ANALYSIS

Dangling Man (1944)

Saul Bellow

(1915-2005)

"At 27, a Chicagoan named Joseph, a university graduate, an intellectual, five years married, leaves his job with a travel bureau, and under the pressure of waiting to be taken to war as a draftee feels himself alienated from society. In his diary between Dec. 15 and April 9, 1943, he objectively describes his quarrels with friends, in-laws, his wife Iva, by whom he is supported in their mean rooming house, and his brother Amos, a go-getting success, as he undergoes intense self-analysis dedicated only to the belief 'I must know what I myself am.' Talks with his alter ego, 'Tu As Raison Aussi,' finally convince him that man creates his own destiny and send him to volunteer in the army rather than continue to wait indefinitely to be inducted."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 183

"In *Dangling Man* young Joseph, caught in a legal trap with his draft board, unable to join the Army and unable to continue a normal life, calls himself 'that creature of plans. He had asked himself a question I still would like answered, 'How should a good man live; what ought he to do?' Hence the plans. Unfortunately, most of them were foolish.' Yet Joseph's response is not one of cynical sophistication, for it is not the defeat of plans that concerns Bellow. It is the fact that in obedience to the external sophistication of society, one makes plans in accordance with conventional standards. Actually one's real plans, to discover all one's potential freedom as a human being, must yield with a kind of furtive reverence to the ultimate power which one can only call God."

Alfred Kazin
"The World of Saul Bellow" (1959)
Contemporaries
(Little, Brown/Atlantic Monthly 1962) 219-20

"Bellow's first novel, *Dangling Man*, 1944, owes more to the example of Kafka than Dreiser. Its awareness of things is acutely contemporary: hungry, bitterly ironic, introspective. The world it depicts is one in which man, seeking freedom, must finally deny it; in which the humanistic dictum [to understand is to forgive] is made intelligible by the alliance of metaphysical absurdity with social regimentation; in which the flayed moral sense can only express itself by futile or nasty gestures….

Joseph—he has no paternity beyond his crisis and no other name—seems a curious combination of Oblomov and Musil's Man Without Qualities, Hamlet and Prufrock, Kafka's K. and Dostoyevsky's Man from Underground, the hero crippled and spiteful. He sits in his room awaiting the day's minor crises while his wife, Iva, earns their living. He considers himself a moral casualty of a war which denies him the possibilities both of freedom and commitment, a man condemned by a condemned age.

The plot is skeletal and simple; it reveals to us no experience we find hard to share. After giving up his job in a travel bureau, Joseph settles back to await his draft number. Ostensibly, he is at work, amidst the general madness, on the reasonable philosophers of the Enlightenment. Actually, he is taking a crack at *freedom*, the freedom, to *be*, to *understand*, to disengage himself successfully from all that is conditioned. But nothing comes of it. Or rather, everything comes contrary to his expectations….what can be done with his freedom? He snaps at friends, quarrels with relatives, clams up on his wife. Their affluence or apathy rattles him continually; their very presence forces him to admit that he is really of their world. A close friend of his renegade Communist days cuts him dead in the street.

A party to which he goes seems to him, compared with the sacred Eleusinian rites of old, a travesty of human intercourse, a spectacle of everything 'nasty, brutish, and short.' And a Christmas dinner at the house of his wealthy brother, Amos, ends a vicious hassle with his snobbish teen-age niece—who physically resembles him! Everyone, he thinks, fails him; he is quite alone. And indeed Joseph is; for the questions to which he has addressed himself, counter to the rules of the game we play in culture, can only sharpen his solitude. Through his failures we begin to see the greater failures of his milieu. Irony and criticism involve both the hero and his world, and are rendered concurrently in spiritual and social terms.

Joseph claims, with the acrid naivete which is the basis of his character, that his primary concern is to discover how a good man should live. The quest, no doubt, requires suffering and alienation. But Joseph also knows, by listening to Haydn, that he is 'still an apprentice in suffering and humiliation,' and he knows, too, that alienation is 'a fool's plea,' for the world lies within us. How, then, does grace finally manifest itself to the weak? It is in keeping with the bold, bleak vision of this novel—in keeping with the destructive lucidity of intelligence with which Bellow begins his career as a novelist and which he gradually loses—that no spry or inspirational answer is proffered. Certainly Art, with all letters capitalized, can provide no substitute for the good life. After talking to John Pearl, the ivory tower artist, Joseph puts down in his diary: 'Is there some sort of personal effort I can substitute for the imagination?' (In this respect Joseph is not unlike Salinger's later heroes for whom saintliness comes before art.) We are not surprised; for Joseph has too much of a conscience, is always holding court on himself, and the ubiquitous nightmare of the war or the sight of a man sprawled in the street can prevent him from celebrating his wedding anniversary.

Nor do his tortured debates with the Spirit of Alternatives—the spirit of unchosen choices—resolve his metaphysical doubts. Death, he agrees with Goethe, is the abolition of choices, but the greatest cruelty is life in death, the curtailment of choices while life, somehow, still persists. This is the meaning of the Dangling Man, the man who has no status in existence because his true self is governed not by Choice but Chance. The random and the inevitable act, pure Chance and pure Necessity, are alike in that they both cripple the will to be oneself. They limit freedom which is the end, as Joseph thinks, of all human striving, good and bad.

But, paradoxical as it may seem, the difficulties of attaining freedom are the difficulties of transcending the narrow circle of personal fears and desires by which we are identified. 'We are all drawn to the same craters of the spirit,' Joseph meditates, 'to know what we are and what we are for, to know our purpose, to seek grace. And, if the quest is the same, the differences in our personal histories, which hitherto meant so much to us, become of minor importance.' In this crucial statement, Joseph reveals the primary spiritual tension in Bellow's work: the tension between freedom and reconciliation, the first a personal and limited thing, the other, though individual still, attuned to the deeper harmonies of existence.

The spiritual action of the book engages the concrete social realities of the moment. To begin with, Joseph is a Jew, and a city Jew. He manifests certain qualities of abrasive intelligence, a knowledge of—even an urge for—suffering and humiliation, and an attitude toward enforced social norms, of which the war is a major symbol, that are relevant to his particular situation. Furthermore, his ambivalence toward friends and relatives within a recognizable ethnic community underscores the failure of family and tradition to provide an adequate buffer against the contemporary forces of chaos. Joseph is also an ex-Communist, a living testimony, that is, to the failure of another kind of ideology.

This does not compel him, however, to deny his social conscience. Without resorting to the antics of the disabused Communist or the pieties of the sentimental liberal, he casts a cold eye on a culture debauched by its peculiar notions of affluence. Standing between the dead-beat Alf, and the arrogantly successful Abt, Joseph is subverted by his awareness of poverty and failure. As he puts it, the fear of lagging pursues and maddens us. It does more: by holding continually before us the promise of unlimited worldly rewards, it actively thwarts our quest for any other end. There is, for Joseph at least, no escape from the persuasions of society…. The surrender of Joseph, his admission that he *needs* the leash, is inevitable; it takes the ironic form of an urgent note to his draft board, begging to be called up. 'I had not done well alone,' he writes at the end of this bitter experiment. 'I doubted whether anyone could. To be pushed upon oneself entirely put

the very facts of simple existence in doubt. Perhaps the war could teach me, by violence, what I had been unable to learn during those months….

Dangling Man is a tight, speculative, and penetrating novel which nevertheless fails to find a sustaining form. The structure is not without interest, is vaguely avant-garde: it is the record of a spiritual defeat in diary form, written with an admixture of quotidian drabness and intensity. The style reflects the tedium and despair, the slovenliness and showy humiliations of Joseph's life, and reflects them often in sordid images—spilled orange juice or a half-plucked chicken in the sink. But the colorless style and rancid manner of confession, though apparently suited to the mood of the novel, insulate it from the currents of reality; they predetermine our attitude to the material and allow no contrary influence, no enriching substance, to enter in. This is another way of saying that the 'objectivity' of the diary device is perhaps too obviously feigned, that Joseph does not remove himself sufficiently from authorial control to enlist our genuine sympathies. Joseph, unlike the heroes of Kafka, say, remains too much the puppet all the way around; his vitality as a fictional character is low.

The brilliant inventiveness of Bellow is still muted here, and the vigor of his imagination exhibits itself mainly in a dance of ideas—though there are contradictions on the point of Personal Destiny he has not seen fit to purge—in grim irony, skull-like laughter, Mephistophelean comedy. Everyone and everything in the novel contains an element of the grim fantastic. Turned inward upon itself and thinly dramatic, the novel still leaves the ineradicable impression of a man who screams out in laughter to see his guts dangling from his belly."

Ihab Hassan
Radical Innocence: The Contemporary American Novel
(Harper/Colophon 1961) 294-99

"The sensitive youth of Bellow's first novel, Joseph in *Dangling Man* (1944), awaiting induction into the army, suspended in a strange moment of complete freedom, watches his freedom become isolation. He is alienated. He believes that accommodation to ordinary social reality has terrible consequences. He is part of the historical moment when rational political enterprise has erupted into chaos—Joseph is, as is to be expected, an ex-member of the Communist Party—and he has, significantly, abandoned an essay on the philosophers of the Enlightenment. But he knows as well that alienation, secession from current society, is both psychologically and logically impossible: … 'The very denial implicates you.'

He entertains in the beginning a desperate belief in the possibility of a 'colony of the spirit,' of 'a group whose covenants forbade spite, bloodiness, and cruelty.' But Joseph discovers in a series of test encounters during his seven wintry months of dangling that the colony of the spirit is not possible either. His associations in formal categories of love, with his wife, with his mistress, with his family, with friends and with neighbors, those whom he might make colonists of the spirit, are steeped in real spite, spite in which Joseph shares, and so he is shunted back again and again into the imprisoning self.

Nor, as a last shift, is it possible either, he discovers, to live in an 'ideal construction,' in a principle of action which has been invented despite chaos and by which chaos is to be met. There is inevitably a gap between ideal constructions and the real world, and principles which have become obsessions are exhausting. Alienation and accommodation, both impossible, are, it turns out, the spirit's only choices. Joseph must give himself to idiopathic freedom, and that way is madness, or submit to the community's ordinary, violent reality. He hurries his draft call. He surrenders…. Joseph's capitulation, though made in great awareness, is the consequence merely, finally, of his fatigue, and it is total."

Marcus Klein
After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century
(World/Meridian 1962) 34-36

"In *Dangling Man*, Bellow's first novel, the world is all war and death. His Joseph is waiting to be drafted into World War II, losing out in his marriage and connected only through his despair and anxiety to the war-torn outside world. In a stunning dinner-party scene, he perceives his friends as compulsive adversaries who talk not to communicate but to score points. He tries not to get involved, detaching himself by intellectualizing their nastiness. He thinks the purpose of parties is '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…to witness pains and tortures, to give our scorn, hatred and desire temporary liberty and play.'

Joseph does not give his rage free play. He plays the observer at destructive parties; he uses his mind as a weapon to neutralize his own combativeness. Split into three voices variously demanding to be heard, to be right, to win, Joseph's mind appears as the Dangler, as the Spirit of Alternatives or as Tu As Raison Aussi. More than merely an expression of his ability to see all sides of all issues at once, this fragmentation reflects the extent to which the obsessional quality of his thought does not lead to any resolutions of his problems but instead provides a model of his defensive techniques and a victory for the problematic. Joseph cannot escape his confusion by force of thought so he tries to avoid it through detachment.

He dreams a dream of historical connections he would like to avoid: 'A few nights ago I found myself in a low chamber with rows of cribs or wicker bassinets in which the dead of a massacre were lying….' Jews are clearly victims of the Nazis, clearly facing real and insurmountable odds. The massacred innocents on the hooks could be figures for Joseph himself. Yet he prefers to play the 'humane emissary' among them, to avoid both anger and the recognition of himself in the slaughtered victims who remind him of his childhood, of fears of the Jewish hell his father could conjure. To feel connected to these victims is to feel responsible; to feel connected to one's own sense of victimization is to face one's personal responsibility for one's own fate.

A prototype of Bellow's later characters, Joseph wants to do neither, preferring to avoid guilt. Like Herzog, Joseph has difficulty assessing his responsibility for his own actions. Because, like Herzog, his thought stops short of himself, he is unable to perceive the extent to which the human emissary is a dangler who derives, by dangling between the guard and the victims, freedom from both. Yet Joseph avoids seeing that he wants this freedom, or that he actively seeks out opportunities in his life with women as well as in the style of his thought, to dangle. Bellow's characters finally save themselves from nervousness by force of their depression. The anxiety detachment produces is too much even for Joseph to sustain. He resolves when death comes not to think of resisting or of laying 'any but ironic, yes, even welcoming hands on his shoulders.' He fulfills his own antagonisms by consenting to his own destruction."

Josephine Hendin
Vulnerable People: A View of American Fiction since 1945
(Oxford 1978) 107-09

"*Dangling Man* was ambiguous because Joseph had his power of freedom removed, first, by war, and second, by his draft board. Caught in a maze of changing rules, none of which makes sense to him, he finds his self draining away. Thus his increasing acts of temper, his bursts of rage, his physical as well as psychical need to break out into forms of expression and individuality. The end of the novel is paradigmatic, Bellow's paradox: that Joseph has achieved his greatest freedom at the moment he embraces regimentation. All movement is ironic maneuvering."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 119

Michael Hollister (2015)