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Faces in a Sea of Suffering: The Human Predicament in Saul Bellow's *The Victim*

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The tyranny of the human face.

De Quincey, "The Pains of Opium"

He felt that he ought to beware, for his own sake, of countering absurdity with absurdity and madness with madness.

Bellow 1988: 96

Saul Bellow's 1947 novel *The Victim* has, as its frontispiece, two epigraphs that frame and set the stage for the fraught condition of its protagonist, Asa Leventhal, as he navigates a tortuous course through the physical and psychic landscape that threatens to be his undoing. The novel's first epigraph narrates the brief but portentous "Tale of the Trader and the Jinni," from *The Thousand and One Nights*, in which a lone merchant, traveling on business and oppressed by the heat, takes shelter beneath a tree. There he breaks fast, relieving his weariness and his hunger with bread and dates. Upon concluding his meager but satisfying repast, the merchant heedlessly tosses the pits of the dates away from him. One of the stones, unbeknownst to the merchant, hits the son of an Ifrit, who, exactly at that moment, passes by the tree under which the merchant rests in satiated repose. The enraged Ifrit, appearing before the startled merchant with drawn sword, accuses him of culpability, however accidental, and demands retaliatory retribution: "Stand up that I may slay thee even as thou slewest my son!" In this story moral intentionality is beside the point. One is, the bard cautions, culpable, with malicious forethought or not. We are responsible for our inattention, for the uncalculated range of the stone's throw. In other words, we are not only linked to, but responsible for the fate of others, even those unknown to us, the faceless others. This deceptively simple admonitory narrative is followed by an altogether more ominous excerpt from Thomas de Quincey's nightmarish description of his opium dreams in "The Pains of Opium." In De Quincey's memoir, the appearance of a human face upon the "rocking waters of the

ocean” gives way to “innumerable faces . . . faces imploring, wrathful, despairing; faces that surged upward by thousands, by myriads, by generations” (De Quincey 71), faces in a sea of suffering, calling, beseeching, reproachfully shaping and crowding the terrors of the unconscious.

The Victim represents two men locked in antagonistic embrace — the anti-Semite Kirby Allbee in vehement pursuit of the anxious, defensive Asa Leventhal, who wants nothing to do with his antagonistic, menacing double. Indeed, Leventhal tries to set himself apart from others, from all others, cynically yet naively believing himself outside the parameters of human contingency and obligation. In this way, *The Victim* engages both the loosely existential issues of identity and freedom so characteristic of the post-war period. The novel also, however, with great subtlety, opens up the question of the responsibility of the Jewish writer to the representation of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust.

Bellow situates his epigraphs as sentries, cautionary signposts, forewarnings of the phobic terrors that will ensnare his dissembling protagonist Leventhal and threaten to pull him under, drown him, along with the countless other wretched souls in the urban sea of human suffering. Together, the two epigraphs set the uneasy frame for the trembling landscape of Bellow’s deeply disturbing novel. The human condition is defined by mutual, conjoined suffering. We are, Bellow would seem to suggest, in this sea of misery together. The human face yields to countless faces, all “imploring, wrathful,” crowded, competing visages struggling to stay afloat, faces “upturned to the heavens” in an attempt to survive, to demand accountability and reprieve. Yet it is not the heavens to which one should, with any measure of assurance, turn. For heaven will not only turn away but cast its merciless gaze upon the suffering of the myriad of those flailing helplessly in its waters. Indeed, later in the novel, Asa Leventhal will recall, with unnerving clarity, a “story he had once read about Hell cracking open on account of the rage of the god of the sea, and all the souls, crammed together, looking out” (Bellow 1988: 164). As the cautionary tale of the Jinni and the merchant suggests, we are all responsible for our fellow sufferers, complicit in each other’s anguish and privation and ultimately accountable for our actions, even when — especially when — our motives are hidden, concealed even from ourselves. Despite the extent to which Leventhal will go in the novel to dodge and dislodge his distasteful obligations to others and to deny his participation in their wretchedness, he will discover, as does Delmore Schwartz’s anxious narrator in the short story “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities,” that “everything you do matters too much” (9). One is but a

stone's throw from injuring others and going under with them. There is, Bellow cautions, no exempting oneself from the human condition. For Bellow, and for his apprehensively prevaricating protagonist Asa Leventhal, the human predicament poses itself in this way: to what extent is one human being responsible for the plight of others? What are the limits of one's responsibility? Is it possible to hold oneself accountable without falling victim to "the tyranny of the human face" and the anxieties it both fosters and presents? (De Quincey 71). For Bellow, of course, such questions are complicated by the ironic suspicion that if everyone is accountable for everyone else, whether one's acts are intentional, accidental, fortuitous, or unconsciously motivated, then finally no one is or can be accountable to anyone.

Bellow's agitated protagonist emerges against this ominous backdrop. The "sea paved with innumerable faces" will be, in the opening pages of Bellow's novel, transposed onto the pavement of New York's streets, a sea of faces, "an immense place, choked with people," contending amid the "distant, rapid concussion" of sounds that fell "like hammer blows" upon Leventhal's fractured psyche (93, 89). Leventhal, a man anxiously unmoored by his presumed obligations to others and the imposition on him of such demands, is burdened from the novel's opening pages by the importunities and stifling requirements of those around him, those whose petitions and very presence insinuate themselves onto his already strained disposition. "[B]itterly irritated" by the demands of family, obligated to attend to his sister-in-law and his direly ill nephew in his brother's absence, Leventhal is plagued by a sense of being sucked under, drawn in by "the nature of a duty" (1, 2). Summoned to his nephew's bedside, he will capitulate to his sister-in-law's unwelcome entreaties, all the while "condemning himself for it" (2). Pressed upon from all sides — his frenzied and superstitious sister-in-law and her black-clad, disapproving mother, the ill child, the hovering presence of an older nephew, his wife Mary's extended absence, and the repugnant suspicions of his anti-Semitic employer, Mr. Beard — Leventhal will be utterly capsized by the unexpected-yet-indefinably anticipated appearance of the downtrodden and aggrieved Kirby Allbee. Allbee, in financial and emotional ruin, targets Leventhal as the perpetrator of his disgrace, with some distorted notion, as Leventhal sees it, that he intentionally set out to ruin him. Allbee, the "stranger" who "utter[s] his name," will become the uncanny figure of recognition and fear for Leventhal (22). A strange attractor, Allbee represents a "memory" both unknown and utterly familiar, and Leventhal is both repelled by and drawn to him. For

Allbee emerges as the projected specter of Leventhal's worst fears about himself: "He made me believe what I was afraid of" (107). Allbee's recriminations — "[Y]ou're to blame. You and you only. For everything. You ruined me. Ruined! Because that's what I am, ruined! You're the one that's responsible. You did it to me deliberately, out of hate. Out of pure hate!" (68) — fall upon the already oppressed Leventhal with the fury of wrathful inevitability, exposing all that he has feared not only about others, but about himself, his own disingenuous and treacherous motives and impulses. Kirby Allbee, drunkard, scurrilous impostor, enraged anti-Semite, and intrepid stalker, will become for Leventhal the face of his own injurious impulses. This is why Leventhal, believing himself "singled out to be the object of some freakish, insane process" (26), cannot simply, with any degree of conviction, walk away from this imperious predator. Charged by Allbee of a crime of which he is unaware, like Kafka's Joseph K., Leventhal will be made all too uncomfortably conscious of the guiding principle of Kafka's nightmarish parable "In the Penal Colony": "guilt is never to be doubted" (Kafka 198).

Indeed, the fractured and tilted landscape in which Leventhal finds himself entrapped would not be unfamiliar terrain for the host of Kafka's disoriented, haunted characters. Allbee enters the scene when Leventhal is already provoked and assailed by the physical conditions of his environment, conditions that are a measure of his heightened anxiety and "peculiar dread," "his nerves had been unsteady . . . this feeling that he was threatened by something while he slept" (51, 21). Leventhal is caught in the tenuous grip of the delusion that he has been one of the lucky few who got "away with it," one who, in other words, had fortuitously escaped the injustices and indignities that afflict others (16). Thus, ever cognizant of his precarious good fortune, Leventhal lives in fear of what might — and still may — descend upon him: "He had almost fallen in with that part of humanity of which he was frequently mindful . . . the part that did not get away with it — the lost, the outcast, the overcome, the effaced, the ruined" (16). Yet Leventhal belongs in neither world. Mistakenly believing himself to live outside of that which shapes the contingencies of others, he exists on the margins, ducking in an elaborately choreographed performance of any felt kinship with others, all the while nagged by "his guilty relief, and the accompanying sense of infringement" that creates in him at once a heightened sense of and yet a strange detachment from his surroundings (256). Even in the midst of the crowded, bustling streets of New York City, he exists in a kind of dissociated isolation, a willed separation from the teeming gestures of aggregate human motion going

on around him. Moving amid “the people, thronging the streets, barbaric fellahin among the stupendous monuments of their mystery,” Leventhal finds himself anxiously suffused, jostled, agitated, “breathing hard” (1). His proximity to others, from the “barbaric fellahin” thronging the streets to the “mass of passengers” and crush of “souls” crowding the decks of the ferry that “crawled in the heat and blackness of the harbor” (56), contributes to his anxious and claustrophobic sense of discomfort, reminding him of his dangerous propinquity to others, to the throngs of humanity pressing him forward. He is haunted by “the feeling that he really did not know what went on about him . . . strange . . . savage things. They hung near him all the time in trembling drops, invisible, usually, or seen from a distance. But that did not mean that there was always to be a distance, or that sooner or later one or two of the drops might not fall on him” (84). Leventhal, in other words, is haunted by the possibility that his fortunes will be cast among the unhappy multitudes, the “unlucky” ones, that he will be tarnished by that which befalls others.

Amid both the real and imagined pressures exerted by those around him, Leventhal believes himself pursued, pressed upon, and caught in the grip of something he cannot control. Phobically repelled by the closeness of other bodies, he feels he has not enough air to breath. The choking, incapacitating fear of his place amid the stifling weight of humanity is measured throughout the novel by the claustrophobic, singeing heat that conspires to envelop Leventhal, the heat, like the crowds, “pressing,” sweltering, descending upon him. References to the lingering, clinging heat measure Leventhal’s escalating anxiety. Like the texture of Leventhal’s dread, the heat of the day hangs on, “gaping fiercely over the black of the Jersey shore” (18); the streets of his misery look “deadened with heat and light” (31). Weighing upon him, the clouds are “heavily suspended and slow. To the south and east, the air was brassy, the factories were beginning to smolder and faced massively, India red, brown, into the sun and across the hot green netting of the bridges” (31). The weight of “the heat [makes] him heavy” (51), enervated, inert. Here, in the teeming, sweltering city, Leventhal is held captive, constrained against his will in the scorching heat-weighted, blinding landscape of dread:

The towers on the shore rose up in huge blocks, scorched, smoky, gray, and bare white where the sun was direct upon them. The notion brushed Leventhal’s mind that the light over them 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. (44–45)

The heat is fashioned here as the shape of Leventhal's deep foreboding and alarm, contributing to his hyper-alert state, heightening the sharp edges of his senses: "[t]he street was glaring. . . . There was a hot, over-rich smell of roasting peanuts and caramel corn. A metallic clapping sound came to them from a shooting gallery. . . . Leventhal felt empty and unstable. The sun was too strong, the swirling traffic too loud, too swift" (92). Assaulted by the sights, sounds, and smells of city life, the sensations of being alive among others, Leventhal staggers, weighted down by the oppressive climate and the cacophonous motion of his unstable terrain, his composure "tinged with fear" (6). Clinging to him, the persistent, elevating climes take on the shape of "something inhuman" but also contained within an all-too-human undercurrent of menacing, wild, and uncontrolled, suffocating and proximate immediacy, all caught up in the undercurrents *en masse*, bound to one another. And such proximity is something that Leventhal, in his obsessive renunciation of his complicity in and propinquity to the human enterprise, cannot tolerate.

Bludgeoned by his fear of being drawn under, consumed by the collective, menacing will of others, Leventhal will attempt to flee — a symptomatic response to his intangible but incapacitating dread. Yet there is no safe passage or haven for him. The very landscape, the very air he breathes, seems menacing, suffocating in the collective will of others: "The crowd was extraordinarily thick. . . . The trees were swathed in stifling dust, and the stars were faint and sparse through the pall. The benches formed a dense, double human wheel; the paths were thronged. There was an overwhelming human closeness and thickness, and Leventhal was penetrated by a sense not merely of the crowd in this park but of innumerable millions, crossing, touching, pressing" (164). The faces, clamoring, insistent, suffocating, are simultaneously phantoms — figments of Leventhal's fraught pathology, but also real, for amid "the rocking waters of the ocean . . . the sea . . . paved with innumerable faces" (De Quincey 71) one figure stands out: Allbee, the singular, metonymic face of Leventhal's diffidence and dread.

It is from this churning sea of humanity, as Philippe Codde puts it, that "the downtrodden Allbee had finally risen as its dark and desperate representative" (151). Allbee becomes the embodiment of Leventhal's negligence and indifference, a projection of his own reprehensible motives. Allbee's charge of indifference follows his insistence that Leven-

thal deliberately brought about his ruin, offended by something said to him when Allbee was inebriated in the house of a mutual acquaintance — “sore at something I said about Jews” (29). Allbee accuses Leventhal of deliberately, retributively, getting him sacked from his job, of having sought an interview with Allbee’s employer for the sole purpose of making a scene and getting Allbee fired. Now unemployed and destitute, Allbee blames Leventhal for his ill fortune, following him through the streets, stalking him in the park, intruding into his home. His hyperbolized and unrestrained indictment of the initially flummoxed Leventhal is thus twofold: his deliberately vindictive wish to “get back” at him; and then utter indifference, turning his back on his obligations and responsibilities to the man he has injured. Allbee’s aggression is also a projection of Leventhal’s own self-critique. Leventhal does arm himself with a mask of indifference. His eyes, as Bellow writes, “seemed to disclose an intelligence not greatly interested in its own powers, as if preferring not to be bothered by them, indifferent; and this indifference appeared to be extended to others. He did not look sullen but rather unaccommodating, impassive” (10). Leventhal’s detachment makes him “almost a stranger” to his only brother Max and his family; indeed he does not want the “burden” of family that belongs to his brother (54). However, underneath this mask, Leventhal is anything but “impassive,” his outer comportment only a thinly veiled cover for his frenetic evasions and equivocations. It is not easy being Asa Leventhal, always “disappointed and dissatisfied with himself,” manufacturing justifications and rationalizations, routinely second-guessing himself, measuring his own mistakes against some sort of standard of culpability that he attempts to out-manuever, “full of misgivings” (9, 19). Leventhal constantly amends his responses and actions, always correcting his own impressions, justifying his behavior, but he cannot get it right; he is unsure of his instincts, “susceptible to . . . suggestions” (5). From the smallest gestures — “He even went to the telephone, lifted it, and turned it, untangling the cord, but he set it down and went on” — to more consequential actions — summoning his brother Max to the bedside of his deathly ill son, preventing Allbee from harassing him, and confronting his employer’s suspicions of his truancy — Leventhal cannot bring himself to act with any conviction (82). His constant indecision, hesitation, and uncertainty afflict him with inertia. He cannot quite act, arrested by his self-involved unresponsiveness.

Dodging his responsibilities, Leventhal, not unlike Allbee, will go to considerable lengths to cast blame elsewhere, to avoid accountability. “I’m not under an obligation to you,” he tells the aggravating, dogged

Allbee (127). His protests, not surprisingly, fall on deaf ears: "I say you're entirely to blame," Allbee insists (28). Yet, as Allbee's persistent accusations escalate — both in hysterical fury and anti-Semitic insinuation — Leventhal's conviction of innocence falters; he capitulates to the niggling suspicion that Allbee may have been right all along: "I may be to blame in a way, indirectly," Leventhal warily admits (28). Cornered by Allbee, and as his nerve and conviction wane, the strength of Leventhal's protests is undercut by his hesitation regarding his possible connivance: "Had he unknowingly, that is, unconsciously, wanted to get back at Allbee?" (108). Much to his distaste, Leventhal comes to suspect that his involvement in Allbee's firing and subsequent disgrace might not be that of innocent bystander, that, in fact, as in the "Tale of the Trader and the Jinni," perhaps his thoughtless actions were only a stone's throw away from culpability. He had, after all, while looking for another job, spoken to Allbee's employer at *Dill's Weekly*, a Mr. Rudiger. At the interview, Rudiger is rude and dismissive, and Leventhal is rude and argumentative in return. But his implication in Allbee's dismissal, that he might be responsible for another man's plight and that his own scurrilous motives might have driven the sequence of events and set a chain of consequences into motion, is a judgment that Leventhal cannot abide. Thus at the moment of potential reckoning, he will retreat into modes of evasion: "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). But intentionality, Bellow would have us understand, is, as the Jinni's tale suggests, not the point of Leventhal's ethical involvement here. Intentional or not, one is, ultimately and inescapably, responsible for one's actions, both inadvertent and deliberate. There is no accidental tourist, no innocent bystander. Leventhal's avoidance tactics leave him exhausted, depleted by his suspicions of his own bad faith. By his own admission, there remains "an element of performance" in all that he is doing (143). To Allbee's persistent dogging of him, Leventhal responds, as if this would put an end to Allbee's insufferable demands, "You don't owe me anything. I don't owe you anything, either" (146). However, implied in the chiasmic exchange — "you don't owe me . . . I don't owe you" — is the unshakable, if unhappy, connection between the two men. For Leventhal's antagonist is also his unwelcome, insinuating double; Allbee's presence is all too familiar:

Suddenly he had a strange, close consciousness of Allbee, of his face and body, a feeling of intimate nearness . . . seeing with microscopic fineness the lines in his skin, and the smallest of his hairs, and breathing in his odor. . . . [H]e could nearly feel the weight of his body and the contact of his clothes. Even more, the actuality of his face, loose in the cheeks, firm in the forehead and jaws, struck him, the distinctness of it; and the look of recognition. Allbee bent on him duplicated the look in his own. He was sure of that. (143)

Indeed, in Allbee's indignation, resentment, and needling expression of vindictiveness, Leventhal "had a particularly vivid recollection of the explicit recognition in Allbee's eyes which he could not doubt was the double of something in his own" (151).

From Leventhal's guilty and self-loathing perspective, looking at Allbee becomes a matter of looking at himself, or, more precisely, a matter of self-reckoning, of casting the uncomfortable backward glance at a life he might have fallen into had he not pulled himself out at the moment of no return. There is, indeed, something of a "shared secret" between the antagonists (25). For Leventhal's past is not without its own similar misfortunes, largely of his own making, and so he sees in the other man the face of his own nearly plausible and perhaps latent collapse. Allbee's current circumstances are a reflection of Leventhal's earlier, dissolute life. For Leventhal, opting for the path of least resistance seems to have begun in his youth, going wherever his impulses took him. School did not go well for him and neither, in his early years, did employment. Shifting aimlessly from one job to another — "[f]or a while he sold shoes. . . . Later he found steady work as a fur dyer, and after that, for about a year, he clerked in a hotel for transients" — Leventhal not long thereafter found himself routinely "turned . . . away" from sought after opportunities (11, 15). His romantic life fared no better, and Leventhal came to believe "that the harshness of his life had disfigured him" to such an extent as to "repel" the objects of his desire (13). Broke, a drifter living in seedy quarters with diminished prospects for a future, Leventhal, like his unhappy double, descended into "a spirit of utter hopelessness" (15). In many ways, Allbee is a projection of Leventhal's fear of what he might have become had fortune not intervened. Indeed, Allbee's ruinous conditions, his loss of employment, his estrangement, loneliness, and dissolution remind Leventhal that he, too, had almost succumbed to dissipated wandering and joined the ranks of "the lost, the outcast, the overcome, the effaced, the ruined" (16). Allbee uncomfortably, threateningly, reminds Leventhal, "you shouldn't forget that luck cuts both ways and be

prepared, and when you're in my position — *if* you ever are. That's the whole thing, that *if*" (181). Bolstered, however, by his good fortune, reassured that "his bad start, his mistakes, the things that might have wrecked him, had somehow combined to establish him" (16), Leventhal views himself as reprieved. And as the enraged Allbee confronts him, Leventhal thus exonerates himself from his kinship to the other man's misery by making such circumstances a matter of character: "It's necessary for you to believe that I deserve what I get. It doesn't enter your mind, does it — that a man might not be able to help being hammered down? . . . No, if a man is down, a man like me, it's his fault. If he suffers, he's being punished. . . . It's a Jewish point of view. . . . But I'll tell you something. We do get it in the neck for nothing and suffer for nothing. . . . To you the whole thing is that I must deserve what I get. That leaves your hands clean and it's unnecessary for you to bother yourself" (130). Allbee thus represents the "others," the unlucky ones who — because of something in themselves or in their circumstances — are destroyed.

In something of an inebriated rant, Allbee will unknowingly express Leventhal's own belief in the reasonableness of acting in one's self-interest:

"The world's a crowded place, damned if it isn't. It's an overcrowded place. There's room enough for the dead. Even they get buried in layers. . . . There's room enough for them because they don't want anything. But the living . . . Do you want anything? Is there anything you want? There are a hundred million others who want that very same damn thing. I don't care whether it's a sandwich or a seat in the subway or what. . . . For everybody who repeats 'For man' it means 'For me.' The world was created for me. . . . And it's all for me, forever. . . . Who wants all these people to be here, especially forever? Where're you going to put them all? Who has any use for them all? Look at all the lousy *me*'s the world was made for and I share it with. Love thy neighbor as thyself? Who the devil is my neighbor? . . . Even if I wanted to hate him as myself, who is he? Like myself? God help me if I'm like what I see around." (173–74)

Leventhal will go to considerable lengths to justify his neglect and indifference toward others by contextualizing Allbee's individual plight in terms of the inevitable predicament of human existence, a kind of cosmic inequity over which no one person has control. In defense of his inattentions, Leventhal will rationalize his refusal to assume responsibility for Allbee's condition as part of the larger scope of the necessary disproportion of providence:

In a general way, anyone could see that there was great unfairness in one man's having all the comforts of life while another had nothing. But between man and man, how was this to be dealt with? Any derelict panhandler or bum might buttonhole you on the street and say, "The world wasn't made for you any more than it was for me, was it?" The error in this was to forget that neither man had made the arrangements, and so it was perfectly right to say, "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!*" and that was what was so meaningless. For you might feel that something was owing to the panhandler, but to be directly blamed was entirely different. (70–71)

Leventhal thus holds firm to the creed that ultimately one's own interests trump the interests of others. Determined not to cast his lot with the rest, he will abjure the demands of conscience, obligation, and consanguinity; he will attempt to elude the messy human project of living among others.

There is a telling moment in the novel when Leventhal, becoming increasingly unhinged by the pressures around him, finds himself accompanying his absent brother's older son Philip, among a myriad of visitors, to the grounds of a zoo. There he feels curiously watched, scrutinized, an object of acute and heightened observation. Feeling increasingly apprehensive and out-of-control, certain that he is being stalked by Allbee, Leventhal experiences an extended dissociative interval in which internal and external worlds merge. Here Leventhal's internal fracturing arrests him, his consciousness hijacked by his over-identification with the other, with his intrusive double:

In the thronged zoo, Leventhal kept an eye out for Allbee. Defiant and alert at first, he soon became depressed. For if Allbee wanted to trail him how could he prevent it? Among so many people he could come close without being seen. . . . [M]oving from cage to cage, gazing at the animals, Leventhal . . . 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: the side of his face, the palpitation in his throat, the seams of his skin, the shape of his body and of his feet in their white shoes. Changed in this way into his own observer, he was able to see Allbee, too, and imagined himself standing so near behind him that he could see the weave of his coat, his raggedly overgrown neck, the bulge of his cheek, the color of the blood in his ear; he could even evoke the odor of his hair and skin. The acuteness and intimacy of it astounded him, oppressed and intoxicated him. The heat was climbing again, and the pungency of the animals and the dry hay, dust, and manure filled his head; the sun, overflowing above the topmost twigs and bent back from bars and cages, white and glowing

in long shapes, deprived him for a moment of his sense of the usual look of things, and he was afraid, too, that his strength was leaving him. (95)

In this scene Leventhal exists both inside and outside of the cages he passes. The outward gaze *becomes* the inward gaze; there is no distinction for Leventhal between looking outside of himself at the animals in their cages and transposing himself onto the external world, the subject of his gaze. He, too, is inside a cage, albeit of his own making, the object of watchful observation. But Leventhal is both subject and object in this portrait. For not only does he watch himself — transformed into his own observer — but observes himself from the perspective of someone else, that is, his double, Kirby Allbee. If, throughout the novel, Allbee is fashioned as a metonymy for the throngs in the churning sea of “innumerable faces . . . imploring, wrathful, despairing,” then, here, the zoo becomes a metaphor for the “jungle” of the city, in which Leventhal feels trapped, caged, the object of guilty scrutiny. This heightened sense of fixation — of being *fixed upon* — is intensified and exacerbated, once again, by the excessive aggravation of the heat, the sun “white and glowing in long shapes,” distorting his perception and sensation, holding him suspended between subject and object, action and inaction, motion and inertia, a detached observer and one obsessively watched.

Yet, so acutely the object of his own attention, Leventhal is reluctant to see himself *in* others. That is, he abjures empathetic identification with others, with those who, were he to get too close, too involved, would pull him under. And this is, of course, exactly what happens with Allbee. Allbee will pull Leventhal under. Indeed, at one point in the novel Leventhal, staring out the window, finds his vision impaired by the imperfections of the pane, undulations that “suggested the thickening of water at a great depth when one looks up toward the surface” (187). Here he perceives the external world out of the confines of his apartment as if he were submerged and looking up through opaque waters. Allbee will insinuate himself into Leventhal’s life, indeed, into his home, and almost destroy him. Toward the novel’s desperate end, Allbee, having surreptitiously entered the flat where Leventhal is asleep, turns on the gas in an ostensible attempt to kill himself, and, however much he denies it, take Leventhal with him. Awakening to the smell of gas “pouring from the oven,” Leventhal responds with understandable outrage, but it is with a peculiar calculation that he acts, attributing his fears to his nerves, “his sick imagination . . . an excuse for his cowardice” (254). Confronting Allbee, colliding with him in his attempt to flee his bedroom, Leventhal

believes that he will “have to kill him now” (254). After chasing Allbee down the stairs, Leventhal is left curiously depleted, “impassive,” not “greatly disturbed,” responding to his near collapse with a strange detachment, as if spent from the fight with Allbee, but also impassive, indifferent to both Allbee’s and his own proximity to death (255).

Despite his better judgment and his resistance to getting involved, Leventhal engages Allbee and Allbee’s madness. And although he cautions himself against “countering absurdity with absurdity and madness with madness” (96), he cannot entirely resist the pull of Allbee’s (all-being) will. To be sure, Allbee pursues Leventhal relentlessly, but Leventhal responds; he engages Allbee in the performance of his self-justifying rationalizations and explanations. Leventhal responds to Allbee’s unceasing accusations and demands for reparation with passive resistance, but he is also aggressive in his passivity. Convinced that if he attaches himself to others, he will drown along with them — indeed, that the “others” will deliberately pull him under in an attempt to save themselves — Leventhal will persist in disavowing his mutual responsibility to others, contriving instead a mask of disinterest and inattention, “a state of indifference akin to numbness . . . more conscious of the heat than of any emotion in himself” (165). The human face, the source of identification, reflects for him a duplicitous and thus dangerous misrepresentation: “Grief, overloading of the heart. . . . Horror. . . . People crying when their faces were twisted might appear to be laughing” (168). Thus Leventhal will resist identifying with the human “face,” with his implicated closeness and commitment to others. Yet there is “[s]omething about the queerness of existence, always haunting Leventhal at a short distance” (259). Leventhal views himself, in the eyes of others, as an object of derision. In his infantile narcissism, all others are moved aside. He clings to the notion that he is the focus of everyone’s attention, an illusion sustained by Allbee’s watchful gaze.

Thus Leventhal comes to discover, much to his apprehension and displeasure, that he is not exempt from the human condition, however much he might wish to be so, to have got away with it. He desires to be a dispassionate observer, not at the call of others, thus absolving himself of responsibility and accountability. Deluding himself into believing that he can maintain such a stance, outside the chaotic throes of human existence, he will find himself sorely and confusingly mistaken. For although he can fool himself into believing that he is a perspicacious analyst of his own character, what he really desires is to be an observer not of his own condition but of the fragile condition of others. Yet this is a

tenuous position, constantly undermined by the strain of maintaining the unimpassioned guise, a disposition that Leventhal will cling to in his attempted self-justification. It is, for him, too dangerous and simply too much trouble to attend to the messy needs of others:

He wondered why it was that lately he was more susceptible than he had ever been before to certain kinds of feeling . . . and this shortness of his was . . . merely neglectfulness. When you didn't want to take trouble with people, you found the means to turn them aside. Well, the world was a busy place. . . . You couldn't find a place in your feelings for everything, or give at every touch like a swinging door, the same for everyone, with people going in and out as they pleased. On the other hand, if you shut yourself up, not wanting to be bothered, then you were like a bear in a winter hole, or like a mirror wrapped in a piece of flannel. And like such a mirror you were in less danger of being broken, but you didn't flash, either. But you had to flash. That was the peculiar thing. Everybody wanted to be what he was to the limit. . . . nothing really good was safe. . . . There was something in people against sleep and dullness, together with the caution that led to sleep and dullness. Both were there, Leventhal thought. We were all the time taking care of ourselves, laying up, storing up, watching out on this side and on that side, and at the same time running, running desperately. (87–88)

Leventhal, however, will not run far. As Bellow makes structurally clear, the capacity to observe ourselves as distinct from others is ultimately self-deluding, contrived and desperately maintained in the service of self-deception. No one is exempt from the hard-won, immiserating human enterprise. One is involved and culpable, as Bellow warns in the opening epigraph from the "Tale of Trader and the Jinni," whether one likes it or not. As Allbee cautions, "When you turn against yourself, nobody else means anything to you either" (264). Leventhal discovers that there are unintended and calamitous consequences to indifference and neglect. Indeed, he discovers, much like the deluded George Bendemann in Kafka's "The Judgment," that there are others to whom he is ultimately, intimately, responsible and must attend. In Kafka's story, charged by his father with inattention and unconscionable neglect, George Bendemann will be indicted and sentenced. His father, rising in wrath, will bring vengeance upon him: "So now you know what else there was in the world besides yourself, till now you've known only about yourself! . . . but still more truly have you been a devilish human being!" (Kafka 65).

Leventhal, finally if reluctantly, will come to the troubled conclusion that his self-protective, self-justifying measures prove scant defense

against the inevitable “showdown” that undercuts all evasions and equivocations:

What he meant by this preoccupying “showdown” was a crisis which would bring an end of his resistance to something he had no right to resist. . . . He had used every means, and principally indifference and neglect, to avoid acknowledging it and he still did not know what it was. But that was owing to the way he had arranged not to know. He had done a great deal to make things easier for himself. . . . But the more he tried to subdue whatever it was that he resisted, the more it raged, and the moment was coming when his strength to resist would be at an end. He was nearly exhausted now. (141)

Leventhal’s denial of his culpability, his accountability, and his responsibility toward others — the deprived, the despairing, the dispossessed — ultimately shows itself to be a perverse and self-defeating delusion buttressed by extravagant and elaborately contrived evasions and avoidances. There is simply no possible space for an incurious detachment amid the clamoring of voices. For there are hidden, unintended, and stipulating consequences of one’s actions, a ripple effect that, once set into motion, cannot be contained. In Delmore Schwartz’s “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities,” submerged in the dark light of the movie theatre of his nightmare, the film interrupted by the censorious voice of the usher, the self-involved narrator comes to realize: “You can’t do whatever you want to do. . . . You can’t act like this even if other people aren’t around! You will be sorry if you do not do what you should do, you can’t carry on like this, it is not right, you will find that out soon enough” (8–9). One cannot choose whether to affect others, only how that effect will be measured and adjudicated, just as one cannot opt whether or not to be seen by others, only the modes of contingent self-representation.

At a pivotal moment in *The Victim*, Asa Leventhal awakens from an uneasy dream in which he finds himself an “unwilling spectator” at a railway station, “forcing his way . . . through a crowd” (150). In this dream, Leventhal is both spectator and central agent in the unfolding narrative, the focus of the escalating tension. Having missed his train, an increasingly anxious Leventhal, “carrying a heavy suitcase,” feels excessively encumbered (150). He rushes to catch the next train, which is departing imminently, and struggles to push his way through the crowd, “the sound of whose shuffling rose toward the flags hanging by the hundreds in the arches” (150). Through the imagery of subdued horror, Bellow here creates a language of heightened anxiety, of impending catastrophe that the

reader anticipates even though Leventhal, caught in the immediacy and timelessness of the dream, does not. Propelled by an urgent imperative to get through the crowd and get to the next train, Leventhal is motivated by the desire to escape. As he forces his way to the gate leading to the train, the crowd will “recoil,” both retreating to clear a path through which he can navigate, but also recoiling *from* him, leaving him exposed, isolated, unanchored, and separate from those who surround him. Leventhal abruptly finds himself in a long corridor that seems to lead down to the tracks. Ominously, the corridor seems to have been designed only for him and for him alone, for no one else traverses the passage way. Running to catch the train, he comes to a sudden halt; a barrier stands in the way of his entrance, “a movable frame resembling a sawhorse.” Standing beside the barrier are two men who stop him from entering the interior that would lead him to the train. “You can’t go through,” he is told. Imploring them to let him pass, Leventhal is cautioned that the gate “isn’t open to the public”; nor can Leventhal go back the way he came (150). Instead he is pushed into an alley, somewhere in limbo, unable to make his way to the train, but neither free, unrestrained. He has, in fact, nowhere to go, for one corridor only opens itself up to another, a maze of unconscious anxiety, dead ends. Although at the dream’s end, he is crying, his face “covered with tears,” in his half-conscious state he inexplicably experiences a “sense of marvelous relief . . . great lucidity, and he experienced a rare, pure feeling of happiness . . . convinced that he [knows] the truth” (151). Yet what the “truth” is eludes him, although in that dim light before waking he is hazily aware that the dream points him to the sure conviction that he, like others, “had been in the wrong,” and moreover, that “[e]verybody 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” (151). Believing that the gate was made only for him (as in Kafka’s “Before the Law”), Leventhal is left with the confused, existential intuition that one has autonomous self-determination and is only thwarted by one’s own limitations and misdirection.

What Leventhal fails to grasp is that the parting of the crowd in his wake only leads him to other barriers and unclear passageways, his access obstructed by the mandates of those who would still stand in his way. And beyond this one gate stand only more gatekeepers. And even were he to break through, his efforts, like those of the lone messenger in Kafka’s “An Imperial Message,” would be in vain, for caught in a maze of passages and corridors and stairways,

he would still have to get through the courtyards; and after the courtyards, the second outer palace inclosing the first; and more stairways and more courtyards; and still another palace; and so on for thousands of years; and did he finally dash through the outermost gate — but never, never can that happen — he would still have the capital city before him, the center of the world, overflowing with the dregs of humanity. (Kafka 159)

“No one,” Kafka reminds us, “can force a way through that,” although “you . . . dream it all true” (ibid). The lone individual’s fate, for both Kafka and Bellow, is caught up in, mortgaged to, conditions well beyond their control or awareness.

This dream represents Leventhal’s feeling impeded by those who would stand in the way of his autonomy and safe passage, but it is also suggestive of his having deluded himself into believing that there is, for him, a way out. That he cannot locate a way out is both a relief — conveyed by his tears and his “pure feeling of happiness” — and yet another mode of evasion, of dissembling. Here, contained within the condition of human suffering, is the specificity, for Bellow, of Jewish suffering. Those “innumerable faces upturned to the heavens,” bodies that “surged upwards by thousands, by myriads, by generations,” are both universal and specific. While Kirby Allbee would seem to be a metonymy for human suffering, the suffering of humanity works here to expose the particularity of Jewish suffering, a history of suffering, culminating in the genocide. As Leventhal, “uncomprehending and horrified,” in response to one of Allbee’s anti-Semitic tirades, agonizingly replies, “Millions of us have been killed. What about that?” (131). Published only two years after the end of World War II and the liberation of the concentration camps, *The Victim* shows, among other things, how the Holocaust reverberated across continents. The events of Bellow’s novel, as seen through the eyes of Asa Leventhal, the Jew as victim, portray an American ethos in the wake of the war against the Jews, an atmosphere swelling, like the heat arising from the pavements of New York’s trembling streets, in fear, dread, and suspicion. In uncomfortable ways, Leventhal’s indifference and reluctance to involve himself in the affairs of others is a measure of America’s — and America’s Jews’ — failure to act, failure, that is, to commit to the preservation of morality and the civilized world, having turned a blind eye to the crimes against humanity in Europe. In a letter to the novelist Cynthia Ozick some forty odd years after the war, Bellow wrote: “I can’t say how our responsibility can be assessed. We . . . should have reckoned more fully, more deeply with it [the destruction of European Jewry]. Nobody in America seriously took this on . . . and

every honest conscience feels the disgrace of it. . . . I can't even begin to say what responsibility any of us may bear in such a matter, in a crime so vast that it brings all Being into Judgment" (2010: 438–39).

Throughout *The Victim*, Bellow creates gestures of collective transference through subtle but no less evocative moments of Holocaust imagery and suggestion. Haunting the novel are references to trains, smokestacks, smoldering factories, flames “gaping fierily,” “cowl[s] of the chimneys,” packed busses that “crawled groaning, steering down from the tall blue oblong of light at the summit of the street through a bluish pallor,” the “sibilance of the pouring gas,” the cramped spaces, the fiery, “stiffening, fixative heat,” the throngs of people crowded together with insufficient air to breathe, and the ominous “shadows, tributaries that led into deeper shadows and led, still further on, into mighty holes filled with light and stifled roaring” (18, 19, 18, 254, 123, 246). As S. Lillian Kremer suggests, the backdrop against which Leventhal’s dream of being at a railway station is staged “evokes scenes of Jews herded into cattle cars for transport to the death camps. Railroad station, flags, barriers, recoiling crowds pushed by guards, and sealed exits evoke the Jews of Europe trapped in the Nazi deportation net” (125–26). Leventhal, imprisoned in this redolence of fear and its undercurrents of hatred and suspicion, exists in the uncertain moral register of Bellow’s post-Holocaust America. And Leventhal’s deep reluctance to see himself as a part of the human condition shows just how far he will go to disavow his connection also to a proximate history of Jewish suffering. His repudiation of others, his distaste for the assumed consanguinity of his brother’s family, the bidings of his friends, and the importunity of Allbee, expose his fear of being a Jew and his unconscious self-loathing.

Thus Leventhal’s dream of being trapped in the railway station, neither boarding the train nor finding his way out, reveals his deep ambivalence toward his place in history, his anxious straining to step aside from the conditions of suffering that link him to others with whom he shares the same historical narrative. His dream reveals his relief at being turned away from the train but also his guilt and remorse, as his face is “covered with tears” (151). Leventhal’s reaction, as Kremer argues (126), might be viewed as “survivor guilt,” having escaped, like other American Jews, the devastating fate of European Jewry. The dream exposes Leventhal’s fraught feelings about his Jewishness, but also about his connection to others, to those whose fate, but for the accidents of circumstance, he might have shared, taking his rightful, reckoning place in this sea of suffering. Allbee’s singling out of Leventhal as the target of his self-

justifying wrath, a scapegoat for his own failures and insecurities, is a microcosmic measure of the wholesale assault on those made victims by the willful pathology of others. For Leventhal, caught in the grip of something he cannot fathom, is victimized both by his own phobic dread of being “found out” and hunted down and by Allbee, who makes of him *the victim*, the one for whom no escape is possible. The Holocaust exists just below the surface of Leventhal’s physical and psychological landscape, “the sea . . . no more numbing in its cold, Leventhal imagined, than the subway under his feet was in its heat; the trains rushing by under the gratings” (18). Allbee erupts into Leventhal’s consciousness as a figure of the emerging, if defeated, face of a collective anti-Semitism. Holocaust markers, images and evocations of destruction and of terror, frame the ominous movement of the novel, as the churning waters of the ocean carry Leventhal forward into the perilous wells of denial, estrangement, and alienation, set against the anxious conditions besetting American Jews in the wake of the Holocaust. Bellow’s novel, then, might be seen as an extended, strategically crafted, warning of the compass and reach of moral accountability for both intentional and unintentional consequences of one’s actions, but a warning, too, of the cost — to both victim and victimizer — of indifference to the depth of human suffering.

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