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WAR, IDLENESS AND HUMANITY IN SAUL BELLOW'S *DANGLING MAN*

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Dangling Man is a diary written during the Second World War; Joseph is expecting his draft papers and has entered a critical period of idleness. This article starts by considering the close relationship between war and opportunism, which situates Joseph's alienation in a precise socio-historical context. It then draws a parallel between the hero's crisis and the rise of Sartre's existentialism before examining the question of the young man's approach to reality as a writer and a reader.

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Dangling Man (1944) is Saul Bellow's first novel. It is written in the form of a private diary composed between December 14, 1942 and April 9, 1943 by a young married man expecting his draft papers. Feeling sure his departure was imminent, Joseph quit his job and, as he starts his first entry, is about to begin his seventh month of idleness. Confined in his furnished apartment, no longer a real civilian and not yet a soldier, he finds himself going through a severe identity crisis and enters into a painful introspective process.

Socially, war imposes itself as the concrete illustration of the inevitability of a choice thanks to which an individual may find his place. Joseph could enlist before call-up at any time or seize upon the numerous professional openings offered by the army. In that context, his quietism is akin to nonconformism; his idleness is all the more alienating since it might turn out to be anti-American. That is why this article will first consider the close relationship between war and opportunism, which situates Joseph's alienation in a clearly delineated socio-historical context. It will appear that his prevarication, his solitude and his existential trouble make him a modernist (anti-)hero, in the grip of historical chaos and facing an agonizing subjectivity. In the light of the existentialist theories that were already pervading the times, his choice cannot be merely ontological; his enlisting before call-up, for instance, would contribute to alter the historical order, which could affect all of humanity. His idleness, which

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estranges him from his close relations and from his times, is actually akin to a quest for humanity that will drive him from the verge of schizophrenia to paradoxical self-renunciation. The end of this paper will sketch Joseph's complex relation with writing, which is part and parcel of his singular course.

War and opportunism

From the very beginning of his diary, Joseph presents himself as rebel; he considers that his era is submitted to the will of the hardboiled man, with an innate capacity for adapting to history: "Today, the code of the athlete, of the tough boy—an American inheritance, I believe, from the English gentleman—that curious mixture of striving, asceticism, and rigor, the origins of which trace back to Alexander the Great—is stronger than ever." (7) Such worthy heirs to empire builders should find in the Second World War an outlet for their bellicose nature. Yet Joseph is more at odds with their ideological imperialism, which is incompatible with his introspective approach: "to keep a journal nowadays is considered a kind of self-indulgence, a weakness, and in poor taste." (7) Mainstream ideology imposes itself through opportunism—not so much in supporting the war itself, but in seizing the multiple commercial or professional opportunities it presents to people of goodwill. That is how one of Joseph's former friends became an engineer following a few months' officer training course and another one, who had been encouraged to drop out, now "has an excellent job in a war plant." (83) In the same way, business is now booming for Amos, the ambitious brother, who cannot understand why Joseph keeps refusing his extravagant presents. This gives rise to violent quarrels and Joseph regularly comes under attack from his whole family; when his sister-in-law mentions possible restrictions in the number of shoe purchases, his fifteen-year-old niece jumps at the chance to rebuke her uncle's idleness: "He isn't on his feet much" (42). Amos thinks his brother is utterly unrealistic by not taking the initiative to enlist: "It isn't only the waiting, but he'll miss out on his chances of advancement. He ought to get in there and become an Officer Candidate." (43) Thus the family abides by a strict Protestant ethic—which is all the more ironic since they are Jewish and prove totally insensitive to Joseph's religious fatalism:

"When are you going?"

"I don't know. Whenever God wills."

This amused them. (43)

Faced with his family's implacably pragmatic attitude, the hero's moral and philosophical references prove as useless as his subtle religious allusion:

"As I see it, the whole war's a misfortune. I don't want to raise myself through it. [...] Many men carry their ambitions over from civilian life and don't mind climbing upon the backs of the dead [...]. It's no disgrace to be a private, you know. Socrates was a plain foot soldier [...]."

"Socrates, eh?" said Amos. "Well, that's a good and sufficient reason."

(43)

Blinded by his optimism, Amos—and the hardboiled America he epitomizes—remains utterly impervious to the arguments of his brother, for whom the chaos of history precludes any materialistic finality to existence. Joseph's angst is rooted in the absence of any revelation whatsoever in that modern apocalypse, which still makes him feel closer to a humanity torn between despair and annihilation. In such conditions, the very notion of future seems doomed:

"Well, who the devil has one?"

"Everybody," Amos said. "I have."

"Well, you're in luck. There are many people, hundreds of thousands, who have had to give up all thought of the future. There is no personal future any more. That's why I can only laugh at you when you tell me to look out for my future in the Army, in that tragedy. I wouldn't stake a pin on my future. And maybe I wouldn't have yours..." (44)

Facing the incomprehension of opportunistic America entails verbal clashes and even violent physical confrontations, as when Joseph, pushed to the limit of his patience by his niece's insinuations, accusations and insults, ends up giving her a spanking. The family eventually interrupts the punishment, sides with her and will suspect Joseph of theft, cruelty and even sexual perversion.

The hero's existential trials remain misunderstood by the shopkeepers too, who also benefit from the troubled times. For example, a bartender whom he tells

about his drafting collects his last cents without any qualms (122). His tailor charges fifteen cents for a job he performed for free the year before and doubles the price of his suits following the rise in some of his customers' living standards (notably those who used to receive welfare benefits and are now working for the war effort). Such an attitude is encouraged by the political leaders, who try to impose their absurdist economic theories. The tailor's intellectual guide happens to be ex-President Hoover, who despite his disastrous handling of the Great Crisis, keeps advocating wildcat capitalism as a panacea and seems to have become in 1942 the tutelary figure of American society. In his diary, Joseph uses the term "business" just once, to mention his daily activities, and takes the precaution of adding brackets: "In the morning I dress and go about my 'business'" (82) ; evidently, his "business" is not America's.

Idleness and the quest for humanity

Unlike the opportunists, Joseph does not find a spiritual guide. At that critical moment, he is no longer who he was but he does not know who he has become or who he is becoming; he is suspended between two poles, embodied by two characters: John Pearl and Alf Steidler, two old acquaintances with radically opposed temperaments.

Steidler is a confirmed parasite who lives off his family and who feels he has affinities with Joseph: "he assumes we are in the same boat" (98). Yet the latter cannot identify with a grotesque double who has decided to become idle once and for all, whom he suspects is evil ("we are practicing some terrible vice together" [98]) and who managed to get declared unfit for service as schizoid. As for Pearl, he is an unsuccessful painter who works at the same time as a designer in an advertising agency. As a real artist he presents a positive example by suggesting that collaborating with an alienating society does not necessarily preclude moral integrity. Far from withdrawing from the world, like Joseph, Pearl distances himself through imagination and humor. He is able to ruin the sale of a painting by pretending to apply market rules to the artistic realm and thus to modify the price of a still-life according to the type, the size and the number of flowers that appear on it (60). Joseph feels he does not measure up and such skills do not create any desire to emulate Pearl. On the contrary, once again, they bring him face to face with his limitations and his unanswered questioning: "He has escaped a trap [...]. He can maintain himself. Is it because he is an artist? I believe it is. Those acts of the

imagination save him. But what about me? I have no talent for that sort of thing. [...] Is there some kind of personal effort I can substitute for the imagination?" (61)

In the course of his idle days, Joseph attempts to dilute his vague guilt in rituals supposed to connect him to the world. He thus regularly walks around his neighborhood but often changes restaurant, so as not to have to strike up acquaintances. He is truly like a newborn; his environment is circumscribed to his immediate surroundings and he is mostly driven by the satisfaction of his oral desire, longing to recover original physical sensations: "At half-past eight I eat breakfast. Afterward I walk home and settle down to read the paper in the rocker by the window." (11) He also literally devours his newspaper: "I cover it from end to end, ritualistically, missing not a word. First come the comic strips (I follow them because I have done so since childhood, and I compel myself to read even the newest, most unpalatable ones)" (11). Given that context, the misadventure that happens a few days later turns out to be quite meaningful when he gets invited by his friend Myron. Myron wants to recommend him for a temporary job and suggests they go to a restaurant he used to patronize when he was a political activist. There Joseph meets Burns, a former fellow traveler, a faithful communist, who starts by ignoring him before pretending not to recognize him. Joseph ends up leaving having caused a scandal. Considering Burns's somewhat banal attitude, Joseph's exasperation may seem disproportionate but it actually results from the negation of himself not so much as a political being (for he had long forsaken all such illusions by giving up militant commitment) but as a social being, which happens to be Joseph's only identity certainty: "My talent, if I have one at all, is for being a citizen" (61). The impact of that rebuff is all the stronger since it occurs in a restaurant, a temple to orality and where a frustrated Joseph can feel hurt in his deepest original psychic substratum. One notes that it is also in a restaurant, during the second course, that a few moments later Joseph is to claim "a right to be spoken to. It's the most elementary thing in the world." (23) Capitalists and communists go hand in hand condemning Joseph for nonconformism, which adds to his feeling of the inanity of all comment and makes him face his utter indecisiveness. He takes the opportunity to press Myron not to pursue his job offer, though it would have been a way of ending the joblessness that put his couple in dire straits.

The unfair sharing of daily tasks between him and his wife sometimes drives him to carry out duties that take him out of his isolation. That is how, three months

later, he goes to the bank to cash a check for his wife and encounters a stubborn clerk who will not accept his identity papers and, when enquiring about Joseph's job, calls him by his first name. Just like in the restaurant, Joseph is thus infantilized and shares the lot of many other American rejects: "as though I were an immigrant or a young boy or a Negro" (116). Since the clerk is not moved by Joseph's imminent drafting either, the meeting also ends in an altercation. This new disavowal confirms the failure of Joseph's political striving to join the mainstream. His social indetermination reflects his psychic indecisiveness and condemns him in the context of institutional capitalistic America, which he had managed to put up with by sacrificing his ideological convictions.

Joseph's attitude may seem contradictory, since such situations result from deliberate choices: after all he quit his job before being drafted and deliberately decided to put an end to his activism. He is also keen on getting recognized, while he admits he does not know who he has become. His life as a recluse even suggests he wants to disappear from the world; the writing of his diary leads him to confine himself in his sordid bedroom, in a sordid house, in a sordid neighborhood in a Chicago that is just as sordid. Though he feels alienated from his environment, Joseph does not wish to become annihilated in it; he considers his physical and psychic confinement as inevitable in human existence: "we struggle perpetually to free ourselves" (102). That is why his reclusion does not partake of selfishness only, insofar as it plunges him into himself only to provide him with his essential humanity. His reflection is in tune with the "existentialist humanism" that was being defined at the same time. Sartre believed that anxiety has to do with the burden felt by an individual faced with an inevitable existential choice ("what is not possible is not to choose" [9a]) and whose issue surpasses him, for "When a man commits himself to anything, fully realizing that he is not only choosing what he will be, [...] is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind" (Sartre, 3b). Joseph instinctively perceives the necessity to become involved in a mission, which would be the equivalent of the Sartrean "project" and which would impart transcendence on his idleness and his confinement: "The quest, [...] whether it be for money, for notoriety, reputation, increase of pride, whether it leads us to thievery, slaughter, sacrifice, the quest is one and the same. [...] its final end is the desire for pure freedom." (102) In that context, all individuals around him, be they motivated by social success, the advent of a utopian society or even by the war, make up a

structuring community into which it is important to fit. Yet Joseph does not find any solace in such a conviction for it imposes itself as a revelation and not as the outcome of a strictly analytical approach: "I do not entirely understand this impulse." (102)

The truth is that his intellectual abilities have become ineffective in the urgent schizoid crisis he is going through. His alienation drives him to dissociate himself from the one he used to be but without finding an alternative to the one he describes in the third person: "For legal purposes I am this older self, and if a question of my identity were to arise I could do nothing but point out to my attributes of yesterday. I have not tried to bring myself up to date, either from indifference or from fear. Very little about the Joseph of a year ago pleases me." (18) His self-diagnosis is uncompromising: "on close examination he proves to be somewhat peculiar" (19). Yet the systematic use of the present tense in the evocation of supposedly bygone days raises doubts as to their being over, all the more since one recognizes in the description of the former Joseph traits that perfectly fit the diarist: "Joseph suffers from a feeling of strangeness, of not quite belonging to the world [...]. Now, he says, all human beings share this to some extent" (21). The "now" may be seen as a conjunction or even an interjection simply meant to introduce the next sentence, which should be interpreted as a generalization expressed only from the diarist's point of view. At the same time the ambivalence of the term could signify that this is what the former Joseph is expressing today; in that case the former and the new Josephs are one. That identity would prove logical since such a philosophical approach to humanity has a lot in common with the existentialist theories mentioned above and that the diarist is echoing. Joseph is betrayed by the complexity of his intellectual construction; he remains too close to the one he considers as his *alter ego* and can be suspected of undergoing a schizophrenic crisis.

He is desperately alone and finds the opportunity to discuss his torments only during his two meetings with an imaginary entity: The Spirit of the Alternatives, *alias* But on the Other Hand, *alias* Tu As Raison Aussi. The first time, the highly ambiguous character invites himself on his own authority: Joseph does not know who he is dealing with, but at once treats him like a human with whom he talks, argues and even shares oranges. The Spirit of the Alternatives is an integral part of his creator's spirit, a textual avatar of the double that haunts him. He imposes himself in critical moments, without Joseph's penetrating a mystery that contributes to his own

personality. Though the physical aspect of these meetings fuel the ambiguity, detecting a case of multiple personality would be excessive for the writer remains in control of his narrative. The split is characteristic of the creator's fleeting insight into his subconscious, typical of what the trailblazers of modernism were aiming at: "The other [...] was now 'inside' [...]. This inward turn set language at odds with normal discourse, pressuring it to articulate an even more intense self-consciousness [...]. The writer focused a cruelly analytic eye upon himself, making alien and objective what hitherto had been inward and personal." (Nicholls, 18) Surrealistic though they may be, the two dialogues enable Joseph to articulate his problems in rational terms and in a setting that is greatly reminiscent of a psychotherapy session: "I'm not supposed to give answers" (94) declares The Spirit of the Alternatives, who lets Joseph express himself and merely makes him face up his contradictions. Such sessions, which reflect the appeal of psychoanalytical theories on the surrealists, prove salutary to Joseph. At last he is able to put to use his rich intellect and starts by rejecting the notion of alienation as a "fool's plea" (91). A few moments later, he is made to admit that his words betrayed his thoughts and to reject political commitment just as irremediably as "an inferior activity" (92). The first encounter ends as he expels his interlocutor whom he accuses of being "two-faced" (94). It is not surprising to notice that Joseph feels some kinship between The Spirit of the Alternatives and Janus, the two-faced Roman god, for the latter is the one who "presides over the passage from peace to war [...], that is, over the departure of the army for the space outside the city" and who "watches over birth as a passage from emptiness to life."¹ His influence will indeed lead Joseph to war, out of Chicago, and will put an end to his death-like idleness.

The mythological reading better fits the literal sense of "two-faced" than its more common meaning, which is "hypocritical." For Joseph has just realized that his imagination has been unable to project him outside of himself; like his creator, The Spirit of the Alternatives cannot make a choice and remains indefinable, suspended between two states. By the time of the second meeting Joseph will have realized that his individual crisis happens to coincide with the chaos of his times. His laconic synthesis summarizes the whole modernist issue: "It's the world internalized, in short." (109) Making a choice then will be a necessity, for in agreement with the

¹ Jean-Paul Brisson, "Janus", *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, CD ROM, version 7 (my translation).

existentialist project, the hero's solution will amount to defining himself as well as humanity.²

Writing

Joseph never discloses his family name but mentions in his first diary entry that he has now become a "1 A." He does not bother to explain the sense of the military term (meaning someone fit for service), which one may assume that most contemporary readers were familiar with.³ His administrative ranking is the main reason for his idle wait and makes him all the fitter as a writer, for both "A" and "1" may be said to represent an introduction to their respective languages. The conjunction of the mathematical and of the linguistic indicates the possibility of a rational explanation to any type of questioning, by combining rigorous scientific logic and the capacity of language to express its quintessence.⁴ At the beginning of his text Joseph appears burdened by the weight of history and culture ("Joseph" is one of the most strongly marked names in Judeo-Christian tradition) and vested with all the liberating potentialities linked with the progress of analytical method. The latter happens to be a typical feature of the philosophical outlook of the Enlightenment, which Joseph studied very closely. For he is an erudite man and writing is the best tool he has for apprehending the real; he may actually put up with mankind only by

² The surrealistic context is clearly conveyed during a party as Minna, the hostess, looking for a way to kill her idleness, begs a guest to recite a surrealistic poem of his. Though he complies, Minna remains unsatisfied and gets hypnotized by one of her former lovers and composes the grotesque sight of a patient lying on her own sofa, submitted in public to the sadistic questioning and fondling of a nightmarish psychoanalyst. A cornerstone of modernism, psychoanalysis is here used as social entertainment. It only discloses to Joseph the repellent spectacle of a body stripped of any individualizing character, of an interchangeable element of mankind: "less specifically like a woman than a more generalized human being—and a sad one at that." (35) Such a simulacrum confirms how right the diarist was in the beginning as he indicted the "hardboiled" people, definitely alien to introspection.

³ As the years pass, however, the signifier loses its clarity and its growing indetermination makes it even more appropriate.

⁴ One notes the humorous similitude between "1 A" and the familiar, mirror-like expression "A 1," meaning "first class." "He's 1-A in the army and he's A-1 in my heart" is a popular song released when *Dangling Man* was being written. It is about a woman who is proud of her lover's imminent departure for the war; the "1-A" is thankful to the country that opened up career opportunities and the song extols the individual's submission to moral order:

"He's 1-A in the army and he's A-1 in my heart,
He's gone to help the country that helped him to get a start. (...)
From coast to coast in this great nation,
Each man has got a classification.
Now I've got a guy who never liked to fight,
But for Uncle Sam he'll fight all right." (Redd Evans, 1941)

In that context, Joseph's doubts make him antisocial and his "A 1" status, far from making him closer to his compatriots, is more reminiscent of the infamous "A" that the nonconformist heroine of *The Scarlet Letter* (Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1850) had been sentenced to wear as a patch on her breast in Puritan days. In his own way, Joseph too appears unfairly stigmatized by his own community, which descends from the one that had condemned Hester Prynne.

considering it as a narration: "because, whether I liked it or not, they were my generation, my society, my world. We were figures of the same plot" (18). The only community he truly feels he belongs to is that of writers or of those who write to him. Nevertheless John Pearl sends him a letter whose nostalgic undertones he receives with cynicism, while acknowledging he is touched by its scriptural character: "even such a letter buoys me up. It gives me a sense of someone else's recognition of the difficult, the sorrowful, in what to others is merely neutral, the environment" (102). His "environment" is essentially mediatized and his diary is peppered with learned quotes. Yet the reading of the daily paper now takes up most of his mornings and has permanently supplanted that of literature and philosophy: "Raising the window, I test the weather; opening the paper, I admit the world." (11) Joseph is still living under the influence of the written word but, despite what he imagines, his readings do not open him up onto the world. His daily paper does not represent the universe; it is reflected in it ("with these ruins before my eyes, sodden, themselves the color of the fateful paper that I read daily" [18]). In that respect, writing contributes to Joseph's confinement in his pessimistic vision of a pallid and disembodied world, utterly divorced from the positivism of the philosophers of the Enlightenment. Though he gets enough spare time, he cannot manage to finish the critical essays that he had attempted to devote to them the year before. Entirely based on biography, his works denote a permanent and obsessional concern for the unveiling of the individual behind the creation. His critical failure speaks volumes about the uselessness of such an approach and bodes ill for his own writing endeavor.

In the beginning, his free time can potentially put him in a position where he might become an enlightened writer whose diary would involve introspection and creation. Though he commits himself from the first entry to writing a plea against the imperialism of the American man of action, Joseph ends his text without a single reference to his original goal. Writing will have composed a regressive force dedicated to compensating for the idleness of an intellectual paradoxically led to be thrilled by becoming a man of action himself.⁵

⁵ Some of his potential readers' reactions are hardly encouraging. His wife and his mistress, for instance, lead him to consider women as irremediably impervious to the subversive role of literature and of books in general: "you might teach them to admire *Walden* but never convert them to wearing old clothes." (65)

Conclusion

Just as in *Native Son*⁶ Bigger Thomas resorts to killing so as to join mankind, Joseph is to accept war as an opportunity to find himself in harmony with the course of history: "I would be denying my innermost feelings if I said I wanted to be bypassed and spared from knowing what the rest of my generation is undergoing." (110) He might be about to sacrifice his life, not out of any religious or political conviction but merely because "there are no values outside life. There is nothing outside life." (110) Since nothing can change the fact that one is born alive, all existential reflection turns out to be pointless. So *Dangling Man* recounts the paradoxical itinerary of an intellectual who comes to terms with his times by giving up the intellectual legacy that built up these times. By becoming a mere cog in the war machine, Joseph becomes relieved of his egocentric, abstract, idle and alienating concerns, to eventually delight in the concrete, structuring imposed by society. Far from throwing the individual into doubt and despair, the chaos that is threatening modern civilization (which is also a source of anxiety) makes up its exhilarating outcome. The end of the diary presents the poetic expression of that philosophical paradox, in a terse hymn whose revelatory accents clash within the obscurantism they celebrate:

I am no longer to be held accountable for myself; I am grateful for that. I
am in other hands, relieved of self-determination, freedom canceled.
Hurray for regular hours!
And for the supervision of the spirit!
Long live regimentation! (126)

Joseph's idleness is a gestation at the end of which he is delivered by renouncing himself. Though his diary is undeniably emblematic of the existential project it still ends on the ironic image of a hero thumbing his nose at the project in question. For if defining oneself amounts to defining man, Joseph sets himself free by condemning man to deprive himself of choice and thus not be able to define himself. By giving up on the possibility of choice, Joseph undermines the bases of the theory that puts him in a position to deny the very same theory.

⁶ Richard Wright, *Native Son*, 1940.

This aporia may illustrate the demise of any attempt at conferring an objective meaning on an issue that is bound to remain desperately subjective. In that case, just like Joseph, the existentialist project might be doomed to lose its way in the course of history and might postpone over again the ineluctable advent of the eventual questioning of all certainty.

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