

The Search to Be Human in *Dangling Man*

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Bellow's first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944), is about a man named Joseph who does not know how to integrate himself in American life without losing the spiritual value of his isolation from society. Influenced by the current milieu of the time of modernism and existentialism, Bellow presents an alienated hero who seeks to find meaning in a hostile environment.¹ Written as a diary, the novel's principal audience is himself as he details the life of a young man who believes that spiritual enlightenment can be obtained by isolating himself from society in order to study the thinkers of the Enlightenment. As the months pass, Joseph erupts into anti-social behavior, quarrels with his friends and relatives, and succumbs to outbursts of paranoia and violent behavior. At the end of the novel he admits that his experiment has been a failure and that his search for meaning cannot be conducted in this manner. Reduced to the same common physical, social, and historical denominator as everyone else, Joseph joins the Army to live a life of regular hours and regimentation.

Initial reviews of the novel were positive and focused on the theme of Joseph's alienation from society: a "dangling hero" who faces the disillusionment of his age.² Subsequent criticisms have explored Joseph representing an alternate set of values for the modern age with his attempts to subvert the idea of an objective reality subscribed by collective assent.³ Other critics have looked at how the work is a continuation of the European form of the novel or how it is a metaphor of America recovering from the Great Depression and World War II.⁴ However, I want to focus on a theme that Joseph Baim raises in his criticism where he argues that *Dangling Man* should be conceived as a struggle between reason and nihilism with neither succeeding when the protagonist has an ultimate breakthrough in intuitive experience.⁵ Continuing this theme of Baim's, I will argue that Joseph's search for spiritual fulfillment, to be "human" in the present age, unfortunately fails because, although he finally understands the gratuitous nature of life, he remains trapped within his own rationality and ultimately cannot escape from it – a legacy from his studies of the Enlightenment.

The theme of the novel is recorded in the two interviews that Joseph has with his alter ego, whom he calls *Tu As Raison Aussi*. In these sessions, Joseph denies it is impossible to be "human" in the present age, although the present is not as bad as it has been made out to be: "It's too easy to abjure it or detest it. Too narrow. Too cowardly."⁶ However, the "ideal constructions" of the past, noble characters like "the Humanistic full man, the courtly lover, the knight, the ecclesiastic," can no longer serve as useful archetypes to guide people like Joseph in the present age (102). Ideal constructions are a product of belief and are sustainable only with the conviction that it is part of an enduring reality. To lose such a belief is to ask "what of the gap between the ideal construction and the real world, the truth?" (102). No answer is provided to Joseph. The

result is an intellectual and spiritual paralysis from which Joseph tries to extract himself in the hope to become “human.”

Before this crisis, Joseph was a man of thought and a reader of books, with a particular interest in the Enlightenment. It is crucial to note that throughout the novel Joseph refuses to sacrifice his reason, even when his rational hopes in search of meaning collapses: “what were we given reason for? To discover the blessedness of unreason? That’s a very poor argument” (98). The belief in the potency of reason would explain Joseph’s special interest in the Enlightenment. To perceive and explain the world rationally was one of the great aspirations of the Enlightenment and of Joseph before his crisis.

But the inability to anchor himself beyond his own reason creates the very crisis that engulfs Joseph. He resists against the seductions of *Tu As Raison Aussi*, but, in the end, the case for reason is unable to justify its own existence. With reason unable to support an intellectual and spiritual foundation for Joseph, all he is left is the force of his own will: “Out of my own strength it was necessary for me to return the verdict for reason, in its partial inadequacy, and against the advantages of its surrender” (47). But Joseph avoids the trap of a Nietzschean will-to-power when he visits his childhood room in his father’s house where he has a sudden vision. Recognizing the transience of both his childhood and of the room, Joseph concludes that life is fundamentally one of grace:

Recently I had begun to feel old, and it occurred to me that I might be concerned with age merely because I might never attain any great age, and that there might be a mechanism in us that tried to give us all of life when there was danger of being cut off [...] This rather ordinary, and, in some ways mean, room had for twelve years been a standard site, the bearded Persian under the round stones and the water color, fixtures of my youth [...] I understood it to be a revelation of the ephemeral agreement by which we live and pace ourselves. I look around at the restored walls. This place which I avoided ordinarily, had great personal significance for me. (139)

The mechanism that gives “us all of life when there was danger of being cut off” is the fundamental feature of reality that makes our existence one of surplus, a gift that permits us the freedom to choose our own intellectual and spiritual paths. The childhood room, which Joseph usually avoids, has special significance only to him and no one else, an event that transcends one’s reason or will-to-power. Human arrangements, the “ephemeral agreements by which we live and pace ourselves” are fundamentally unnecessary and therefore gratuitous in nature.

Tragically for Joseph, this insight does not take root in him. Instead of embracing that life is essentially a gift for us to cherish, he returns to his reason to observe that “Birds flew this space [his room]. It may be gone fifty years hence. Such reality, I thought is actually very dangerous, very treacherous. It should not be trusted” (139). Seeking truth, reason must be retreat or face annihilation, for it confronts a reality which it cannot understand. At the end of the novel, Joseph admits to himself that he has failed to use his freedom, his gift of existence, and that his self-

identity has become increasingly fractured as his reason is unable to find ultimate meaning to what it means to be “human.” To preserve himself and his sanity, Joseph abandons his reason for society’s arbitrary “agreements” by joining the Army.

Paradoxically, Joseph’s reliance upon his reason leads him to emotional outbursts throughout the novel. Although he mentions on the first page of the novel that he will not be the stoic hero in the Hemingway tradition – he is not going to endure the “inhibitory effect” of “closemouthed straight-forwardness” – but rather express his emotions at length both to himself and to others.⁷ However, in trying to express his feelings of who he is and not being inhibited by family, friends, and societal opinion in his journal, Joseph fails to find a self in his experimental confinement. Instead of discovering a full-formulated self, Joseph’s unconstrained pursuit leads to irrational and eventually violent behavior which he records but upon which he does not reflect. It is only when he fights with a fellow boarder does Joseph become jolted out of his irrationality and closes his experiment.

Like Joseph’s reason in not being able to provide answers to what it means to be “human,” so does his experiment in unconstrained emotions end in failure. This experiment that marked the beginning of the novel is replaced with Joseph enlisting in the Army, something that one would expect of a protagonist in a Hemingway novel. In fact, Joseph recognizes that Hemingway’s stoicism is a response to the same question of what it means to be “human” in this present age:

Great pressure is brought to bear to make us undervalue ourselves. [...] We are schooled in quietness and, if one of us takes his measures occasionally, he does so coolly, as if he were examining his fingernails, not his soul [...] Who can be the earnest huntsman of himself when he knows he is in turn a quarry? Or nothing so distinctive as quarry, but one of a shoal, driven toward the weirs. (86)

In a world without belief, how does one find a way to live, to be “human”? Joseph’s answer suggests the Hemingway model could be such a path, even though it is an “ideal construction” that is ultimately is illusionary.⁸ The ironic ending of the novel underscores this point:

Hurray for regular hours!
And for the supervision of the spirit!
Long live regimentation! (140)

Clearly to be “human” is not to adopt “regular hours” and “supervision of the spirit,” but to recognize that life is one of grace from which we can choose and live a life of the spirit. The tragedy of Joseph is that he comes to this realization but later rejects it in the name of reason, but reason is not able to furnish him meaning to his life and thus leads him to surrender to an ideal construction that is neither real nor appealable. The result is he becomes relieved of his “self-determination” with his “freedom canceled” for societal authority.

Joseph inability to cope with his freedom is a result of his program to become a self-educated man, an ideal construction of eighteenth-century rationalism. But when it comes to reflection upon himself, we find his thoughts are unsorted, with various musings here and there but no concluding statements. Instead of philosophical examination, Joseph writes of the quotidian, as when he observes himself in the mirror:

[...] I observed new folds near my mouth and, around my eyes and the root of my nose, marks that had not been there a year before. It is not pleasant to find such changes. But, tying my tie, I shrugged them off as inevitable, the price of experience, an outlay that had better be made ungrudgingly, since it was bound in any case to be collected. (127)

The most intellectual passages in the diary are Joseph's conversations with *Tu As Raison Aussi* that resembles a character from a Dostoevsky's novel.⁹ The final exchange is one of self-mockery:

"How seriously you take this," cried *Tu As Raison Aussi*. "It's only a discussion. The boy's teeth are chattering. Do you have a chill?" He ran to get a blanket from the bed. I said, faintly, "I'm all right." He tucked the blanket around me and, in great concern, wiped my forehead and sat by me until nightfall. (123)

The lack of an orderly systematic way to organize his thoughts and his fear of abstract discourse in general are a reaction to such thought found in the character Jimmy Burns. In the past Joseph and Jimmy had a close working relationship. He is described by Joseph as having "dreams of becoming an American Robespierre. The rest have compromised themselves to the ears, but *he* still believes in the revolution. Bloods will run, the power will change hands, and then the state will wither away according to the in-ex-or-able logic of history" (22). Burns has systematized his rationalism to such an extent that "He had all the critical streets marked in code for cellars and roofs, the paving material, the number of newsstands at each corner that could be thrown into barricades [...] He traced them through City Hall Records [...] That's boy is mad [...] He's never been sane" (22–23). Joseph's encounter with someone like Burns, who has organized his thinking to the minutiae of irrelevancy in order to support violence, repelled him to such an extent that he rejects any systemization of his thought, much less abstract thought. He has seen what it has done to his ex-comrade.

This conflict between abstract, organized thought and individual existence is manifested when Joseph makes a scene to force Burns to recognize his existence. Initially Burns ignores his former colleague in the restaurant, but he is forced to acknowledge Joseph's existence when Joseph halts squarely before Burns. As much as the ideologue may try, he or she cannot think someone out of existence. Reality cannot be ignored.

Joseph's failure in systematic, abstract thought therefore is what actually preserves him. Although he seeks to discover what it means to be "human" through his reason, Joseph's refusal

to conceptualize his thought in an abstract and systematic manner allows him to be in touch with reality as it exists. Whereas Jimmy Burns has reasoned himself out of reality, Joseph remains in touch with the world because the reality of someone like Burns repels him from using his reason abstractly. The tragedy for Joseph is that he eventually remains locked in the epistemological mode of reason, even when he encounters moments of grace as when he visits his childhood room. The reason he employs may be better than the one Burns uses – concrete in attention and unsorted in its manner – but it is unable to furnish any significant meaning for his existence.

Thus, in his first novel, Bellow suggests that the search for spiritual fulfillment, to be “human” in the present age, requires more than the “ideal constructions” of Enlightenment reason, Hemingway’s stoicism, Nietzschean will-to-power, or the unconstrained emotions of nineteenth-century Romanticism. As Joseph admits, his experiment has been failure. But the experiment failed not because Joseph did not find spiritual fulfillment; rather, the experiment failed because Joseph refused to reject the “ideal constructions” of reason when he experienced reality’s life-affirming and gratuitous nature when he visited his childhood room. In other words, Bellow points out the failure of archetypes to guide us in our lives because the experience of reality will always be greater and more resourceful than any account of it.

The irony is that Joseph’s failure of thought is what actually preserves him: life’s resistance to complete conceptualization contains an impulse for us to continue to live: “there might be a mechanism in us that tried to give us all of life when there was danger of being cut off,” as Joseph reflected in his childhood room (139). The failure of his experiment does not lead Joseph to suicide, as one would expect, but to join the Army. Joseph’s search for his special fate will be conducted in society and not in isolation from it. To be “human” therefore is to be part of a community and not try to escape from it.

Spiritual fulfillment, to be “human,” is to not to close the “gap between the ideal construction and the real world” but instead to accept the real world as it is (102). The various ideal constructions all fail for Joseph in his search to be “human” because reality cannot be idealized or conceptualized. At best, Bellow implies in his first novel, one can only experience it with the hope that this experience will be one that is life-affirming and gratuitous in nature. This is where we truly dangle as human beings: in our encounter with reality that reveals its genuine nature to us not as despair but one of hope.

Notes

1. Lehan 1959, 181–83.
2. Paige 1944, 244–45 and Wilson 1944, 78, 81–82; also De Vries 1944, 3; Fearing 1944, 5, 15; and Heppenstall 1946, 488–89.
3. Glenday 1979, 139–48; Ikeda 1985, 29–36.
4. Brans 1984, 435–47; Reichman 1996, 28–42.
5. Baim 1970, 28–34.

6. Bellow 2003, 99–100. All subsequent in-text citations will be from this reference.
7. For an interesting comparison between Joseph and Robert Cohn in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, refer to Baumbach 1965, 36; also Wisse 1971, 79–91.
8. It is interesting that Bellow cuts short of any further discussion of Hemingway's ideal construction in this novel. It is not visited again until *Henderson the Rain King*. In this novel, Bellow directly refutes the notion that Hemingway's stoicism can be translated into any type of social ethics. It is only when Henderson dispenses with modern philosophies and ethics, e.g., existentialism, is he able to able some spiritual fulfillment when he opens himself up to the divine. Refer to Cecil 1972, 296–300; Majdiak 1971, 125–46; and Markos 1971, 193–205.
9. The influence of Dostoevsky in Bellow's works is acknowledged by the author himself. Bellow has particularly singled out Dostoevsky's performance in the "Grand Inquisitor" of *The Brothers Karamazov* as an outstanding example of thinking in fiction. See Bellow 1965, 1446; also Lyons 1978, 45–50.

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