

Title	Transcendence and Anti-Dogmatism : Saul Bellow's The Victim
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Citation	Osaka Literary Review. 1992, 31, p. 90-100
Version Type	VoR
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.18910/25445">https://doi.org/10.18910/25445</a>
rights	
Note	

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**\* Transcendence and Anti-Dogmatism:  
Saul Bellow's *The Victim***

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**I**

To say the least, *The Victim* (1947) is not considered to be a major novel of Saul Bellow. Tony Tanner has seen in the novel "the problem of what the self owes the self and what the self owes the rest of the world."<sup>1)</sup> A view of this kind indicates the fundamental aspect in the novel, but too much concentration on the moral side might lead to the easy conclusion that the novel is merely anti-Semitic.

More discreet critics raise an opposition to such a reading. They implicitly give warning to seeing too much of an anti-Semitic element in the novel. Sanford Pinsker, for example, observes that Bellow's novel is, or should be, more enigmatic and complicated.<sup>2)</sup> *The Victim* is evidently, as in Robert F. Kiernan's recent comment, a representative "work of its period," which timely deals with the persecution of the Jews and at the same time illustrates the world of absurdity.<sup>3)</sup>

However, Bellow does not just pursue the question of moral responsibility in a confused contemporary world. It is not only the timeliness nor a kind of irony that makes *The Victim* worth reading. Instead, it seems to me to contain a certain strategy by which Bellow attempts to show a new sense of possibility not inspired by facile arguments. This paper is intended as an investigation of the strategic process Bellow takes in seeing something beyond the apparent resistance to the forces of victimization and the concept of human responsibility.

**II**

*The Victim* features a protagonist and an antagonist: Asa Leventhal a Jew and Kirby Allbee a Gentle. Set during a deadly hot summer in New York, the novel centers on the conflict between the two characters.

Leventhal, who works as an editor of a trade magazine, is one day unexpectedly accused by Allbee, who believes him to be the causal agent of his recent downfall—loss of his job and subsequently of his wife. Leventhal at first gives Allbee a flat refusal, but gradually begins to be aware of his inevitable involvement in the matter.

Although the novel ends with a tone of ambiguity, the point to be illuminated is that the “sense of being a victim,” as John J. Clayton claims, can equally be applied to both Leventhal and Allbee regardless of the degree of the responsibility. It is true that the novel develops centering on this ambiguous victim/victimizer relationship, but the significance lies not in the attribution or classification of victim/victimizer status but in the complexity of the situation itself where the two are being involved.

Michael K. Glenday points out that there is “a fault in too easily associating his [Leventhal’s] predicament with the condition denoted by the novel’s title.”<sup>4)</sup> Likewise, it is important to note, to borrow Ellen Pifer’s phrase, that “Bellow deliberately refrains from supplying a logical explanation for the coincidence of his characters’ initial encounter or for Leventhal’s uncanny perceptions.”<sup>5)</sup> It is also true that the narrative makes some hidden logical connection between the encounter of Leventhal and Allbee and the thematic concern of the author. L. H. Goldman declares that “Bellow’s concern is not so much with social responsibility as with its abuse.”<sup>6)</sup> Yet in *The Victim* Bellow shows himself divided in his attitude to the abuse of responsibility. Let us consider the following quotation, which offers a key to an understanding of the author’s stance. Leventhal, when his friend Williston implies that Leventhal is subject to some responsibility for Allbee, retorts as follows:

But then, as he dwelt on it, the whole affair began to lose much of its importance. It was, after all, something he could either take seriously or dismiss as an annoyance. It was up to him. He had only to insist that he wasn’t responsible and it disappeared altogether. It was his conviction against an accusation nobody could expect him to take at face value. And what more was there for him to say than that his part in it was accidental? At worst, an accident, unintentional. (86)<sup>7)</sup>

What the passage makes clear at once is that Leventhal denies all his responsibility and that he ascribes his involvement to an accident. The polemic between accident and responsibility can be traced to the influence of anti-Semitism and existentialism in the most general sense of the words. Bellow's implied stance seems to be subject to those influences, but actually the novel takes steps to transcend both of the ideas. Such a hypothesis makes it possible to interpret the novel much deeper. Let us consider respectively how the novel treats and transcends those two aspects in the following discussion.

### III

For the moment we shall confine our attention to the case of anti-Semitism. The fact that Leventhal is too conscious of his Jewish identity is clear especially when he takes a taxi to the house of Williston and remembers his late father's words:

“What's it to me if you despise me? What do you have that I care about except the *groschen*?” That was his father's view. But not his. He rejected it and recoiled from it. Anyway, his father had lived poor and died poor, that stern, proud old fool with his savage looks, to whom nothing mattered save his advantage and to be freed by money from the power of his enemies. And who were the enemies? The world, everyone. (98-99)

Although he assumes an air of indifference, Leventhal has much in common with his father. Practically, he is preoccupied with falling a victim to some irresistible persecution of an anti-Semite, having lost his way out of the victimhood. Leventhal tells Williston, “You may think you have a different slant on it than Allbee has, but it comes out the same. If you believe I did it on purpose, to get even, then it's not only because I'm terrible personally but because I'm a Jew” (103). The narrative implies that Leventhal is too much preoccupied with a Jewish-centered view. It is not until he understands the idea of “what is exactly human,” pronounced by Schlossberg, a Jewish journalist, that Leventhal gets the chance to be liberated from the whole incident. “Good acting is what is exactly human” (119), Schlossberg assumes and goes on to say more

of his idea:

“You shut one eye and look at a thing, and it is one way to you. You shut the other one and it is different. I am as sure about greatness and beauty as you are about black and white. 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.”  
(120)

Several critics have often commented on these Schlossberg statements. “The core of the problem,” emphasizes Tony Tanner, “is the self and its relation to the surrounding world.”<sup>8)</sup> Ellen Pifer remarks that Schlossberg’s address “offers a marked contrast to Leventhal’s reserve and impassivity.”<sup>9)</sup> It is in this critical moment that the narrative demonstrates, as in L. H. Goldman’s phrase, “the close relationship between social responsibility and individual responsibility . . . the connection between individual responsibility and human dignity.”<sup>10)</sup> The Schlossberg statements are significant in that they indicate humanity beyond the problems of any particular (racial or social) identity.

*The Victim* displays the dialectic between Jewish identity and anti-Semitism and suggests that although Allbee’s persecution of Leventhal still leaves room for a variety of interpretations and the logic of Allbee’s accusation remains enigmatic, Leventhal gradually notices the whole cause for Allbee’s defiance does not necessarily arise from anti-Semitic rebuke. We can see the beginning of Leventhal’s realization as such early in the opening paragraph in Chapter 9, where we meet Leventhal in the zoo with his nephew, Philip, after they encountered Allbee in the previous chapter. The following description is interesting in that it shows the affinity between the two characters, felt by Leventhal himself as the beginning of mutual understanding:

But now and then, moving from cage to cage, gazing at the animals, Leventhal, in speaking to Philip, or smoking, or smiling, was so conscious of Allbee, so certain he was being scrutinized, that he was able to see himself as if through a strange pair of eyes . . . Changed in this way into his own observer, he was able to see Allbee, too. (95)

There is a suggestion here that Leventhal, despite remaining defiance, is beginning to be aware of his adversary's feelings. Indeed, from this chapter on, Leventhal gradually allows Allbee to enter his apartment (his wife is away helping her mother moving), stay there overnight, and finally to share the room with him.

However, the reconciliation of Leventhal and Allbee seems incomplete since we cannot but doubt that although the novel apparently solves the dialectic between Jewish and Gentile ideas, there has to be some subtler vision lurking throughout the story. For the closing chapter of the novel presents Leventhal and Allbee who has too easily changed for the better. In other words, how they transcend their opposition is vague. Hence let us look at the process of the transcending more in detail, focusing on the final chapter.

#### IV

So far we have investigated the first level of transcendence envisaged in the novel. The story reveals, however, that this level can also be transcended if such knowledge is based on existential consciousness, since as Leventhal allows Allbee to enter and stay in his room he, Leventhal, perceives some existential "indifference": "He was in a state of indifference skin to numbness, and he lay down more conscious of the heat than of any emotion in himself" (165). Therefore reading *The Victim* as a mere anti-Semitist novel is not enough. On the contrary, it takes another turn toward the end.

The final chapter serves to show that Leventhal and Allbee have at last reconciled with each other. Yet, as Eusebio L. Rodrigues points out, it "appears to be tacked on as an afterthought."<sup>11</sup> In fact, the continuity from Chapter 23, where Allbee attempts suicide almost involving Leventhal while sleeping, to the closing chapter, dealing with the incident several years after Allbee's suicide attempt. In the opening paragraph, we see that Leventhal has settled down to a quite successful new life. The text goes on as follows:

Things went well for him in the next few years. The consciousness

of an unremitting daily fight, though still present, was fainter and less troubling. His health was better, and there were changes in his appearance. (256)

Here Leventhal is depicted as something of a transcendental figure. He deems life "a shuffle, all, all accidental and hazard" (256), and by so doing he has learned to stop being self-defensive against anti-Semitic persecution.

Leventhal seems redeemed but actually unchanged, and how and why he accomplishes redemption is not clearly described in the novel's conclusion. We should notice here that Leventhal's recovery comes from his ignorance of existential consciousness he should feel through the encounter with Allbee and its aftermath. Leventhal thinks that life should make a "promise" to everyone, including himself. He believes that man should be rewarded despite many troubles. Yet comparing the promise to "a theater ticket," he suspects that there are both good and bad places obtained by these tickets:

And with his ticket, a man entitled to an average seat might feel too shabby for the dress circle or sit in it defiantly and arrogantly; another, entitled to the best in the house, might cry out in rage to the usher who led him to the third balcony. And how many more stood disconsolately in the rain and snow, in the long line of those who would only expect to be turned away? But no, this was incorrect. 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. (257)

Leventhal's suspicion is probably supported by Bellow's itself, and accordingly another concern of the novel becomes clear. On the surface, *The Victim* revolves around the question of human responsibility based on racial conflicts, but here Leventhal focuses on yet another possibility. Instead of the problem of anti-Semitism, Leventhal puts in question a kind of existentialist view of humanity. Of course, Leventhal does not completely suffer from existential anguish by comparing his life to a piece of paper (he believes in "more important things"), but he is not

aware of what they are. Although he lives much better than before, he cannot see what made him what he is.

Bellow is very deliberate in deciding that existential struggles do not solve the problem, either. He has a vision beyond. Howard M. Harper, Jr. properly explains in this respect as follows:

Although Bellow leaves the interrelated problems of fate and responsibility unresolved, *The Victim* is a very powerful and complex illumination of them. He shows that they are insoluble not only because man's knowledge and intellectual powers are too limited to deal with their complexity, but also because the problems themselves are multidimensional; they have dimensions which are not accessible to reason.<sup>12)</sup>

Harper sees a dimension beyond the border of reason as a thematic concern of the novel. This dimension can be obtained if it transcends the levels of anti-Semitic and existential concerns.

The "promise" Leventhal refers to is one possibility, but he still wonders if there is really any "promise" in life. He is not certain that he has found any such "promise," that is, his present condition is good enough. The text proceeds:

Repeatedly, he went over all that he had done during those confusing weeks. Hadn't he tried to be fair? Didn't he intend to help him [Allbee]? He considered that he and Allbee were even, by any honest standards. (257-58)

Here we see that Leventhal is still preoccupied with the past incidents. He believes in a transcendental power of humanity, which would provide him with steady and successful life in the end, but he is yet captive in a victim/victimizer relationship. In short, Leventhal does not have anything that he can rely on to live.

Whereas, Allbee, when he appears again before Leventhal in the final chapter, seems to have gotten over the deterministic premise that "God disposes" (208). Yet in fact Allbee, too, is depicted as a partially recovered figure. He recognizes that he has to accept the realities of life as they are. He tells Leventhal when they meet each other in the hall of the theater:



“So you see? I’ve made my peace with things as they are. I’ve gotten off the pony—you remember, I said to you once? I’m on the train.”

“A conductor?”

“Conductor, hell! I’m just a passenger.” His laugh was short and faint. “Not even first class. I’m not the type that runs things. I never could be. I realized that long ago. I’m the type that comes to terms with whoever runs things. . . .” (264)

Here Allbee makes similar statements to those he did on pages 207 and 208 but somewhat alters the details. And yet the modified contents are important in considering the theme of the novel. By “coming to terms with realities” Allbee seems to have recovered his once lost identity, but he never seeks the one which bears the realities, or one who “runs things.”

The idea of “who runs things” is a device which implicitly suggests the existence that “disposes,” to use Allbee’s expression, the whole universe. On Allbee’s part, he feels relieved so long as he follows someone or something that puts everything in order. On Leventhal’s part, however, the solution does not come so easy since he really wants to know “who runs things.” In this respect the closing paragraph says:

“Wait a minute, what’s your idea of who runs things?” said Leventhal. But he heard Mary’s voice at his back. Allbee ran in and sprang up the stairs. The bell continued its dinning, and Leventhal and Mary were still in the aisle when the houselights went off. An usher showed them to their seats. (264)

The novel closes open-ended, not answering Leventhal’s question. The open-endedness will reveal that neither Leventhal nor Allbee knows what did, and will, make them what they are. Yet the point is that they are not ready to make the “what” clear but to dismiss their most essential question. We should note here not only that Leventhal wants to know “who runs things” because he thinks it should explain the whole of the incidents that happened to Allbee and him but that the question itself is finally ignored by both of them.

This closing incident is significant in that the transcendental process, which they have almost achieved to this point, is stopped halfway. Yet,

in fact, the question of "who" blurs the transcendental vision. The direction of transcendence may be implied in the closing paragraph, but actually it remains vague. This is one of the weaknesses *The Victim* has in itself. To be sure, the novel contrasts itself to mere anti-Semistist or existential novels since it attempts to explicate beyond constant juxtaposition of anti-Semitic and existential thought such spiritual level of humanity as Schlossberg calls "exactly human." However, the question of "what is exactly human" is never disclosed in any concrete sense, either, only felt by Leventhal as very abstract idea of the "promise."

Nevertheless, the transcendence of both anti-Semitic prejudice and existential exposure demonstrates Bellow's narrative strategy in this novel. Neither Jewish identity nor existential condition is of great significance to Bellow since he attempts to show something beyond both of those subjects. To put it differently, the novel refuses a limited and closed reading. The Jewish-oriented reading would presume that *The Victim* forms a kind of deliberate objection to such an anti-Semistist attitude as Allbee apparently takes toward Leventhal. Likewise, the existentialist reading would also result in a limited reading if it only presented the absurd human condition in which Leventhal and Allbee are forced to live.

Therefore it should be emphasized that the novel envisages the transcendence of any given idea—one turned into dogmatic thought. The final chapter is not so successful because two central characters remain yet to seek the vision that will enable them to reconcile with each other and to live in harmony with the society to which they belong. And yet *The Victim* subtly indicates the way in which the transcendental vision is to be gained by the central characters.

## V

*The Victim* is a book of transcendental vision in the sense that Bellow attempts to discredit dogmatic thoughts seen to reside on two levels. In so doing, he gives a strategic role to the victimhood in which Leventhal and Allbee are involved. Victimhood, for Bellow, is never a matter of just identifying one person as a victimizer and another as a victim. Nor

is it merely that of resorting to their existential struggles. Instead, the novel is touched with typical Bellovian transcendence. Bellow shows his unwillingness to commit himself to a single stance on any given issue. Although the process remains immature, it nevertheless displays the basic contour which Bellow's later novels are to develop.

Bellow's narrative strategy, can be called anti-dogmatism. *The Victim* is anti-dogmatic since Bellow shows in it his transcendental detachment, his belief that he should not impose any given system in explicating human nature. Yet it should by all means be noted that Bellow is "anti-" dogmatist. For he would dislike to be called by any name ending in "-ist," and as in this novel would reject any fixed idea that leads to any "-ism." In *The Victim*, Bellow's strategy separates the novel's surface text from deeper narrative intention, and the novel must be read as a careful study of the author's own elusiveness, which his later works are yet to reveal in different ways.

## NOTES

\* This is the English version of a paper I read at the 24th general meeting of the Osaka University English Society on November 9, 1991.

- 1) Tony Tanner, *Saul Bellow* (1965; New York: Chip's, 1978) 26.
- 2) Sanford Pinsker, *The Schlemiel as Metaphor: Studies in Yiddish and American Jewish Fiction*, rev. and enl. ed. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1991) 125.
- 3) Robert F. Kiernan, *Saul Bellow* (New York: Continuum, 1989) 27.
- 4) Michael K. Glenday, *Saul Bellow and the Decline of Humanism* (London: Macmillan, 1990) 28.
- 5) Ellen Pifer, *Saul Bellow Against the Grain* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1990) 47.
- 6) L. H. Goldman, *Saul Bellow's Moral Vision: A Critical Study of the Jewish Experience* (New York: Irvington, 1983) 12-13.
- 7) Saul Bellow, *The Victim* (1947; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988) Further parenthetical page references are to this edition.
- 8) Tanner 35.
- 9) Pifer 43-44.

- 10) Goldman, "The Philosophy of Judaism," *Saul Bellow in the 1980s: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Gloria L. Cronin and L. H. Goldman (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1989) 61.
- 11) Eusebio L. Rodrigues, *Quest for the Human: An Exploration of Saul Bellow's Fiction* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1981) 55.
- 12) Howard M. Harper, Jr., *Desperate Faith: A Study of Bellow, Salinger, Mailer, Baldwin and Updike* (Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 1967) 20.