

ANALYSIS

The Victim (1947)

Saul Bellow

(1915-2005)

“What Mr. Bellow attempts is to compress into an arena the size of two human souls the agony of mind which has ravaged millions of Jews in our century. *The Victim* rates as a subtle and thoughtful contribution to the literature of 20th century anti-Semitism.”

Richard Match
New York Herald Tribune
(23 November 1947) 10

“*The Victim*...is hard to match in recent fiction, for brilliance, skill, and originality.... *The Victim* is solidly built of fine, important ideas; it also generates fine and important, if uncomfortable, emotions.”

Diana Trilling
Nation
(3 January 1948) 24-25

“*The Victim* depended much on intensification of effect, by limitations on time, by rigid economy in structure of scene, by the unsaid and the withheld, by a muting of action, by a scrupulously reserved style. The novel proved that the author had a masterful control of the method, not merely fictional good manners, the meticulous good breeding which we ordinarily damn by the praise ‘intelligent’.”

Robert Penn Warren
New Republic
(2 November 1953) 22

“In Bellow’s second novel, *The Victim*, 1947, the focus of disorder is anti-Semitism; the quest is for self-knowledge rather than freedom. Anti-Semitism no doubt belongs to the pathology of culture. The disease, however, happens also to define a classic symptom of the human condition: the endless terrors of self-justification, darkness seeking light and light relapsing into darkness, a nightmare of ambiguities. Bellow sees the symptoms clearly, and treats the disease with a grotesque humor, for what indeed could be ‘funnier’ than the monstrous mummery of guilt?”

Defense and accusation, action and consequence make up the crazy, relentless dialogue of the novel. The narrative spins giddily around two characters, Asa Leventhal and Kirby Allbee, antagonists who turn out to be alter egos in the same bitter farce. Leventhal is a Jew, a burly, impassive, solitary man sprung from a background of tragedy—his mother dies insane in an asylum—failure, and erratic luck. He has, like Joseph, the gift of a dour, quarrelsome sensitivity, a measure of violence and self-pity, tenderness and strength—his natural tendency is to feel persecuted, a man bearing the world’s weight, one who wrests a modest triumph against great odds.

Allbee is the anti-Semite, a suffering and insufferable creep, endowed, at times, with an insane lucidity of perception. He appears from nowhere, down-and-out, to accuse Leventhal of having contrived his ruin in revenge for an anti-Semitic remark Allbee once made at a party. He blames Leventhal for all his ills, from the death of his wife to his inability to find employment, haunts Leventhal in parks and restaurants, and moves into his apartment where he finally attempts suicide. The two men are locked in a death struggle for the impossible meaning of innocence, for their own and each other’s soul. On trial here are not only Jew and Gentile, but Man. It is a trial that can have no witnesses. Leventhal’s wife, Mary, is away visiting her mother, his brother Max deserts his own family to work in a Texas shipyard, and his Jewish city friends come and go, bringing with them the irritations of easy counsel. Actually, most of the

characters in the book are caught, like the two principal figures, in a conspiracy of parallel and ironic actions.

The first and most obvious irony of the novel is that Allbee, the Gentile, poses as the aggrieved party, the 'victim.' So long as Leventhal insists on his innocence—and it is with great subtlety that the ambiguous nature of his guilt is gradually unfolded—so long he remains wide of self-knowledge. But it is as Allbee says, 'Know thyself! Everybody knows but nobody wants to admit.' Only when Leventhal stops feeling wronged by this mad and repulsive intruder, only when he begins to see in Allbee as example of misery and desperation greater than his own, does he begin to admit. He, at least, had been able to 'get away with it,' to beat life's rap. Should he be forced then to become his brother's keeper? And how much may a man give of himself in a universe of 'hot stars and cold hearts?' The answer to prevarication is this: 'Why pick on me? I didn't set this up any more than you did.' Admittedly, there was a wrong, a general wrong. Allbee, on the other hand, came along and said, '*You!*'

But ironies beget ironies. Leventhal cannot easily rise to the spiritual exigencies of the situation because, as a Jew, he has been turned against himself: he has, that is, unconsciously surrendered to the anti-Semitic view of Jews. That he has an exacerbated sense of his Jewish destiny is evident not only in his inflamed conversations with Allbee but also in his talks with friends, Harkavy and Schlossberg, about Disraeli. Outrage against immemorial wrongs blends into the perverse *need* to be wronged; the rebel-victim seeks vindication in the same attitudes that perpetuate his agony. This is as true of Leventhal as it is of his unholy double, Allbee. But malice turned against the self can also turn outward. The paranoiac tendencies of Leventhal threaten to aggravate the domestic troubles of Max, who is married to a devout Italian Catholic; the errors of his partial judgments—the guilt, for instance, he feels at the death of his young nephew—penetrate into the lives of people he loves. Leventhal withers into the truth slowly: the old Christian truth—another irony still—that the power of love exceeds the requirements of justice.

Racial prejudice carries only part of the novel's meaning; its practical correlative is status. Raised in the school of hard knocks, Leventhal naturally feels resentful. Yet he shares the idea of success—that American compulsion to flash and excel—imposed by a society to which he must remain, in some ways, an outsider. Nor is success in American what it used to be. As Allbee puts it, 'The day of succeeding by your own efforts is past. Now it's all blind movement, vast movement, and the individual is shuttled back and forth.' As personal effort comes to mean less in the contemporary world, group opinion comes to mean more and the confrontation of the victim with his oppressor becomes farce or phantasmagory.

This is the situation of Leventhal and Allbee, both of whom assent to the rule of money, though they have both known failure, *because* they have known it. In this climate of unacknowledged opinion, the final crime is not the murder of a fellow man but the contrivance of his ruin. And indeed the symbolic equation of death and money is everywhere implied—in Harkavy's indictment of life insurance, in Allbee's feeling that his poverty and lost status are due to some kind of Hebraic retribution, something like the terrible darkness brought down by Moses on the Egyptians. As the old aristocracy of America, which could claim—like Allbee—descent from Governor Winthrop, breaks up and loses its economic grip on the country, wild accusations of class murder become as integral a part of the social process as the redistribution of wealth or power.

In the brilliant conception of this novel, reversal follows close on reversal. The final irony is the identification of the two antagonists with one another. For Leventhal not only submits to the spell of Allbee; he stands up for him in public and saves his life in private. His very fury when Allbee carries on a sordid affair with a woman in Leventhal's own apartment is the fury of a man who recognizes what *he* might have done in the absence of his wife. The identification, the marriage of opposites, is managed by Bellow with great tact. It is rendered physically in the weird sensation of a moment: Leventhal looking at Allbee's back in the zoo and experiencing the other's presence as one experiences one's own. It is suggested in the aftermath of dreams. Waking up from one of these dreams with a great sense of release, Leventhal thinks: 'Admittedly, like others, he had been in the wrong.... Everybody committed errors and offences. But it was supremely plain to him that everything, everything without exception, took place as if within a single soul or person.' By coming to terms with his guilt, our hero discovers his identity, and discovering it he must relinquish it again to the common soul of human kind. Is this not love?

The ending of the novel is suspended as the ending of *Crime and Punishment*, say, must be. After seeing through Allbee a vision of 'horror, evil, all that he had kept himself from,' Leventhal goes back to a better life, a wiser and sadder man perhaps, certainly more affable and reconciled—which is exactly how Allbee turns out to be when they both meet in a theatre many years after. The defeat of *Dangling Man* gives way to the quiet stalemate of *The Victim*; the most affirmative note in the book is sounded by a minor character, old Schlossberg: 'If a human life is a great thing to me, it is a great thing. Do you know better? I'm entitled to 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.'

Technically, too, the novel marks an advance over its predecessor. The grim comedy of humiliation, the terrible mockery of guilt, the absurdity of evil, the senselessness of sudden dread, the drabness of the spirit's sleep come alive in scene after scene, and the style acquires a certain concreteness of detail absent from the earlier novel. There is no doubt, however, that the novel tends to shuffle and drag, and that the ludicrous, nightmarish encounters with Allbee are so often repeated in the same key that they lose much of their intensity. Furthermore, Allbee as a figure tends to waver uneasily between a fictional character and thematic symbol. The details of his unprepossessing physique as of his wretched mental life are convincing enough, but the uncanny relevance of all his speeches forces upon him a different and symbolic presence, that of Mephisto perhaps, or the Darker Double. Even here, it seems, the energy of Bellow's mind overreaches his growing dramatic powers, and his creations remain somewhat in the shadowy realm between the 'ideal' figures of Kafka and 'real' characters of Dostoevsky.

This peculiar quality of Bellow's earlier work once again reminds us of the assumptions of romance as a form of fiction, albeit a kind of romance so ironic and intellectual as to bear greater resemblance to the European allegories of our time than to those fabulous evocations dear to the American imagination."

Ihab Hassan

Radical Innocence: The Contemporary American Novel
(Harper/Colophon 1961) 299-303

"Asa Leventhal is called upon to make a nice adjustment in his guilt, to pit what he owes to another against what he owes to himself. Asa, the Jew in what is at its first level a novel about anti-Semitism, is confronted suddenly by an anti-Semite who accuses him of malice and an obscure crime which he may or may not have committed. Having every reason to deny his culpability—not only is the crime ambiguous, but his putative victim is himself a victimizer and he is as well his own betrayer—Asa is gradually displaced from his isolated rectitude.

Kirby Allbee penetrates his solitude, his apartment, the domestic secrets of his marriage, invades his bed, the intimate habits of his cleanliness, finally the last stronghold of his being, to the point where Asa must admit his implication in the fate of Allbee, of all men, all-being, no alibis permitted. To do less is to deny compassion and it is to be less than human. But on the other hand, compassion brought to a certain extreme is more than human. Pitched to a certain extreme, compassion is death. When Allbee, turning on the gas in Asa's apartment, would have Asa share his grief to the point of sharing his suicide, he compromises the moral injunction for which he stands.

The components of the problem are the same, still the individual and the community, and there is still the basic conflict between the self that demands preservation and the society that demands self-sacrifice. The terms are, however, deeper than alienation and accommodation, and they are less abstract. In each succeeding novel these public terms have become more personal. Asa Leventhal, a middle-aged fat man and not an intellectual, is involved in a situation the intensity of which commands his complete participation and constant practical decision. That makes the difference in *The Victim* of validating the conflict, and it as well eliminates the possibility of the romantically ironic gesture of surrender. The plot of *Dangling Man* provided a pretext for intellectual play, but it was not sufficient to test the play in action.

Asa's situation (which is, it happens, precisely that of Velchaninov in Dostoevski's *The Eternal Husband*) forces him to moral realizations which mean life and death.... Velchaninov becomes the victim of a man whom many years ago he had wronged. The parallels between *The Victim* and *The Eternal*

Husband are in fact numerous and detailed, and there can be no doubt that Bellow had this Dostoevski novella in mind.... The very weight of domestic detail in the novel, its very ordinariness—Asa's going to and coming from work, his eating, his sleeping, his washing and dressing, his subway riding, his complete occupancy of his days and nights—reinforce the importance of his realizations.”

Marcus Klein
After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century
(World/Meridian 1962) 36-37

“Asa Leventhal in *The Victim* is a Depression product whose sense of the gross limitations on his possibilities is bound up with his vision of ruin as economic ruin. Fear of a blacklist hovers over his mind like a force for pure nihilism and negation. He fears such a list records his failings and will stop his future. He feels ‘disfigured’ by the harshness of his birth. He is the son of a ‘pack rat,’ a Jewish immigrant fighting for survival, and a mother who died mysteriously in a mental hospital. He both feels enormous anger and the necessity of controlling it. He has a short fuse; he perceives the world as a jungle. He has an innate assertiveness, but it is victimization as a fear, a self-image, a source of security that controls his view of life.

Leventhal's assertiveness is blocked by his sense of dependency on the gentile world he feels demands his docility. He is suspicious of the friendship of the Willistons, an influential couple whose largesse makes him feel like a beggar. ‘He had often rather helplessly and dumbly put his difficulties in their hands and waited, sat in their parlor or hung on the telephone waiting while his problems were weighed, conscious that he was contributing nothing to their solution, wishing he could withdraw them but powerless to do so. Inevitably there had been times when his calls were unwelcome and the Willistons’ patience overdrawn.’ Into a life of such anxiety and repressed anger Bellow brings a WASP who accuses Leventhal of victimizing him and ruining *him* with his combativeness.

Kirby Allbee, one-time friend of the Willistons and a cocktail party provocateur who enjoyed telling anti-Semitic stories in Leventhal's presence, comes out of nowhere, having become a widower, an alcoholic and a bum, to accuse Leventhal of getting him fired years before and ruining his life. Leventhal believes himself innocent, but his ever-ready guilt over his own combativeness binds him to Allbee, who can paralyze him with his dependency. Allbee unmans Leventhal by irrationally accusing him of malicious aggression. Leventhal loses the power to write to his wife because of Allbee's presence in his house. When he sees Allbee following him, he can practically feel him: ‘The acuteness and intimacy of it astounded him, oppressed and intoxicated him.’ When Allbee, drawn by Leventhal's ‘animal hair,’ runs his fingers through it, ‘Leventhal found himself caught under his touch and felt incapable of doing anything.’ The accusation that he has acted aggressively feminizes him.

It is the idea of victimization that is the monkey on Leventhal's back, the loud, hysterical voice crying ‘My pain is your fault!’ that gives him so much trouble. His physical passivity with Allbee is less a homosexual fear than an expression of his social anxiety, of his impotence before his own increasing anger, of the extent to which meeting an adversary only intensifies his docility, his child-like confusion. Leventhal has been conditioned to be controlled by someone who irrationally accuses him of killing with his appetites and assertiveness.

Victim and aggressor in this novel are bound in an intense symbiotic relation. Allbee taps Leventhal's guilty repressed anger; Leventhal is hooked by Allbee's authoritative use of the role of victim. In this sense Allbee and the gentile society he represents are peculiar maternal figures, infantilizing and manipulative. Leventhal needs to structure life so as not to see himself as a man of aggressiveness and appetite; he needs to see himself as harmless, even as a loser. He finds in Allbee's pain and failure the spur to his own mysterious sense of failure which exists despite his comfortable job and loving wife. Victimization controls his combativeness and structures his life. He needs his anxiety as a form of security.”

Josephine Hendin
Vulnerable People: A View of American Fiction since 1945
(Oxford 1978) 105-06

“*The Victim* (1947) is continuous with *Dangling Man* in its ethical modalities, both novels part of Bellow’s 1940s ‘Inferno.’ His work is generally characterized by passage of his protagonists from Inferno-like situations and attitudes toward Purgatorio, or Limbo, where an individual awaits movement into Purgatorio: the Dantesque positioning a good indicator of postwar America, poised for Heaven but resting on a line that stretches from Inferno to Limbo or the Purgatorio. Rarely does Bellow’s individual achieve Paradiso, and if so, only momentarily, in a sexual bliss or with a finely prepared dish. Bellow’s Christian, who is almost always a Jew, moves between the lower and intermediary levels of existence; for in the author’s canon, to achieve Purgatorio signifies not the road to happiness but the attainment of an ethical mode of behavior....

Asa Leventhal, far more Jewish than Joseph, gains a sense of himself only when he is hounded by guilt feelings embodied in the person of Kirby Allbee. The latter, a sponger, drinker, loser, the traditional Gentile from a Jewish point of view, feels wronged by Leventhal. And yet he retains a hold over Leventhal by virtue of the fact of their common humanity, so Bellow claims. Although the nature of the hold remains vague, and we feel Leventhal is a born sufferer, rather than a man of choice, there is no question his life gains significance to the degree Allbee violates it. Here Bellow joins with Dostoyevsky, in this, one of his most Russian novels.

Allbee is, apparently, all men who are or have being; if he is All-be or All-being, he is, in this narrow sense, an ever present, demanding God. If Allbee is there as a persistent gadfly, then what he makes of Leventhal is Job: molested by this man from his past, by his sister-in-law, by all those unable to make adjustments to modern life, who heap their ills and maladjustments on Leventhal. As a Leventhal—a man from the Levant or East—he takes on Biblical characteristics: not only Job, but a suffering godlike creature, embodied in a weary, enervated man. Leventhal simply yearns to be, to be left alone to live out his days, without either great pleasure or great pain. He desires a middle course of existence, which Bellow will not permit, since it denies sensitive feeling. Leventhal’s reaction must be sharpened—as later happens to Augie March, Herzog, Tommy Wilhelm, Sammler, Citrine—or else he remains in Limbo, even if unknown to him.

We glimpse Leventhal’s intensification or deepening as early as the fifth chapter, about one-sixth into the novel. As he heads for Staten Island, in response to an SOS from his sister-in-law, he sees his new life, one assaulted by others. He observes the New York skyline. ‘The notion brushed Leventhal’s mind that the light over them [towers on shore] and over the water was akin to the yellow revealed in the slit of the eye of a wild animal, say a lion, something inhuman that didn’t care about anything human and yet was implanted in every human being too, one speck of it, and formed a part of him that responded to the heat and the glare’... Having lived without full awareness, Leventhal is set for redemption by way of becoming responsible for every one of his acts. In that arena of trivial and minor events Bellow casts his novel. Here, in fact, he establishes the ethical mode that will govern his fiction, proving the strength of his vision and the weakness of his novelistic sense.

For in his pursuit of ethical modes, Bellow often allows his fiction to deteriorate into didacticism, or, worse, into shrill rejection of alternative modes of being or countering forms of behavior, or even into incomprehension of such adversary modes. As a consequence, Bellow found the 1960s a challenge to man’s very humanity, seeing in the frenzy of the decade a return to savagery, the worst in man. Bellow had to resolve the 1960s by way of rejection or through parodic forms; so that, in a real sense, his intellectual development *as a novelist* ceased after the 1950s....

The Victim is Bellow’s attempt to find an equivalent of what Mailer, Jones, Burns, and others were doing with the army and with combat. Paradigmatic is the Biblical book of Job. The key polemical ideas are suffering, at one end, and one’s belief in a transcendent power (by no means God) at the other. Man lies stretched on a rack in between, and he may gravitate in either direction, toward suffering, with or without understanding, or toward escape, by assuming he is beyond any fixed reference. Near the end, Leventhal asserts it ‘came into his head that he was like a man in a mine who could smell smoke and feel heat but never see the flame.’ The image is Platonic, about those who confuse the flame on the wall with reality, while missing what is real altogether. In Bellow’s inversion of the image, Leventhal must strive to set the flame, for he has attempted to go through life satisfied with smoke and heat, even less.

The average sensual man must be brought to understanding, and this only by an accrual of disasters. Leventhal's wife is away (in the South), his nephew dies, he meets an alienated brother for the first time in years, he is accused by Kirby Allbee of having destroyed his life, even of having caused Allbee's wife's death, he serves in a job whose other employees make anti-Semitic remarks, he incurs the hatred of his brother's wife and mother-in-law. Bellow has transformed the large-scaled disasters of Job's predicament into the trivialities of contemporary life, which are, however, no less essential to the growth of awareness.

Allbee, who victimizes Leventhal, and is, to some extent, victimized, is also a Job of sorts. He is a man who preys on others because of flaws in himself. Bellow never really focuses him, and while we can see that some of that vagueness is designed, we are also bothered by Bellow's inability to pin him down uniquely. As much as Leventhal is the paradigmatic Jewish sufferer, Allbee is the classic Gentile, so true to the so-called type that he remains unclear as an individual. He drinks heavily, is disorderly, flouts family life, is as unsteady at work as he is at play. If the Jew represents the principle of order, the Gentile is filthy, chaotic, inconsiderate, racially intemperate. He represents qualities inherent in those who assume the world belongs to them, whereas the Jew is orderly so that he can live undisturbed, invisibly.

Bellow's narrative strategy is to keep the reader immersed in trivia. Events are so ordinary as to pass beneath notice, except that Bellow charges each with significance. Once suffering begins, then every aspect of being becomes intensified, as in pain a patient invests details with meaning they otherwise lack. Even conversations, which later, in Bellow, would become witty and parodic, here are ordinary, without resonance. So much in the novel, in fact, expresses clearly what it means that the reader wonders how Bellow expected to gain significance from so little. Yet as we know from repetition of a word, it gains exotic dimensions from rehearing. By way of the ordinary repeated in various guises, Bellow makes the ordinary fresh. Things that exist about Leventhal serve to estrange him, as Meursault's characteristics make him a stranger [in *The Stranger*, by Albert Camus].

The reader recognizes that Bellow has attempted a mode of American existentialism, at the very time it was spreading over the French literary scene. Character is the snaillike movement that results from the accumulation of trivial details; a funeral, a monotonous job, a careless love affair. The ordinary magnified can be the stuff of a life experienced on the edge of a precipice. Bellow could have picked up much of this from home-grown American naturalism, except that naturalism had aspects of determinism, violence, and sloth alien to his type of world. The French variety of precipitous living is closer to Bellow's conception of life, although he has removed real violence (only some shoving and fistfighting, Jewish violence) and replaced it with suffering. Bellow has, in a sense, created a bourgeois existentialism, its precipices often connected to marriage and jobs.

The culmination of Leventhal's relationship with Allbee comes when the former stays out one night and the latter takes over the apartment, locking the door while he enjoys a female pickup in Leventhal's own bed. The sexual triangle is, somehow, completed. If this novel had been written in the 1950s, we could have seen a Chambers-Hiss exemplar in the Leventhal-Allbee duo. For when Allbee accommodates himself to Leventhal's bed, he is in a sense sharing with Leventhal by way of a woman. The sharing of the bed with Allbee disgusts Leventhal so much he throws him from the apartment. There is, further, the suggestion that when Allbee chains the door, he has taken over Leventhal's life, not only the apartment; and with that taken over Leventhal's wife, even though she is away. They share the wife when they share the bed. Part of the brilliant undersurface of the novel derives from just such intimations. Leventhal must be redeemed from entanglements he never dreamed existed."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 118-20

Michael Hollister (2015)