International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature
ISSN 2200-3592 (Print), ISSN 2200-3452 (Online)
Vol. 1 No. 4; September 2012

Saul Bellow's Response to Nietzsche's Ideas on Nihilism in *The Victim*

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Received: 22-06- 2012 Accepted: 19-07- 2012 Published: 01-09- 2012
doi:10.7575/ijalel.v.1n.4p.138 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/ijalel.v.1n.4p.138

Abstract

This paper intends to expound Saul Bellow's response to Nietzsche's ideas on nihilism. The latter contends that the life-denying morality of Christianity has ultimately resulted in modern nihilism to solve which he propounds "active nihilism". While "passive nihilism", he argues, has darkened human life, the active one can save modern human, because it enables them to go beyond infertile moral judgments. In his second novel *The Victim* (1947) which portrays human anxieties in the modern era, Bellow comparatively asks his readers to confront nihilism, instead of ignoring it, and then make efforts to prevail over it, nevertheless the path he suggests differs from the one offered by Nietzsche. He depicts modern human's predicament in *The Victim* by posing its central character in a disheartening situation, but concurrently shows his perturbed endeavors to discern a way to surmount that situation. Eventually he realizes that to divest himself out of that quandary, he must overcome his fear of death to salute life, and also to acknowledge the bond of human beings that creates in them a sense of responsibility toward each other. It is here that Bellow parts with Nietzsche who holds that elevation is only gained by the egotistic Overman.

Keywords: modern predicament, the will to power, active nihilism, humanity

1. Introduction

Saul Bellow's first novel *Dangling Man* (1944), like Sartre`s *Nausea* and Camus' *The Outsider*, reveals a kind of preoccupation with displacement from society, the absurdity of life and obsession with death. His second novel *The Victim* (1947) depicts similar issues in a rather implicit way, nonetheless presents new perspectives regarding those preoccupations. Though the protagonist of the novel suffers from nihilistic tendencies of the modern age, he does not surrender to them, and attempts to overcome his anxieties. This is the distinctive feature of *The Victim* from several works written in the same period, and reveals the commencement of an endeavor in Bellow's career to find a way to solve modern human's problems. That endeavor somehow brings to mind Nietzsche's contemplations on modern nihilism and his propounded way to overcome it. In this article, the connecting line between Bellow and Nietzsche is taken into consideration in a rather new way, because critics such as Lehan who tackle the influences of Nietzsche on such modern writers as Bellow mostly focus on the depressing layers of modern literary works, whereas the present paper traces some rays of light in Bellow, and observes him as one of the first modern writers who have attempted to find a way to prevail over nihilism.

Tracing back the origin of modern nihilism to Christian morality, Nietzsche declares that to surmount such a phenomenon, which he calls "passive nihilism", the life-denying asceticism of Christianity should be denounced and discarded. He calls the process of such denunciation "active nihilism" which enables modern human to go beyond Christian moral judgments which are the sources of "passive nihilism" in his eyes (*The Will to Power* 1967: 5). Since he refutes other-worldly doctrines and rejects the existence of any creator except human, Nietzsche

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observes "a pattern of eternal recurrence within which life renew[s] itself as energy", and holds that "within this pattern the individual exercise[s] the eternal will to strive, to grow and create, to live in the face of suffering, to say yes to life as it renew[s] itself around him" (Lehan 1973: 2). This act of saying "yes to life" is what he terms "active nihilism" and considers the only proper way to challenge "passive nihilism".

Active nihilism, however, is not undergone by everyone, Nietzsche believes. Merely those who have the aptitude to go beyond the present miserable state of humankind can undertake such a venture and reach the higher state that he calls the state of Overman. This term has been the subject of numerous controversies, as those who are capable of reaching the state of Overman, Nietzsche argues, "fulfill" themselves "regardless of the cost to others" (Lehan 1973: 2). They are strong "immoralists" who possess "the hardier virtues of egotism, cruelty, arrogance, retaliation, and appropriation" and denigrate "the softer virtues of sympathy, charity, forgiveness, loyalty, and humility" (3).

Like many other modern writers, Bellow has been affected by Nietzsche's ideas, however he parts with him in significant issues. Though he confronts nihilism and makes efforts to prevail over it, the path he suggests differs from the one offered by Nietzsche. He does not confirm Nietzsche's "hardier virtues of egotism, cruelty, arrogance", rather approves of "the softer virtues of sympathy … [and] forgiveness". Bellow's fiction is in many aspects "an examination of power relations, or rather of abuse of power both in society at large and in smaller familial groupings" (Glenday 1990: 96) in all of which firmly stands against selfishness and ignoring others' rights in every possible form. Moreover he seems to disagree with Nietzsche on the definition of nihilism, as he tells an interviewer: "Nietzsche defines nihilism as the dislocation of reigning values … [while it] is not an idea, it is an event" (Roudane 1984: 267).

While the protagonist of *The Victim* does his best to "live in the face of suffering, to say yes to life", he is not "regardless" of what his deeds "cost to others", unlike Nietzsche's Overman. Bellow's second novel is thoroughly devoted to the question of humanity in relation to others and one's responsibility toward others which appears in flesh and blood in the sudden, vindictive presence of an old acquaintance in the life of the central character and makes it a permanent nightmare, till he admits his shared responsibility for the failure of that person and thereby tranquilizes his conscience.

2. Binary Opposition of Victim/Victimizer

The setting of *The Victim* is New York in its hot, suffocating, windless days. At the outset of the novel we read: "on some nights New York is as hot as Bangkok. The whole continent seems to have moved from its place and slid nearer the equator, the bitter gray Atlantic to have become green and tropical" (3). This disturbing, gloomy setting, "apart from being realistic, remains a symbolic manifestation throughout the novel," as Lee Yu-ch'eng suggests (1982: 1) that signifies the distressing conditions in which the central character would later be caught up. His state of mind also intensifies the weird feelings induced by the setting, as he seems to suffer from an agony caused by a sense of displacement – a psychological disruption rather than a physical dislocation.

Then two intermingled, stressful events occur which reinforce the eerie sense created at the outset. First Asa Leventhal the protagonist of the novel receives a call from his brother's wife by which she informs him that her little son is seriously ill. Though he is terribly busy, he considers the case urgent and goes to his brother's apartment. As a matter of fact, he does rarely know his brother's family and this is the reason why he is dubious about going there. Afterward he encounters Kirby Allbee, an old acquaintance who has lost his job and subsequently his wife in an automobile accident. Destroyed with the loss of his wife, Allbee who drinks a lot and pursues an aimless life has come to accuse Leventhal of being responsible for his failure, and this devastates Leventhal's life. Irritated by the charge and unable to decide what to do, at first he attempts to ignore Allbee and get rid of him, but eventually comes to realize his responsibility toward him – a recognition that makes his encounter with Allbee of great import, besides the most significant dialogues of the novel that highlight the notion of victim and make the readers reflect on the victim/victimizer relation are exchanged between them.

When Allbee charges Leventhal in a seemingly unfair way for being the cause of his dismissal and hence losing his wife, many readers consider the latter subject to victimization, since his ambivalent attitude toward Allbee is a sign for being caught by him. Nonetheless by scrutinizing their interaction, we infer that both are trapped in an inescapable game of victimization. Regarding this complicated relationship, Gordon argues this way:

> Leventhal and Allbee become each other's victims. Allbee is Leventhal's victim because so long as he insists that Leventhal has ruined his life, Allbee will find no need to change his life. And Leventhal is Allbee's victim because so long as he admits that he is responsible for Allbee, he is simply weighed

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> down by what is base in human nature. Each character becomes locked in the bad faith of the other, becomes fixed by a relationship which prevents the possibility of change. (1979: 113)

This indistinctness of the victim vs. victimizer results in an absurd situation in which both are caught up, and might be considered by some the essence of modern human predicament. Besides it is one of the interesting aspects of the novel, since Bellow acts impartially toward them and does not take sides with either. He depicts that neither of them possesses human dignity. Furthermore the state of each of them, especially Leventhal's reminds us of the archetypal *scapegoat* that is "neither innocent nor guilty. He is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done, like mountaineer whose shout brings down an avalanche. He is guilty in the sense that he is the member of a great society, or living in a world that such injustices are an inescapable part of existence" (Frye 2000: 41).

But since the concerned, fretful modern humans are not capable of sacrificing others in altar of gods, they do so on the pretext of moral judgments, as Nietzsche points out. In his *On the Genealogy of Morality*, he talks about the origins of moral judgments which substituted ancient sacrifices, and argues that to create a space for *conscience*, human beings have adopted some moral practices as the punishment of what is considered a wrong deed – to make others be embarrassed of being guilty in front of gods. Through those practices, he affirms, such notions as *consciousness of guilt* have been developed to strengthen those judgments.

There is a strong guilt-consciousness in Leventhal on the altar of which Allbee decides to sacrifice him. This guilt-feeling can be detected form a Nietzschean viewpoint as the direct effect of moral judgments created by various social institutions through history. In the modern era, this guilt-consciousness may lead to a nihilistic inclination that chases the modern human like a shadow. Anxiety and fright are the feelings Leventhal shares with many other modern humans. Besides being a victim of Allbee, Leventhal is the victim of a moralistic society and is hence trapped in a state that cultivates nihilistic feelings. Allbee is also the victim of moral judgments created by the same social institutions.

3. Passive Nihilism

The plot of *The Victim* can be divided into three parts in the first of which Leventhal experiences absurdity, uncertainty and insecurity which engulf him with fear and anxiety, nonetheless he never feels completely subjugated. In the second part of the novel, we see his attempts to overcome those negative feelings and regain his composure. Through those attempts, he finds out that an acknowledgement of human dignity and the sense of responsibility toward others might solve them. By such recognition, he reaches to the third phase where he comes to terms with life, "say[s] yes to it" and gains peace of mind.

Considering the rise of modern nihilism, Nietzsche contends: "What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism*" (*The Will to Power* 3). Tracing its roots in Christianity, he argues that in contrast to what genealogists of morality affirm, the origin of Christian morality is constructed on the hostile interactions of the master and the slave. While masters regarded such actions as war, hunting, and dancing as moral deeds, slaves commended the opposite and condemned masters' actions. This hostility, Nietzsche holds, has led to the formation of Christian morality which has by turn brought about ascetic practices and ideals.

Nietzsche observes three phases in modern nihilism the first of which is to recognize it. He argues that when Christian value-seekers discern that transcendental moral values no longer quench their thirst or answer their questions, they encounter disappointment, skepticism and pessimism which eventually lead them to nihilism. Since this nihilism is the direct product of moral judgments, he contends, it should be given up. By so doing, the seekers step onto the second stage where they need "active nihilism" that sharply differs from ascetic ideals, as it is the major ongoing drive of life. In the third stage where such forces as the will to power and struggling are the ruling principles, the seeker "revaluates all values".

According to him, ascetic Christian practices prevented the emergence of any nihilism up to the advent of rapid scientific achievements in the modern times. For a long time man had considered himself the center of the universe until such scientist as Copernicus proved that neither man nor the earth was the center of the world. Nietzsche contends that scientific theories and discoveries brought to light the fact that transcendental interpretation of the natural world was merely a vicious way to devalue it. He affirms that afterward a new phase started which led to nihilism as the psychological state of the modern seeker in which "the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking. *Why* finds no answer" (*The Will to Power* 9).This state of mind is one of the major characteristics of modernism.

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Living in a post-war, industrial, consuming society, Leventhal is exposed to suffer from disturbing thoughts which he should tackle, as related in this part: "Since Mary's departure his nerves had been unsteady. He kept the bathroom light burning all night. Somewhat ashamed of himself …. This was absurd, this feeling that he was threatened by something while he was sleeping" (16). The feeling of being threatened and the consequent anxiety and inability to sleep are evidences of modern nihilism.

There is a dream almost in the middle of *The Victim* which seems very significant to the present discussion. Leventhal sees himself in a railroad station in the dream, with a heavy suitcase in his hand, craning his head and pushing and shoving the crowd to open his way to the train which is about to leave. When he reaches a barrier, a sawhorse, and finds it impossible to reach the train in this way, he pushes it aside and passes by. Then he encounters two people who do not allow him in; "A push on the shoulder sent him into an alley. His face was covered with tears. A few people noticed this, but he did not care about them" (104-5). Besides Leventhal's distraught state of mind, his dream might stand for various things: people's struggles to gain their goals, their will to power, or perhaps the Judgment Day when people try to get on the redemption train. As the dream symbolizes, life has set many obstacles in Leventhal's way and thereby has taught him to push others to reach his goal, as others have done to him, though his endeavors temporarily seem to be of no avail. At the end of the dream, he finds himself neither awake nor asleep, rather in an overexcited state of mind that encloses him in a temporary sense of marvel.

4. The Will to Power

Bellow depicts life in *The Victim* as a large race in which power is the undeniable ruling force. One of Leventhal first encounters with one of the people in the position of power offers a good picture of the issue of power: "Rudiger kept him waiting for nearly an hour in the reception room and for a few minutes more in his office…. But as soon as he faced about, Leventhal knew at once that he had nothing to hope for" (29). Bellow illustrates here the treatment of those who are in power positions, and how that treatment suggests Leventhal's scanty chance to get a position. In the above-mentioned dream there are also two men who hinder his getting on the train. They can be considered the representative of authorities that keep others in a subjugated position.

Leventhal's dream brings to mind Nietzsche's tracing of the origin of moral codes. He confirms that in exercising their power over slaves, masters create their own values, while concurrently slaves strive to surmount those values, but since they are powerless, they cannot regain any dignity. Consequently frustrated impulses of hatred are so much strong in them, he asserts, that can exterminate any empire. After winning the power from masters by slaves, the race of power is transformed into moral struggle; slaves create their own values to oppose those of masters'. For Nietzsche, life is just a power struggle in which every being endeavors to gain dominion over others, as explained here:

> Mankind's history, [Nietzsche] notes, offers countless examples of individuals risking their lives in pursuit of power and dominion.... The relationship of power characterizes every stage of life: it is present, of course, in physical acts of subjugation; but it is also the motive force behind intellectual forms such as philosophical dialogue or the ritual conventions of courtly love as well as what shapes the historical modulation between emerging and declining cultural movements. (Spinks 2003: 137-8)

Bellow exposes the notion of power in his novel via other terms such as competition and race. For Leventhal, "life has always been a push, a violate struggle to get and then to maintain a precarious position" (Gordon 1979: 130); his physical and verbal confrontations with Allbee reveal that concept of life. A classical interpretation of their confrontation might be to consider it the eternal encounter of good and evil, whereas in a Nietzschean view it is just the confrontation of two opposite forces trying to attain power over each other. It can be read as a kind of master/slave relation in which each side attempts to gain the master's position. Talking to Leventhal about his misfortune, Allbee reveals his opinion about life as the manifestation of the desire for ruling over others:

> I guess you wouldn't be familiar with the Catholic catechism where it asks, 'For whom was the world made?' Something along that line. And the answer is, 'For man.' For every man? Yes, for every last mother's son. Every man. Precious to God, if you please, and made for His greater glory and given the whole blessed earth. Like Adam. He called the beasts by their names and they obeyed him. I wish I could do that. Now that's clever. For everybody who repeats 'For man' it means 'For me.' 'The world was created for me, and I am absolutely required, not only now, but forever. And it's all for me, forever.' Does that make sense? (120)

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Allbee's ideas exactly accord with Nietzsche's observation on the existence of the will to power in all human beings. Nietzsche holds that every resistance against power is itself a quest for power, signifying the everlasting conflict in power hierarchy – hence all moral judgments are just the disclosure of power-seeking intentions.

5. Acting Human

The Victim relates the death of three people: the early death of Leventhal's mother, the shocking, untimely death of his little nephew, and the sudden death of Allbee's wife, therefore the presence of death permeates through the whole novel and generates a sense of fear and anxiety. Leventhal's mind is so obsessed with the notion of death that consequently results in his lack of faith in life – the very feature of passive nihilism in Nietzsche's eyes. While he is unaware of his own psychological state, he thinks of other people's fear of death: "But most people [have] fear in them- fear of life, fear of death, of life more than of death, perhaps" (96). It seems proper to be argued here that besides being victimized by Allbee's intruding presence and accusation, in addition to the upsetting moral codes of the society, Leventhal suffers from self-victimization, since he does not let himself enjoy life. Soon afterwards he has that terrible dream which, however, causes him a sort of momentary mirth.

> He found himself not awake, precisely, but so nearly awake as to be conscious that he lay in the dark. He had a sense of marvelous relief at the end of the dream. He was, it seemed to him, in a state of great lucidity, and he experienced a rare, pure feeling of happiness. He was convinced that he knew the truth, and he said to himself with satisfaction, "Yes, I do know it, positively. Will I know it in the morning? I do now." For what he thought would have been very strange to his waking mind, difficult to accept if not downright foolish. But why was that? "Why?" he reflected. (105)

The "great lucidity" and "pure feeling of happiness" he goes through in his dream is "very strange to his waking mind", because his conscious mind is not only burdened with accepted codes of behavior, but also with the fear of death, besides Allbee's accusation, thus his unconsciousness forces him run into a kind of "epiphany" – impossible to reach in the conscious everyday experiences. Leventhal's dream experience reminds us of James Joyce's *The Dead* where he depicts a snowy night in Dublin when Gabriel the protagonist of his story sees different images of past and future which generate a kind of revelation for him.

After that dream and also Allbee's ineffective suicidal action, Leventhal relinquishes his fears and begins his real quest for happiness, thereby experiences the spiritual rebirth which coincides with the return of his wife Mary. This different move is the consequence of what Lee Yu-ch'eng refers to as getting "aware of the common fate of humanity" – an awareness that "paves the way to his redemption and makes possible his rebirth" (109). Like a good many protagonists of modernist fiction, Leventhal experiences nihilistic moments of modern life which, nonetheless, illuminate the way to overcome his nihilism and renew his life, and this is similar to what Nietzsche calls active nihilism.

From relating Leventhal's fear of both life and death to his quest for physical security and mental sanity and then his spiritual rebirth, *The Victim* tells a story of self-recognition and its subsequent redemption. Though Bellow portrays an absurd hero in an absurd situation, he strengthens him to overcome that absurdity by clinging to life and humanity and hence points to a way that can help modern human overpower nihilism. By narrating the interaction of Leventhal and Allbee, Bellow presents abundant questions some of which intentionally remain unanswered, nevertheless through the same interaction he underscores non-transcendental values such as humanity that can substitute the lost transcendental values. He depicts in this novel that to come to terms with life, to ignore the fear of death, to dispose of one's anxieties, to consider oneself responsible for other fellow humans, to feel sympathy for them and share their pains would give meaning to modern human's life and maintain their dignity as human, and here he parts with Nietzsche who applauds Overman.

Drawing a distinctive line between the life-denying doctrines of slave morality and life-affirming doctrines of master morality, Nietzsche applies the term passive morality to a moral decadence as the outcome of slave morality and the decline of master morality. While passive nihilism represents a form of life, he argues, based on the passive imagination of slave morality, active nihilism is a mode of existence which accepts human's creative role to reconstitute the world. Although *The Victim* is to a considerable extent in line with Nietzsche's views about nihilism, Bellow parts with Nietzsche in asking human to be human and act as human, not as Overman, as Nietzsche does. His views are implicitly dramatized by the complicated, multi-dimensional interaction of Leventhal and Allbee through the novel, but there is a scene where Bellow explicitly puts his words in Schlossberg's mouth in a friendly discussion in a café:

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> It's bad to be less than human and it's bad to be more than human. What's more than human? Our friend – "he meant Leventhal," was talking about it before. Caesar, if you remember, in the play wanted to be like a god. Can a god have diseases? ... We only know what it is to die because some people die and, if we make ourselves different from them, maybe we don't have to? Less than human is the other side of it…. So here is the whole thing, then. Good acting is what is exactly human. (84)

This piece can be considered the gist of many ideas shown in the novel: be human, neither less, nor more, and that would be "Good acting". As Schlossberg points out, those who want "to be like a god", fail in doing so, because they are imperfect, mortal beings. But while perfection and immortality are impossible to gain, humanity is, thus sustain your humanity and do not be "less than human", Bellow asks us to do. Schlossberg continues his words by saying that "less than human" refers to those who have "no love", "no hate", "no fear" and "no hearts". Although Leventhal believes that "less than human" is more common nowadays, he likes "to think 'human' meant accountable in spite of many weaknesses – at the last moment though enough to hold" (96), and what he goes through by being caught up in the predicament induced by Allbee and gradually coming to recognize his responsibility toward him as a fellow human helps him emerge out of as "exactly human". It is here that Bellow's protagonist diverges from Nietzschean Overman, even though both of them long for self-fulfillment; he does not crush others with arrogance and cruelty.

6. Conclusion

Like many other writers of the twentieth century, Bellow portrays modern nihilism in *The Victim*, nonetheless he does not leave the crisis unsolved, as he offers a way to overcome nihilistic tendencies by accentuating the notion of humanity. Somehow like Nietzsche who suggests active nihilism to defy the passive one, Bellow tries to fulfill his intellectual dreams by refuting passivity toward modern problems. The central character of this novel endeavors to find a way out of the maze in which he is caught up and thereby gives a new meaning to his life. Life-affirming drives highlighted in his endeavor are somehow in line with what Nietzsche has underscored, nevertheless what Bellow seeks is "exactly human" not the Nitzschean Overman.

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