for like Caesar, he rejects his human weakness and projects it onto others. Asa lacks still more the complementary wisdom that to be human means to feel human concern; that to be human means to be responsive to the suffering of others.

Less than human, human, more than human is not one continuum; a man who is more than human will also be less than human. Both deviations involve a detachment from humanity, a refusal to admit that one is like other men. But while there is not one continuum the philosophy of Schlossberg does see man as occupying a middle state traditional in Judeo – Christian theology. Being human rests on the admission of this middle state. When Schlossberg says that he is not too good for this world, one is reminded of Peretz short story, “If Not Higher” (*Treasury*, p. 233) in which Litvak, mistrustful of the rabbi of Nemirov, who disappears every Friday morning at the time of the Penitential prayers, hide under the rabbi’s bed. Early he hears the rabbi’s groans of suffering for all Israel; then he sees the rabbi dress in peasant clothes and go anonymously to help a sick woman. The rabbi brings her firewood, kindles it, in spite of her objection that she cannot pay, and as the fire burns recites the prayers. The Litvak becomes the rabbi’s disciple and even after, when another disciple tells how the rabbi of Nemirov ascends to heaven at the time of the penitential prayers, the Litvak does not laugh. He only adds quietly, if not higher. Higher not by leaving the earth but by involving himself with it; he does not remove

himself from humanity but enters it, listening to and heeding its groans.

Here is the standard old Schlossberg and Bellow apply. By the end of this morality novel Asa has largely succeeded in meeting it. And so, the novel is affirmative in spite of its dark tone, much more completely than *Dangling Man*. But a man has difficulties in becoming exactly human and thereby choosing dignity.

Through the growing sense of the reality of others, through his growing awareness of their kinship with him, Asa has become, in Schlossberg's terms, human. Now he can call his wife home, he is ready for her. That he has changed permanently we know by the final chapter, which finds him healthier, happier and a father to be. Like *Dangling Man*, *The Victim* move toward a re-definition of what human is, a definition, which goes beyond Schlossberg's wisdom. In the middle of the novel Asa's dream of expulsion from the railroad station leads to an overwhelming sense of truth found. "Yes, I do know it, positively, will I know it in the morning? I do now." (Bellow: 1947 : 169) Typically for Bellow, Asa does not hold onto it; he oversleeps, wakes up irritated. But for a moment, he knew.

To retell the dream in greater detail: the dreamer is in a terribly crowded station trying to get to the second section of a train he has missed. Pushed into a corridor, he tried to go down through a newly constructed gate to the tracks. But a contractor in a fedora steps him – the other man, a workman, is not able to interfere with

his boss – and pushes him out into the alley; his face is covered with tears.

There is no simple relationship between this dream and the truth that eludes Asa. It is like Asa's strange pain on awakening after the birthday party at the Harkavya. Again truth approaches out of sleep. Again there is the reaching out for some ultimate truth about the self, a truth just out of reach. Here it is seen as a kind of birth, hence the significance of the birthday party. Asa himself new born: doubled over, unable to breathe or cry, at the same time it is Asa giving birth, giving birth to the elusive truth. Often in Bellow we find this imagery of personal re-birth, redemption into a new life.

It is a sense, a vision of the unity of all persons, the essential likeness of all persons, each mysteriously containing all. This is where the movement towards perception of the other as real, toward identification with others, and toward acceptance of self, of others, and of death, has been leading toward a submergence of individuality in a transpersonal, anonymous self. It is the vision of victim and victimiser as one.

How can the human being possess dignity among so many all wanting as he wants? The answer: each man is everyman, All-Be: in touching Allbee, Asa touches all of humanity, indeed, he becomes all of humanity. Asa, feeling guilt, rejects responsibility, accepting responsibility, he feels less guilt. One responds, to relieve

of the other's suffering. And if all are one, the other's suffering is one's own too.

To what extent does Asa live with this truth? Bellow emphasizes that Asa's change is partial. But far more successfully than Joseph the Dangling Man, Asa ends his alienation. Beginning, like Joseph, as a solitary, separated from his wife and hostile to the few friends he has, he goes much further than Joseph in joining humanity without surrendering to society. His success heralds the over eager affirmation of Bellow's next novel, *The Adventures of Augie March*.