

ANALYSIS

Seize the Day (1956)

Saul Bellow

(1915-2005)

“In Bellow’s work the quest for freedom is always qualified by the deeper need for reconciliation. The tension between these two elements is nowhere better realized than in *Seize the Day*, 1956, Bellow’s only novelette to date and possibly his finest work...a work that adumbrates those destructive elements of American culture which Augie managed to escape.

When we see Wilhelm he is already in his middle forties, an established failure in the business as in the private world, and the pattern of his past errors had worked itself out. His early ‘career’ in Hollywood, for which he gives up college, culminates after seven years in a job as a movie extra. More recently, the company for which he works as a sales manager eases him out before he attains executive status. Separated from his wife, Margaret, and their two children, he is nevertheless bled remorselessly by her constant demands. And his bland, egotistic father, once a distinguished physician, asks only that he be allowed to enjoy his retirement in affluent peace. The drama of the story derives from the close, ugly duel between father and son.

At stake in this combat are the ideas of different generations on success, love, human dignity. The father’s idea is generally one of self-sufficiency, stiff-backed and aggressive, an idea identified with a vanishing era of entrepreneurism. The son presents an image of candid failure, dependency, willing self-humiliation. Wilhelm may indulge himself in more self-pity than Dr. Adler would ever allow himself, but he is also far less selfish and hypocritical; he does not try to dodge the draft as his father recommends nor does he attempt to disguise his weaknesses behind a front of unctuous pride. But the contrast between the two men, between the two generations—terms like ‘inner’ and ‘other-directed,’ ‘Protestant’ and ‘Social’ ethic come readily to mind—is best exemplified by the attitude each betrays toward his family. To the gelid courtesy, which masks a real indifference, Dr. Adler exhibits toward his son and daughter, Wilhelm manifests an agonized concern for his own children. Agonized, accountable, humiliated, begging often but never quite crawling, Wilhelm finally emerges as the kind of figure who gives to words like mercy and love a peculiar resonance.

The irony of the novella, of course, is that the only person to whom Wilhelm can turn in the great city is Dr. Tamkin, a charlatan and swindler, a combination healer, inventor, and sage. Tamkin manages to deprive Wilhelm of his last dollars on the stock market, but before vanishing from the scene, he leaves behind him strange words full of fakery and wisdom. It is further irony that in Wilhelm’s peculiar distress, separated as he is from father and child and wife, from society itself, since he has neither job nor money, Tamkin’s [views] become part of a truer vision. Compelled all his life to make errors—and to suffer punishment, Wilhelm can find no part of past or future key to his existence. Comes Tamkin and says, ‘The real universe. That’s the present moment. The past is no good to us. The future is full of anxiety. Only the present is real—the here—and now. Seize the day.’

For Wilhelm, this is the beginning of an attitude which, however disingenuously it may have been presented by Tamkin, focuses human energy neither on the memory of failure nor on the presentiment of death, but on that intensity of perception, akin to love, which has the power to redeem past and future alike. For this quality of perception self-knowledge is required, and it is again behind Tamkin’s rhetoric that Wilhelm finds the clue to his identity concealed. There are always two souls, Tamkin argues, the true and pretender soul. The pretender soul is full of the world’s vanity and uses altruism, even love, as a foil to its own insatiable egotism: ‘The interest of the pretender soul is the same as the interest of the social life, the social mechanism.’ Meanwhile, the true soul pays the price, suffers and becomes sick in its solitude, knowing that though its prime function must always be to love, the pretender soul, of all things, is the most unlovable. Hence love turns into hate, and suicide becomes murder—we kill the enemy within.

Reflecting on this, Wilhelm admits that he too has been party to this deadly game, that his pretender soul must be the one called Tommy, the name he took out in Hollywood, and that Wilky, as his father insists on calling him, might not even be his true self: 'Might the name of his true soul be the one by which his old grandfather had called him—Velvel?' In this inner perspective, the fact of failure ceases to be a personal thing, and death itself no longer seems the final degradation, the apotheosis of all human errors. The climax of the novel comes when Wilhelm, feeling the full force of his predicament—when the lonely person begins to feel like an animal, and howls from his window like a wolf—stumbles into a funeral parlor. Earlier, we know, he had received an intimation of the meaning of love in an underground corridor off Times Square, a place dark and disfigured by desperate signs, echoing with a babel of broken voices and lurid human desires: 'He was imperfect and disfigured himself, but what difference did that make if he was united with them by this blaze of love?'

But the vision of love is consummated only in the presence of the corpse he sees in the funeral parlor, a body composed and serene which could have been that of his father, but which in this particular moment of terrible illumination strikes Wilhelm as the body of Man himself, of Wilhelm or Wilhelm's children, the body of all desires composed by human mortality. The 'great knot of ill and grief' in Wilhelm's throat bursts and he cries uncontrollably, but it is not, as some critics crassly believe, tears of self-pity he sheds. They are tears of piercing insight and release, a shuddering music: 'He heard it and sank deeper than sorrow, through torn sobs and cries, he found the secret consummation of his heart's ultimate need.'

The high solemn note on which the work ends gives us pause, and pausing we begin to wonder how Bellow, after all, brought us to face these ultimate verities. For the novelette starts by formulating the problem of success in America in worldly terms, continues to explore the predicament of Wilhelm in the light of the manners and morals of his particular milieu, and suddenly, as it were, resolves the question by rising to a more exalted level of perception. The difficulty Bellow encounters here is one that he must face and conquer in each of his works. It is essentially the difficulty of a novelist who, like some novelists of the Thirties, gives great credence to social facts yet, unlike them, finally embraces a meta-social view of man. It is this symbolic transition from manners to metaphysics that Bellow, to his very great credit, insists upon, and insisting upon it must find a way of performing.

In this particular respect, *Seize the Day* is a partial success as it is in other respects almost a complete one. The stages of Wilhelm's progress are well marked: humiliation, knowledge, love, reconciliation. And the theme of death is introduced early in the work: a reference to Milton's 'Lycidas' which Wilhelm recollects from his college course, constant allusions to Wilhelm's age and his father's fear of death. Furthermore, the theme of death itself is more adroitly woven in the social fabric of the work than in any other Bellow has written. The equation is once again the Freudian equation of money and death, success and aggression. The abstract presence of the stock market dominates the novella, and it is given, by the ghostly figure of Mr. Rappaport, a distinctly macabre tone. One this subject Tamkin is quite explicit: 'Money and Murder both began with M.... Money-making is aggression.... People come to the market to kill. They say, "I'm going to make a killing." It's not accidental.'

Death, we see, circulates in the golden arteries of our civilization; its hand moves silently over the city, and the dying reach out to pull the living into their walking graves. This Bellow sees with terrible clarity; the abstract idea is rendered only too well. It is the specific event, however, the scene in the funeral parlor, coming where and when it does, coming to Wilhelm and to no other, that leaves us to wonder if the particular mode of his illumination does not seem rather gratuitous, rather foreign to the concerns he has most steadily expressed throughout the action. The thematic logic of Wilhelm's life remains convincing, the dramatic sequence of his actions not."

Ihab Hassan

Radical Innocence: The Contemporary American Novel
(Harper/Coloophon 1961) 311-17

"Tommy Wilhelm is, like Asa Leventhal, a suffering fat man, but he is a man this time at an extremity of isolation—a perfect slob, unkempt, unsanitary, a hippopotamus, and emotionally a slob too, full of whining, demanding pity and the world's love, nursing his hurts. He is so repulsive to the world that not to

find a means of involvement in it will at the next turn mean death. All the obvious means—living in the world's assigned role, with marriage, family, money—have already failed him. He has in the past been an actor, provided, as his agent had advised him, with an opportunity to be the world's love—cast by his agent as the type that loses the girl—but such extravagant saintliness, such loving so removed from his privacy, and such a denial of his inescapable self, were beyond his capability. He did not become a Hollywood star. His marriage has ended in separation. His father dislikes him.

Moreover, he has lost his job, and on this day of days in which the novel finds him, he will lose the last of his money and his place therefore in the world's business. A stranger even to his hotel clerk, cast as a swine before Mr. Perls, beyond rapport with Mr. Rappaport, a stranger to everyone he meets, displaced, baffled, rejected, and shamed, no more now than a soup of flesh and whisky—he speculates at the Commodities Market in the futures of lard and rye, which is to say in his own future—he encounters this day all the broken ends of his attempted engagements with the world. He has precisely Augie's confusion, but he has tested its terms more desperately and he is face to face now with loss of the whole world and of his own soul, too. His salvation is Dr. Tamkin. Tamkin, another theorizer, overbears Tommy anew, with metaphysical rant in amalgamated English. He is an oddball and a crackpot, a jerk, an operator, and a swindler, but he knows well what gives, and the truth is in him.

That truth is threefold. It begins in the realization that every man has to love something or somebody. 'He feels,' says Tamkin, 'that he must go outward. "If thou canst not love, what art thou?" Are you with me?' Tommy is with him and he learns secondly that a kind of love, the most usual and the kind in which Tommy has dealt, is inverted vanity and death to the true soul. That is the love, says Tamkin, that is 'the same as the interest of the social life, the society mechanism.' It panders to the love of the dying, and: 'The love of the dying amounts to one thing; they want you to die with them. It's because they love you. Make no mistake.' The third and final stage of the truth is the possibility of loving, and living too. It is a matter of necessary belief in the beneficence of life, if not in that of the universe.... The final truth is in the simple giving way to one's humanness, accepting the doom of one's burdens but seizing the indisputable lavish life within one here and now. That giving way allows life in a dying humanity, and the seizing of existence confers value upon life.

Seizing the day is, moreover, as Tommy learns in the last resonating adventure of his day, the principle of reconciliation, an act of love itself. Finding himself shuffled into someone else's funeral, and now after intimations of death all day long face to face with the thing itself, he weeps at the bier of a stranger. Heavy sea-like music pours into him, he sinks deeper than sorrow, and through torn sobs he moves 'toward the consummation of his heart's ultimate need.' That need, the whole of the novel comes to reveal, is the need not to die. The corpse is the tutelary Tamkin's last appearance or it is his successor, and it forces Tommy to a moment of *Angst*: at the point of death, he realizes existence, the 'true self,' the vitality which all men share, and which defines men. Tommy's weeping is an acceptance of life and therefore an act of love toward life within an acceptance of death. And the acceptance presents Tommy with a place in the world. The progress of Bellow's sensible hero from alienation to accommodation has become in *Seize the Day* a progress of the soul through its freedom, from isolation to affirmation of ordinary life in the world."

Marcus Klein
After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century
(World/Meridian 1962) 39-41

"*Seize the Day*, Bellow's excellent short novel, projects the frustrated dependency of a middle-aged man on his father. Money is the symbol of control and submission, of the powerful father and powerless son. At forty-four Wilky is down to his last seven hundred dollars and besieged with bills from his estranged wife. He begs for money and sympathy from his father, a successful doctor who at eighty can still invite the flattery of everyone in his apartment hotel. Asking for help, Wilky hears his father rehearse his faults, giving the impression of how unfair the father believes it to be for the 'better man of the two and the more useful, to leave the world first.' Dr. Adler tells him, 'I'm as much alive as you or anyone. And I want nobody on my back. Get off! And I give you the same advice, Wilky. Carry nobody on your back.'

Wilky clutches at Tamkin, a self-styled financial wizard, to save him economically. But his need for a savior, a father, only makes him an easy mark, and he is quickly swindled out of what little is left.... Wilky is hooked on the idea of father, of being taken care of. As he screams resentfully into the phone to his estranged wife, 'Everything comes from me and nothing back again to me.' The concentrated power of *Seize the Day* comes from its complete absorption in the plight of the man who fulfills himself by becoming welded to his failings, frozen in pursuit of a protector. But the only redeemer is death, for Wilky, having lost everything he had, finds himself carried along by a crowd to a funeral where he bursts into tears, weeping for himself and experiencing the relief at the bottom. Wilky and Herzog could not be less alike. Yet both find relief only in letting go."

Josephine Hendin
Vulnerable People: A View of American Fiction since 1945
(Oxford 1978) 104

"*Seize the Day* (1956) makes us realize what an aberration *Henderson the Rain King* was in Bellow's development. For *Seize* joins with his work in the sixties and seventies to establish Bellow as our most renowned instructor.... *Seize the Day* fits curiously between *Augie March* and *Henderson*, one of the strangest placements in postwar fictions.... It is a middle-aged man's lament for his lost youth, his lost opportunities. Tommy Wilhelm, at forty-four, is a man standing among the ruins. He is built like Samson, and like the Biblical hero, he has brought down the temple, but for very unheroical purposes. In point of comparison, he is more like Arthur Miller's Willy Loman [*Death of a Salesman*] than Samson, both protagonists of the indeterminate middle class.

Miller's play, together with his justification for his protagonist, comes to mind, since both it and *Seize the Day* are appropriate fictions for the 1950s. Both, also, are developments of a Depression ambience. Like Willy, Wilhelm had been a traveling salesman, a commercial cowboy, possessor of a piece of territory for Rojax, until a son-in-law was moved in ahead of him. But behind that story, possibly all of it a disguise, is another story, that of Wilhelm's philandering and his own failure in the job. For Wilhelm, like Willy once again, lives amidst dreams, of a career as a movie star, a rich man, a vice-president of Rojax, achievements well beyond his powers. He has befouled everything he has touched. His movie career was a farce—he barely became an extra; his marriage fell to ruins when he left his wife for a Catholic girl who loved him. His job as a salesman followed.

Now, like a child, he lives in a hotel (separate rooms) with his father, whose expense he cannot afford. To establish his independence, the son has changed his name, from Wilhelm Adler to Tommy Wilhelm, part of the falsification of every aspect of his life; he has also claimed to be an alumnus of Penn State, when he had only got through his freshman year. He is a self-invented romantic hero, part of that tradition which extends from Don Quixote to Lord Jim. But since Bellow is writing bourgeois, not romantic, tragedy, Wilhelm's reach exceeds his grasp in small things, as does Willy Loman's.

In Bellow's own canon, Tommy Wilhelm is the obverse of Simon March, in *Augie March*. Both are big men, physical, Gentile in appearance, and clearly dependent on striking at the right moment to gain their advantage. Simon strikes, and forms a contrast to Augie, who waits out his chances. Wilhelm strikes at all the wrong things, and despite a hardheaded father, a doctor, he never learns. His farcical movie career becomes continuous with, most recently, his investments with Dr. Tamkin.

Part Houdini, part confidence man, trailing legends, Tamkin is *there*, inside and outside, living off the misfortunes of a man like Wilhelm. Tamkin makes himself into shaman, scientist, psychologist, doctor of souls, magician, confidant of the rich and famous; and he may be telling the truth or he may be lying, or he may be expressing partial truths. He is an imitation Eugene Henderson, a teller of tall tales, an extravagant figure in American fiction, now living in a hotel, playing the commodities market, and awaiting his chance. It does not really matter how much truth resides in Tamkin's assertion; for a confidence man has no existence except in association with those who confide in him.

Wilhelm is a middle-class, broken-down Faust, willing to sell his soul for whatever relief he can gain from his monetary and personal misery. In a display of subtle wit, Bellow has Wilhelm place his remaining cash in Tamkin's care. His future depends on the commodity market, on margins, mainly in lard, a fit

commodity; for as he turns to lard, his money, based on lard, becomes increasingly less. Tamkin's philosophy is to 'seize the day,' not to wed oneself to a life of suffering: '...don't marry suffering. Some people do. They get married to it, and sleep and eat together, just as husband and wife.' Some people stick to suffering, he argues, because they fear that without it, 'they'll have nothing.' All this appeals to Wilhelm, because he is a man who always tried to cheat suffering; and he recognizes that Tamkin speaks the truth. But it is a half-truth, because it embodies the very kind of advice Wilhelm cannot heed, as well as a type of advice that had proved disastrous to him in the past. Tamkin repeats that only the present is real: one must grasp 'the hour, the moment, the instant.' Wilhelm is hypnotized by such words; yet he has nothing with which to seize the moment, the day. Even his father wants no part of a son who has made so many mistakes, and Wilhelm's desire to regress to small son protected by gigantic father is rejected by Dr. Adler.

The archetypal situation for this in modern literature is, of course, Kafka's 'Letter to His Father,' the letter never sent, but in that the son seems victimized by a general need the father has to humiliate and confuse him. In Bellow's novella, Wilhelm has given his father more than sufficient reason for rejection of his financial and personal disasters. Everyone in the novella, in fact, acts toward Wilhelm as he deserves. Part of the problem in locating the value system Bellow is suggesting derives from Wilhelm's own faults, much as we find Willy Loman so flawed Miller's compassion for him is stretched beyond what literature allows an author. Miller argued that Loman's situation was so general a quality of American life that he was victimized by our being what we are—and as a consequence, we must pay attention to the Willy Lomans.

The argument is itself a trap, as well as self-defeating. Bellow wants both Wilhelm's failure and our attention. Yet Wilhelm had his chances, he followed the dream, and the dream led to disaster. He let down everyone who touched him.... Bellow suggests that Wilhelm deserves our attention because he is human, because when he weeps at the funeral of a strange man at the novella's end, he is transformed into Niobe, and weeps for himself and for all mankind. By that act, he has joined himself to all of us, and we must not judge. Yet in his every dealing, Wilhelm has proved imitational—name, college degree, marriage, as a son. Although we might respond favorably to the presence of a big, blond, blubbing forty-four-year-old, he has so few redeeming features, except self-pity, that fictionally the presentation falls between stools.

We swing around to our original proposition, which questioned what place this work had in Bellow's canon between two 'open' fictions, *Augie March* and *Henderson*.... All aspects of the novella are connected to death, the death of Wilhelm's opportunities overreaching all. The long scenes at the commodity market are for life substances—rye, wheat, grains, lard—yet for Tommy they signal an end, of his money, his chances. Marginal, they stress his own marginality. *Henderson* is the opposite, all potential death situations turned to life. *Seize the Day* apparently signaled a literary crisis, in which Bellow either sought another style or had lost his bearings. It is tight, unadventurous, everything occurs on a single day, indicating a closing down. *Augie* and *Henderson* sprawl. In a curious way, *Seize the Day* curls back upon Bellow's earlier career, suggesting *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, whose styles he tried to escape in *Augie March*. *The Victim*, with Asa Leventhal and Kirby Allbee, particularly comes to mind, here transformed into Tommy and Tamkin.

The real question, then, comes with how we should read this novella. It is the most problematic of Bellow's fictions, and yet many critics have cited it as among his most successful work. By 'successful,' they mean shaped, consistent in its details, and full of compassionate humanity. Yet it is pinched, and Wilhelm is of little interest; so little, consequences are reduced. His humanity is insufficient, *fictionally*, to be built upon in Bellow's terms. His tears at the end may signal a connection to others, a recognition that someone besides himself deserves pity; but it also signals tears for himself, that circuitry of self which is so stifling. Bellow has constructed Wilhelm on too obvious a scale; given his romantic nature, his lack of restraint, his inability to curb his overreach, his failures are transparent. His separation from his wife, Margaret, is stereotypical in its details; his movie career, farce that it is, has no surprises; his failure at work is little else than the fact itself.

Willy Loman succeeded because he was present, on stage, with the gestures and expressions of a fine actor. We were drawn in by the physical man. On the page, he is flattened out, less appealing, the play shrill in its insistence. But Miller wrote the character to be performed; Bellow wrote him to be read.”

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 329-31

Michael Hollister (2015)