

## **The Adventures of Kirby Allbee in Saul Bellow's *The Victim***

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With the appearance of *Ravelstein*, Bellow's most recent novel, we again encounter a familiar character in Chick, who, in more ways than one, functions as a "mentor", a "brain truster", a "reality instructor" or a "Machiavellian", thereby indicating a trend and a tradition in Bellow's fiction. Despite individual differences, these figures are often presented, in Richard Lanham's words, as "*homo rhetoricus*" - actors replete with constantly changing situations, schemes, plots strategies and roles, who through the power of words, try to reinterpret reality and to convince themselves and others to accept their revision of it (1976: 4). However, it is in the nature of such characters to pretend they are good actors; each "*homo seriusus*" endorses a conception of life, as Lanham says, that relies on a strong belief confirming that there are solid systems, rules, codes and values that underlie all social and cultural practices (1). One of the pioneers of such figures is Kirby Allbee, whose conduct (associated with strong sense of acting) savours of possession and exorcism. He is both a Jinni who haunts the soul of Asa Leventhal, the protagonist of the novel, and, in consequence, accelerates his deterioration and confusion, and paradoxically the exorcist who helps Asa regain his spirit and expel the devil.

While this paper closely examines the roles of Kirby Allbee, his impact on Asa Leventhal and on the narrative aspect, it aims to present Allbee as a typical representative of such figures and, hence, to call for a deeper examination of the tradition. In the opening paragraph of the novel, we are introduced to a world characterized by extremes of temperature, chaos, tyranny, fear, anxiety and criminal assault. Such a world not only justifies Allbee's role-playing as a Jenni but increases Asa's falsehood, animality and

sense of displacement and insecurity and encourages him to act accordingly: "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 grey Atlantic to have become green and tropical" (*The Victim* 1947, 9). Beyond the artificiality and falsity of New York, which is suggested by the notion of "seem" and "like", borrowed from the world of theater, there is a frightening upheaval which seems not to belong to the order of nature. It is horrifying because it challenges Asa's sense of his own reality and heightens his sense of displacement, insecurity and fear of evil, the source of which lies in the tyranny of the strong heat stalking the city. On another occasion, the killer heat reminds Asa of a story he once read about Hell:

The towers on the shore rose up in huge blocks, scorched smoky, grey, and bare white where the sun was direct upon them. The notion brushed Leventhal's mind that the heat 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. (47)

Leventhal's meaning speaks for itself: the sunlight, containing something evil and inhuman, provides a background for the human evil and activates people's tendency to act with savage egotism. According to Asa, the sunlight implants that inhuman element in all human beings making them less than human.

The evil artificiality of the modern world is perhaps reflected in the character of Allbee, whose relationship with Asa weaves the main plot of *The Victim*. Despite their rowdy arguments, Allbee teaches Asa lessons in good acting by forcing him to re-evaluate his moral values, to admit his bestiality and to reconsider the nature of his relations with his fellow humans.

All throughout his encounters with Asa, Allbee's frequent appearance and disappearance are vague, sudden and inexplicable and are derived from the realm of

Jennies suggested by the epigram to the novel. In addition, in their encounters both Allbee and Asa use an abundance of acting imagery to refer to each other. Each believes he is "*homo seriosus*", while the other is "*homo rhetoricus*", performing, pretending or lying. When Asa first catches a glimpse of Allbee in the park, he shockingly responds, "Who is the customer?.... An actor if I ever saw one. My God, my God, what kind of fish is this? One of those guys who want you to think they can see to the bottom of your soul" (27). Clearly Asa tries to read the internal quality of Allbee through his outward condition. At the same time Asa fears that Allbee can enter his body and see the bottom of his soul. So Allbee is established as an actor-devil in the manner of the Yellow Kid, a notable Chicago confidence man whom Bellow greatly admired. The Kid says,

"I was a psychologist, ...My domain was the human mind. A Chinese scholar with whom I once studied told me, 'People always see themselves in you.' With this understanding I entered the lives of my dupes. The man who lives by an idea enjoys great superiority over those who live by none.... My purpose was invisible. When they looked at me they saw themselves. I only showed them their own purpose." (1956, 43)

The quotation above is of paramount importance. At the core of it is the idea of people as audience, the Kid as actor. Furthermore, the Kid is presented as a persecuting double, a motif which suggests links with psychoanalytical theorizations particularly the works of Otto Rank and Jacques Lacan. In other words, what the Kid seems to be saying is readily comprehensible in terms of Rank's analysis. Rank maintains that the narcissistic esteem of one's own ego, the horror of the destruction of the self leads to the creation of an image similar to the self in the double, thus assuring oneself of a second life (1971, 85). Likewise, the Kid's concept of his role as a double is in line with Lacan's exploration of the infant's identification with its reflection in the mirror. Lacan concludes that it is a gratifying experience since it lets the infant gain a sense of wholeness whereas

before it experienced itself as shapeless, all without effort (Lacan 1977, 1-7). Similarly, Allbee's domain is the "human mind"; he possesses his dupe (Asa) and lets him see his own image through himself. As such, the figure of Allbee gives an impetus to the idea of the double and gives some benefits to the act of possession and to the theme of acting. Leventhal's recognition of Allbee coincides with the appearance of a woman who was "painted heavily" and looked "like a chorus girl who had slipped out of the theater for a breath of air" (28). The woman not only intensifies the sense of acting, but also serves to relate theater to artificiality, false appearance and deceit. By associating women with the realm of theatrical falsity, Bellow is under the influence of patriarchal norms. In his "Pleasures and Pains of Play-going," Bellow, like Plato, suggests a link between theaters and the effeminate realm of feelings. Plato regards the behavior which audiences admire "on the stage as womanish" (436) and similarly Bellow maintains "My mother used to go to the theater or to the pictures in order to have a good cry" (313). This means both are open to the accusation of performing gender roles because they, to borrow Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's words, "take the privileged male of the white race as a norm for universal humanity" and claim that woman is merely an inferior "kind of troping of that truth of man" (1989, 517-8).

On another occasion, women are also associated with the theater but they help Asa see the reality of human suffering compared with the artificiality of acted performance. From his window Asa, like a spectator, sees a woman harshly beaten by a crazy man, probably her husband. Her dress is ripped from neck to waist and her heels are knocked on the pavement. Another woman is also swung round by the same man. What adds insult to injury is that all this happens in the presence of two soldiers who regard the

human suffering of the two women as a theatrical performance. They watch with "an air of being present at an entertainment especially arranged for them, and seemed to laugh to themselves from time to time" (81). The severe attack on the two women reflects the sado-masochistic nature of the two soldiers and of the betrayed husband who is perhaps also only acting, playing a role which society expects from him.

Importantly, Asa's place at his window watching the beating at the street provides a literal outdoor theater here, making it likely that we must consider the whole world as a stage. Furthermore, the scene indicates the doubleness of role played by each character: each is potentially both spectator of the actions played by others and actor on a wider stage. To be more specific, the two soldiers are an audience, watching the beating scene, and yet seen as, actors by another audience - Asa. More important, the scene signals that Bellow's notion of acting and audience alternates between two levels: the falsity of acted performances compared to the truth of real human suffering, the danger inherent in the role of detached spectators compared to the significance of engaged audiences. What is meant here is that the two soldiers who watch the suffering of the two women for their own amusement lose much of their humanity because they regard the scene as an acted performance, while Asa, who focuses on the reality of their suffering achieves a deeper insight into the performance going on before him and, consequently, permits a change within himself; he develops a moral standpoint so to speak. He is terribly repelled and begins to doubt his immunity to corruption. He fears that the "strange things, savage things" that "hung near him all the time in trembling drops "might fall on him (81-82). In so behaving, Asa presents himself in such a way as to have a profound effect upon the audience/readers. Asa manages to become an actor-audience who, to borrow Goffman's

words (211), treats himself as a part of the audience/reader team and the readers/audience are made to treat themselves as a part of Asa's team. This is a great advance in Asa's position, and hence Bellow's estimation of the theater, as he can eventually get into what Goffman calls "collusive intimacies" with team-mates if he seeks successful performance and "back-stage relaxation" (206).

So in asserting a link between the theater and artificiality, Bellow does not underestimate theater and hence the profession of acting. On the contrary, Bellow is attracted to theaters and assigns to them a serious function. In the same article mentioned above, Bellow is critical of actors for offering a poor, unconvincing theatrical performance: "The actors seem to have no notion of play. I don't know why. Is it too frivolous to play in the theater? Does it lead to disrespect of their theories? The behaviour of actors is very businesslike" (Bellow, 1954 312). Bellow's attitude here is reminiscent of Hamlet's view of acting upon receiving a group of actors about to play to the King. Both believe that the theater image comes to show life its true image. Hamlet says, "Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor: suit the action to the word, the word to the action" (*Hamlet*, III, ii, 14-16). This means that the acting imagery as discussed by Hamlet and Bellow opposes the realm of falsehood indicating thus an advance in authenticity.

The ideas are reflected in the arguments between Asa and Allbee. When Asa denies knowing about Allbee's being in the park, Allbee, with his ringed and angry-looking eyes, "appeared to be saying that it was effrontery and bad acting to deny it " (29) and claims Asa is pretending, not suiting the word to the action. This means that Allbee too regards "bad acting" as unconvincing theatrical performance connected with false and

shameful behaviour. Significantly their mutual accusations are conclusive evidence that both are "*rhetoricus*" but try to appear "*seriosus*"; each is acting and possesses a playwright's consciousness and attempts to force the other into a role that fits his script. This is the essence of the rhetorician. Allbee creates a script about a Jewish conspiracy planned by both Harkavy and Leventhal, one in which the latter assumes an important role: " 'Then you went in and deliberately insulted Rudiger, put on some act with him, called him filthy names, deliberately insulted him to get me in bad' " (33). What Allbee means is that he belongs to "the effective dominant culture", to use Raymond Williams's model of "hegemony", which, as the name suggests, incorporates the "central system of practices, meanings and values, which we can properly call dominant and effective" (1977, 383). But Asa, instead of integrating within this society, Allbee intends to say, presents himself as "opposition", i. e. "someone who finds a different way to live and wants to change the society in its light" (385). In a way, Asa finds himself in the same situation as the merchant in "The tale of the Trader and the *Jinni*" from *Thousand and One Nights*. Out of the blue, both the merchant and Asa are accused of ruining the *Jennies*' lives. In response, Leventhal writes a counter-script in which he gives Allbee the role of a bad actor, a *Jinni*, whose utterances are, to use Austin's words, "constative" i.e., they cannot perform the action to which they refer (Austin 1975, 1); in other words, Asa means that Allbee's accusations are pure rhetoric, in the spirit of the definition of Paul de Man, who asserts that rhetoric "radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration" (1979, 255). In short, Allbee's charges are to be taken lightly and Asa's response must fit the stimulus. Moreover, Asa saves for himself the role of a serious person who is too proud to accept direct responsibility for Allbee's

deterioration and too insistent on his role as a moral person to let Allbee regard him otherwise: "Just like a bad actor to accuse everyone of bad acting' " (29), Asa thinks of Allbee. Asa believes his utterances, to use Austin's words, are "performatives" which actually perform the action to which they refer (1975, 1); he speaks "pure grammar" which, as Paul de Man defines, "postulates the possibility of unproblematic, dyadic meaning, and pure logic, which postulates the possibility of the universal truth of meaning" (1979, 255). Apparently both refuse to take part in the script offered by the other and their dramatic dialogue comes to a halt as a result. But Allbee's accusations raise in Leventhal a violent storm of fears of anti-Semitism, of his own failure and of the possibility that Allbee's charges, like the merchant's, might have had some grounds, that is, he might have committed degraded deeds. To defend himself, he denounces Allbee's bad acting publicly, but secretly he sets out upon the journey of self-discovery.

From the first encounter onward, Allbee pops up when he is least expected and leaves suddenly. He surprises Asa at the park, at the restaurant and at home. He occupies his room and his bed. In short, he literally possesses Asa. But Asa does not change his policy although he can be angry on certain occasions. All through his meetings with Allbee, Asa focuses on Allbee's bad acting, which he offers as the main reason for Allbee's deterioration. Asa is infuriated by Allbee's behaviour, which he sees as marked by his filth, evil and sexuality and is enraged by the degradation of his theatrical performance, namely his lies and pretence, false appearances and clowning. On hearing Allbee's story about his wife, Asa decides he is "acting, lying" (66). While at the restaurant with Philip, Asa cannot stand Allbee's theatrical acting for it is poor, false and unconvincing: "He was playing to the crowd and, standing there, his head hung

awkwardly forward, he could hardly keep from laughing at the sensation he was making. And yet there was the false note, the note of impersonation in what he did" (99). For the most part Asa associates Allbee's conduct with clowning, which Asa considers a debased kind of performance. During their second encounter, for example, Asa wonders if Allbee means to give him "the same song and dance" (61). Once Asa learns that his own intuition does not betray him, he throws Allbee out of his house: " The nerve of him, that damned clown" (69) murmurs Asa fiercely. In their fifth encounter Asa shouts at Allbee to "stop this damned clowning" (137). After he catches Allbee with a whore in his home, Asa huskily cries: "You dirty phoney!....You ugly bastard counterfeit. I said it because you're such a liar, with your phoney tears and your wife's name in your mouth, every second word. The poor woman, a fine life she must have had with you, a freak like you, out of a carnival" (221).

Allbee, Asa believes, exhibits all the elements that constitute a bad actor, the negative version of the rhetorical man: filth, phoniness, deceptiveness, dishonesty and clowning. Thus, Asa derives the conclusion that Allbee is "not human" (221).

Although Asa tries to keep calm in the teeth of Allbee's attacks, he is mesmerized when he feels that Allbee possesses him utterly:

But suddenly he had a strange, close consciousness of Allbee, of his face and body, a feeling of intimate nearness such as he had experienced in the zoo when he had imagined himself at Allbee's back, seeing with microscopic fitness the lines in his skin, and the smallest of his hairs, and breathing in his odour. The same sensation was repeated; he 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. (133)

To assure his full possession of Asa, Allbee brushes Asa's hair making him suffer under the spell of his touch. The same feeling is experienced on another occasion and Asa is terrorized: "At this moment Leventhal felt Allbee's presence, all that concerned him, like a great tiring weight" (186). And Asa observes that the strange eyes of Allbee bear a resemblance to his: "He 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" (139). Asa's dread of his sensed intimacy to Allbee is a subconscious acknowledgement of Allbee's possession of him, that Allbee is his double, his alter ego (Newman 1996, 9-14; Rodrigues 50-51; Jonathan Baumbach, 1965; and Robert R. Dutton 1971, 46-50), his dark side with which he refuses to come to terms, as he must if he is to achieve the exactly human. Accordingly, Asa as a spectator starts reviewing his past experience with Allbee seriously in an attempt to discover his real goal in life.

Significantly the relationship between Asa and Allbee is reminiscent of the theatricality of exorcism, the casting out of devils, a custom manifested in the late 16th century. In the process of restating Samuel Harsnett, Stephen J. Greenblatt assumes that the significance of exorcism "lies not in the intrinsic quality of the ritual nor in the precise character of the marks of possession." Rather, "it lies entirely in the impression made upon the spectators" (in Davis ed., 1989, 433). Although the performers, both the possessed and the exorcist, appear to be absorbed in their roles, their real goal is to catch the attention of "the crowds of beholders," resumes Greenblatt (433).

Obviously the theatricality of the exorcism applies *ceteris paribus* to the relationship between Asa and Allbee. In this connection, we may consider the element of acted performances, their histrionic manipulations and the rhetoric which characterizes their encounters. Moreover, each pretends to be possessed by the other and attempts to exorcise himself of the other's bad influence, or, evil. Extrapolating further, we may also propose that the real object of Asa's performances with Allbee is the crowd of spectators: the readers and of course Asa, who often watches the performances of Allbee, and who watches himself watching the performance of Allbee (in the zoo). At any rate, the audience is given a central role to play. According to Greenblatt, the theater of exorcism

elicits from us complicity rather than belief. Demonic possession is responsibly marked out for the audience as a theatrical fraud, designed to gull the unsuspecting: monsters such as the fiend with the thousand noses are illusions most easily imposed on the old, the blind, and the despairing; evil comes not from the mysterious other world of demons but from this world, the world of court and family intrigue. (439)

The audience are not passive spectators detached from the performance which is going on before them; they become engaged actors asked to play a role which conforms to the projections of the performers and the scriptwriters. This is exactly what Walter J. Ong S. J. means by his expression "a game of literacy", which describes the relationship between the writer and the readers: "A reader has to play the role in which the author has cast him, which seldom coincides with his role in the rest of actual life" (1972, 87). So the question is: what is the content, the nature of the audience's role? Spectators, Greenblatt assumes, are asked to regard the performance before them as acted, unreal; the theater of exorcism does not claim to reflect reality, and so evil on the stage is not real; it exists only in the real world.

What Greenblatt assumes comes to support the notion of Allbee as Asa's double, i.e., Allbee as the devil is an illusion; the real "Allbee" exists inside Asa himself. The

introduction of Asa as doubled audience requires from him deeper consideration of his moral values, his role in the world, his philosophy and attitudes. But if Asa is doubled, to borrow Newman's idea (Newman 1998), so are the readers. As audience/readers of *The Victim*, we read of the imaginary audience for which Asa and Allbee are providing their acted performances. As such, we are appeased because we are given a moment of relief which results from the sense that evil exists inside the imaginary audience. But since the fictionalized audience lies in us, we become, to use Ong's expression, "reflective sharers of experience" (87).

#### Notes

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