

Tommy in Fagman shirt: Mosaic Masochism in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*

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Jewish writers despair. Malamaud, Roth, Friedman alike. A Canada-born Jew migrated to the USA, Bellow too despairs. His *trousered*¹ protagonists are invariably alien and alienated, desperate and despairing, constantly contesting with society, with fortune, with inherent potential, with a huge 'himself' full of contradictory drives; it takes time, if not life, until they come to terms with themselves. The experience more or less involves wrong/rash choices, guilt consciousness, self-hatred, psycho-physical disorder, and a deliberately internalized construct which leaves their sense of reality crippled and them relishing suffering. This obsession with suffering is particularly vigorous in the early Belovian heroes: Joseph in *Dangling Man* (1944), Asa Leventhal in *The Victim* (1947), Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day* (1956). Tommy, however, stands apart from the other two, even Herzog, with his masochistic drive that challenges any interpretation to be complete.

Tommy is caught in the narrative on the day of *atonement*. A dour slob, he dislikes his nature but is unable and, more curiously, unwilling, to change it. He has tried lots of ways and schemes to be successful in his mission of being more than human, but he has failed, and failed, and failed! He might not like to fail, but he must like fatality. Allegedly does he luxuriate in suffering. Himself does he confess that he has always catapulted himself into a situation which his intuition warned him to be wrong. To put it simply, he knows 'it' is wrong yet--and so--he does 'it'. This is masochism. His masochism is, however, not simply a psychological disorder, a demonstration of death drive; it is also, should we say chiefly, a projection of castration complex, an assertion of rebellion against the ever-punishing superego, a sadistic drive targeted against the 'father' who ignored the subject's 'mother.' Paradoxically, this drive in Tommy also has a desire to elicit love and concern that his hard-core father, Dr. Alder, has denied sharing. It is this consciousness of and belief in the existence and exigency of love, of concern, of communication, which does not let Tommy's masochism eat on itself. Far from being either mocked at or encouraged, masochism is here

ennobled to pave the way towards an affirmation of life, of the need to live. What I wish to argue is that Tommy's masochism originated from both castration complex and a sadistic drive to irritate and attract at once the hating love object--the *chastising* father, but at the end he succeeds in coming out of this complex psychological cocoon by shedding the "pretender soul" to reach *teshuvah*² after a very Jewish way.

Jewish despair

When Rubin, the man at the newsstand comments: "Well, y'lookin' pretty sharp today," Tommy doubts this appreciation: "Am I? Do you really think so?" A person expert in self-loathing, Tommy cannot take it easily. So he turns round and sees "his reflection in the glass cupboard full of cigar boxes, among the grand seals and paper damask and the gold-embossed portraits of famous man, Garcia, Edward the Seventh, Cyrus the Great" (*Seize the Day* 6) [Henceforth abbreviated as *SD*]. This mirror-image of himself on/above some giant brands and great figures reminds Tommy of his ambition to become a great man, an ambition all Belovian heroes are invested with. Speaking plainly, Below's protagonists despair because they intend (but fail) to assert. Most of these asserters aspire to become an image they have cherished throughout their lives: Augie March's "Man with a capital M," Herzog's the dignified "I," Wilhelm's superhuman "Tommy." Their problem lies not chiefly in the fact that they lack the potential to realize their dreams; the problem is, what Clayton calls, "Jewish vertigo" (50), setting as standard the highest imaginable and a denial to accept anything lesser; the problem arises as the characters are set in a modern, materialistic, mechanized world where idealism counts little/nil and where nobility of intention and greatness of soul are most wanted. The idealist assertions, therefore, lead them nowhere but to despair, angst, anguish. Clayton finds this anguish and the masochistic way these heroes confront this anguish "particularly Jewish": "The other side of Jewish faith in the common life is Jewish despair, Jewish guilt and self-hatred, Jewish masochism" (50). Now when we say that masochism is an essential characteristic of the Jews, it does not of course suggest any inherent perversity in the Jews. With the Jews, rather, masochism has a cultural, semi-religious significance. To understand this, we must glance at the history of the Jews. Let me quote from Durant detailing the "Odyssey of the Jews" in miniature:

Driven from their natural home by the Roman capture of Jerusalem (70 A.D.), and scattered by fight and trade among all the nations and to all the continents; persecuted and declaimed by the adherents of the great religions . . . Christianity and Mohammedanism . . . barred by the feudal system from owning land, and by the guilds from taking part in industry; . . . mobbed by the people and robbed by the kings; . . . outcast and excommunicated, insulted and injured;- yet, without any political structure, without any legal compulsion to social unity, without even a common language, this wonderful people has maintained itself in body and soul, has preserved its racial and cultural integrity, has guarded with jealous love its oldest rituals and traditions . . . (Durant 146)

What were the forces then that overpowered Jewish despair and guilt and let them maintain their sanity and dignity? The positive force at work was undeniably an unshakable commitment to tradition; the *negative* one was masochism. Throughout their long history of cosmopolitan persecution and humiliation, the Jews needed to develop and practise masochism, a sort of defense mechanism, resistance through endurance. They, almost the same way as Tommy does, not simply admit, but celebrate suffering. Now if Jews are expert in suffering, they also have the ability to transform, to elevate their suffering through, in Clayton's words, "irony," through "a celebration of endurance": such an approach to suffering dwarfs oppressors' sadistic complacency and secures the self-respect of the oppressed. A careful reading of *Seize the Day* will show that its pervasive masochism, supposedly born of a distaste for and revenge on the father that chastens, is transformed after the very Jewish way to something noble and affirmative saving Tommy from final annihilation.

"ripe for the mistake"

Suffering has special meaning with the Jews:

"Why do the righteous suffer?" Job says that "God's plans are beyond man's knowing and that man could not condemn God in order to justify himself." All these seem to justify that "suffering is not meaningless, though its meaning is often hidden from us, and that it is not wasted is the response of faith to tragedy." (Hertzberg 197)

With Tommy, however, the nature of responding to suffering is quite complex. Far from a typical Jewish spiritual stance, he not just passively admits suffering; he appears to be obsessed with disaster, active in inviting suffering with full knowledge of the consequence. Here it verges on perversion, a desperate psychic chaos not evident even in that self-proclaimed "masochist" (*Herzog* 4), Moses Herzog. And this masochism accounts for what Tommy has failed to do.

Tommy failed because he has not learned how to seize the day. The day we catch him in the novel, we find him a non-achiever, a loser by any conventional standard. He has no family, no friend, no job, no money. But, don't blame fate! Bellow is no fatalist. Nor is he a religious preacher. Only unlike most modern writers he upholds the necessity of religion/sense of morality in his novels. What is the nature of Bellow's religion then? If we consider Erich Fromm's distinction between authoritarian and humanistic religion, Bellow certainly belongs to the humanistic tradition which emphasizes individuality and love more than obedience. Now according to humanistic nondeterministic philosophy, an individual is responsible for all her/his action and its consequences, because action originates from an individual's freedom of choice. Tommy has always chosen the road which his intuition warned him not to take, and "that has made all the difference"³, standing before a bifurcated road, Frost took the one his intuition urged him to take, while Tommy always does the reverse; he listens to his whim and ignores his intuition. His first deliberate mission to success was going to Hollywood when he had got a letter from a talent scout, Maurice Venice, inviting him to have a talk with him at his office:

He wanted to start out with the blessings of his family, but they were never given. He quarreled with his parents and his sister. And then, when he was best aware of the risks and knew a hundred reasons against going and had made himself sick with fear, he left home. This was typical of Wilhelm. After much thought and hesitation and debate he invariably took the course he had rejected innumerable times. Ten such decisions made up the history of his life. He had decided that it would be a bad mistake to go to Hollywood, and then he went. He had made up his mind not to marry his wife, but ran off and got married. He had resolved not to invest money with Tamkin, and then he had taken him a check. (*SD* 23)

Later in the novel when Tommy feels Dr. Tamkin fishy, the narration reiterates this obsession with fatality:

After a long struggle to come to a decision, he had given him the money. Practical judgment was in abeyance. He had worn himself out, and the decision was no decision. How had this happened? It was not because of Maurice Venice, who turned out to be a pimp. It was because Wilhelm himself was ripe for the mistake. His marriage, too, had been like that. Through such decisions somehow his life had taken form. And so, from the moment when he tasted the peculiar flavor of fatality in Dr. Tamkin, he could no longer keep back the money. (*SD* 57-8)

Bellow adopts a technique that keeps distance from third-person omniscience and stream of consciousness alike, thus allowing us observe the process of self-analysis without permitting to become too much involved with the analyst/ analyzed. Continuously shifting from "he" to "I" and vice-versa, the narrative is able to secure a sort of objective authenticity while leaving us a little perplexed about Tommy's obsession with fatality: how much aware is he of his obsession? It works in the unconscious, for we don't find Tommy himself confessing or highlighting this complex operating within him; it's always the third-person narrator as in the above mentioned extracts. Now the narration through linguistic signals cunningly highlights Tommy's masochistic drive towards disaster: Tommy moved to California when he was "best aware" of its risks; he "ran off" to marry his wife who later proved to be a vamp; he "could no longer keep money" once he felt the fatality involved. The words smell a sense of hurry-scurry urgency, as if a moment's delay will spoil everything. Ironically, it is delaying that Tommy always needs, delaying that would have saved him, delaying that he delayed to consider.

This is masochism. And it is not simply a past with Tommy. His present miserable condition is also a product of his own. He got sick with city life (probably, his continuous failure, rather than an inherent romanticism, contributed much to this), the ever-gasping, all-grasping, money-sucking, soul-fucking Broadway "with its complexity and machinery, bricks and tubes, wires and stones, holes and heights" (*SD* 83). He seems exhausted with it when he responds to his father's queries about why he doesn't look okay: "No, Dad, It's not the pills. It's that I'm not used to New York any more" (*SD* 33). He also remembers

the idyllic suburb around Boston in his childhood. Yet he continues living in the city, arguing "to be here in New York with his old father was more genuinely like this."

And, though a man at mid-forty, he chooses to live with his carping father and at Hotel Gloriana, a hotel frequented and inhabited by retired/old people. An alienated person, he is further alienating himself.

And, Margaret, his wife, like a typical Belovian female character, appears to be a money-sucker vamp. It is, however, Tommy's masochistic drive that has fuelled her cruel inconsideration, because after the separation, Tommy lets her put financial burden upon burden on his shoulder and chest while he knows very well that "no court would have allowed her the amounts he paid" (*SD* 29). Tommy rationalizes that he needs to do this for his two sons whom he likes like anything. Probably a demonstration of fatherly love he has come to know through his experience of how much a son craves for, probably a lesson to his own father who has not learned how to love one's son.

Masochism thus assumes a complex stature. Is Tommy a wicked person then? A pervert? An Eve-like adventurer who wants to examine one's range of control/endurance? A masked sadist? A victim taking revenge by defiling himself?

akrasia or perversity?

In his study of the politics of pain and pleasure in the Marquis de Sade, Timo Airaksinen outlines the subtle difference between perversity and akrasia. The definition of perversity, propounded by Edgar Allan Poe in his essay "The Imp of the Perverse" can be summarized as follows: "the perverse person does what he should not, just because he should not do it" (Airaksine, 21)⁴. This is totally different from "akrasia," or weakness of the will, an Aristotelian notion which seems to explain much of human folly: "The mind naturally aims at good, and akrasia explains why something else is realized." Poe disregards this notion and focuses on the dark recesses of human psyche which would later be explored by Freud: "human mind contains features which cannot be understood as mere weakness and error" (quoted in airaksinen 21). Poe explains that

Induction, a *posteriori*, . . . is, in fact, a *mobile* without motive, a motive not *motiviert*. Through its promptings we act without

comprehensible object; or [we could say]. . . through its promptings we act, for the reason that we should not. . . With certain minds, under certain conditions, it becomes absolutely irresistible. (quoted in Airaksinen 22)

The words "should not" encapsulate the essence of perversion as it refers to the subject's knowledge of the values s/he is about to break. Airaksinen then moves back to a notorious story of Erasmus⁵ to clarify the issue further: "what the person knows is forbidden is for him more desirable than anything else- this is perverse. On the other hand, . . . we prefer our second- best alternative to the best one- which is nothing but akrasia" (24). Akrasia then is associated with weakness of will. Interestingly enough, Tommy has no akrasia in its strictest sense; he suffers from wrong decision but not confusion or weakness of will; when he makes mistake he does it with a vengeance; full of vital energy, Tommy never wavers with his will and ambition. Tommy is rather a perpetrator of perversion, which might get clearer if we gloss the examples Poe gives of perverse motivation (summarized by Airaksinen 22-23):

- i) A speaker's "earnest desire to tantalize a listener by circumlocution." Although he could do different, the speaker succumbs to the temptation to irritate the audience and involves himself in a disastrous performance.
- ii) A "person who has an important task to perform before a deadline, but waits until it is too late In his attraction to the disaster, he avoided it from the beginning."
- iii) The "fascination of danger, in which one is compelled to break a safety barrier simply because it is there."
- iv) The fate of a person who killed a rich relative simply to "break the status quo of success and well-being; who confessed just because he wants to confess. . . ." So he is sentenced to death.

The "earnest desire to tantalize," "attraction to disaster," "fascination of danger," "break the status quo" --all these summarize the very Tommy, his sadomasochistic drive. However, Tommy is not a simple case of perversion; his perversion has rather stemmed from and involves many a psychological, social and sexual aspect of humanity.

castrating the chastising father

Psychoanalysis is too deterministic to accommodate a person to a T. And with Bellow's protagonists, baffled and baffling, it often falls short of. Though a voracious reader of Freud, Bellow is also a stern critique of the master. Often does he satirize psychoanalysis in his novel; for example, Dr. Tamkin in *Seize the Day*. Still we need to return to Freud to trace back the origin of Tommy's masochism. Because this only could verify our assumption that Tommy's masochism is a sort of sadism directed against his father, the patriarchy.

Let's check what masochism means indeed. In "The Sexual Aberrations" Freud gives a definition of drives⁶:

The most common and the most significant of all the perversions--the desire to inflict pain upon the sexual object, and its reverse--received from Krafft- Ebing the names of 'sadism' and 'masochism' for its active and passive forms respectively. Other writers . . . have preferred the narrower term 'algolagnia'. This emphasizes the pleasure in pain, the cruelty; whereas the names chosen by Krafft-Ebing bring into prominence the pleasure in any form of humiliation or subjection. (quoted in Gay 251-252)

What Freud had in his mind was the sexual passivity in women, but masochism is not always a 'passive' form of pleasure in subjection. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) Freud revised his theory of death drives, understanding the more fundamental nature of it than he had thought. A most strong evidence of death drive he found in "masochism, the self-destructive opposite to sadism, a *drive for control and mastery* characteristic of the anal phase" (Minsky 81; italics added). And masochism not only involves physique, it has moral aspect also. In fact, masochism in Freud is chiefly moral, a pathological way of hating. Berliner's position is the opposite; to him, masochism is the pathological way of loving. In Berliner, masochism crawls up from a sense of guilt and the corollary need for punishment; but instead of giving up the hated object, the person represses the hatred, and in adulthood submissively accepts the cruelty as love. Daniel Weiss' classic study of Tommy's moral masochism is nearer to Berliner: "The broadest psychoanalytic category within which Tommy Wilhelm operates is that of the moral masochist, the victim, for whom suffering is a *modus vivendi*, a means of self-justification" (287). I find Weiss a little exaggerated but his analysis of Tommy's psyche is worth quoting:

The ultimate sacrifice of the moral masochist to the love object accounts for his greatest paradox, his perverse refusal to "please" the parent in any rational sense of the word. The masochist identifies himself with the hating love object. He turns against himself, not his own sadism but the sadism of the parent. His guilt becomes the guilt of the hating parent should feel if his cruelties are unjust. Since the parent cannot be wrong, the child must then feel guilty for him. He must be the bad child who deserves such chastisement. (291-2)

Masochism in Tommy is then closely associated with his parent, his father in fact. And undoubtedly, searching for father--a most frequented motif in modern English literature--is an important theme of *Seize the Day*.

But has Dr. Adler ever chastised Tommy? That he has not does not in any way suggest that he's a soft-hearted father. Rather the opposite. Because chastisement is not always negative. In Judaism, chastisement typifies human's (son's) relation with the God (father). And in real life, paradoxically enough, chastisement and punishment sometimes appear to be signs of concern, and their absence signs of indifference. Absence can even be a strong source of violence. In Rajinder Singh Bedi's short story "Lajvanti," for example, when the wife was lost during the India-Pakistan Partition, the husband tried hard to locate her. At last he found her only to see that she was raped during the chaos and was given shelter at a Muslim household; however, he accepts her heartily responding to the call of the society to accept assaulted women who are just victims of politics. Later, she always tries to share her experience, but the husband, always amiable and caring, never shows any interest in, nor does ever talk about the incident. This very silence becomes a traumatic pressure for the girl, verging on a form of violence. Recapping of Tommy's early life highlights this silence of Dr. Adler's regarding anything with Tommy. When he was moving to California, we find him consulting with his mother and it is she who, while weeping for his son's rash decision, helped him pack his bags. Dr Adler appears as a distant figure, an alien, a figure who can punish and "could" make a career for Tommy but who did not take any active step (except for quarelling perhaps) to prohibit Tommy from gambling with life. But, if he had intervened, would Tommy have cared for his words? Since the best answer to 'if' is 'might be,' no matter how much psychoanalysis is

involved, we better move to the analysis of these two characters who, as Daniel Weiss observes, conform to typical character types of the literature of neurosis.

Tommy and Dr. Adler are people of two different poles. Tommy is "childish," sloppy, disordered, dirty; Dr. Adler is "adult," thorough, organized, neat. Tommy is a failure; Dr. Adler's a successful life. Tommy is masochistic, likes injuring himself, relishing failures as a form of selfhatred; Dr. Adler is sadistic, always soaring with a strong sense of vanity and success, a figure of self-respect. From a conventional point of view, Dr. Adler appears to be more likeable a character than Tommy is, except for sadism (a digression: isn't sadism an important ingredient of success in the present world?). Now while Tommy's masochism is active, Adler's sadism is passive. We don't find him beating or torturing or exhausting his wife or Tommy. His sadism is in silence, in absence, in indifference. The story provides no trace of anything warm between Adler and his wife; what we are told is that Dr. Adler forgets the date of his wife's death:

"Gosh, Dad, I'm not sure. Wasn't it the year Mother died? What year was that?"

He asked this question with an innocent frown on his Golden Grimes, dark-blond face. What year was it! As though he didn't know the year, the month, the day, the very hour of his mother's death.

"Wasn't it nineteen-thirty-one?" said Dr. Adler.

"Oh, was it?" said Wilhelm. And in hiding the sadness and the overwhelming irony of the question he gave a nervous shiver and wagged his head and felt the end of his collar rapidly.

"Do you know?" his father said. "You must realize, an old fellow's memory becomes unreliable.

It was in winter, that I'm sure of Nineteen-thirty-two?"

Yes, it was age. Don't make an issue of it, Wilhelm advised himself. If you were to ask the old doctor in what year he had interned, he'd tell you correctly. All the same, don't make an issue. Don't quarrel with your own father. Have pity on an old man's feelings.

"I believe the year was closer to nineteen-thirty four, Dad," he said. (*SD* 27)

One must not miss the sadistic relish in Tommy. And Tommy's masochism crucially involves this sadism directed against his father. Freud sees, though not wholly unerringly, human beings a victim of Oedipus complex since the moment they enter the world. It takes a lot to master this sexual drive as it is "immediately matched by opposing forms of drive, expressed as the threat of castration from the father" (quoted in Easthope 5). Castration functions differently for girls and boys: while the girls must accept her "absolute inferiority" because she lacks the penis, the boy must admit his "relative inferiority, the father's castrating injunction against his incestuous desire for the mother, and the possible *loss* of his organ" (Andermahr 24, italics added). With a boy, therefore, castration complex works as a solution to Oedipus complex, but it works in either of the two ways: the positive one is when the boy accepts his relative inferiority and strengthens his relation with his father as the only way to repress his desire for the mother, thus submitting before the law of patriarchy; the negative one is when the boy does not repress but shifts his desire, making the father the object of desire to avoid drive towards mother, thus having patriarchy as an object.

In *The Art of Loving* Erich Fromm distinguishes the nature of mother love and father love: "The first 'by its very nature is unconditional,' the second is 'deserved' in that the father represents 'the world of thought, of man-made things, of law and order, of discipline, of travel and adventure' " (quoted in Fuchs 84). That Tommy has a special niche for his mother is evident throughout the novel, especially when we find him uncharacteristically violent finding "the stone bench between his mother's and grandmother's graves. . . overturned and broken by vandals" (*SD* 34). Tommy seems equally violent-- well, not violent, 'desperate' we should say-- in his relation to his father who not only denied but distorted the "deserved." Tommy has never had any strong relation with his father, and he has tried to avoid or minimize his identification with his father in a bid for independence.

This bid for independence is typically American. In Tommy's case, it is typically American with a vengeance, closely involving independence with identity. In his psychic organization of identity, specularity plays a vital role. Before moving to Lacan, let me quote again the cupboard image with a little more details:

He saw his reflection in the glass cupboard full of cigar boxes, among the grand seals and paper damask and the gold-embossed portraits of famous men, Garcia, Edward the Seventh, Cyrus the Great. You had to allow for the darkness and deformations of the glass, but he thought he didn't look too good. A wide wrinkle like a comprehensive bracket sign was written upon his forehead, the point between his brows, and there were patches of brown on his dark blond skin. He began to be half amused at the shadow of his own marveling, troubled, desirous eyes, and his nostrils and his lips. Fair-haired hippopotamus! (SD 6)

To be something is to attest and assert an identity; to Lacan, "identity is a form of identification" (quoted in Easthope 59). Now this identity is made in and by what he calls "the Other." This Other is the symbolic order, comprising law, society, people, culture, tradition, even genetics. So what we are is how the symbolic order does identify us with, what we are is how "the mirror" --- the other people, the symbolic order --- shows us. The cupboard mirror does not reflect a "pretty" looking Tommy. The "darkness and deformations of the glass" might account for the distortion but there is distortion, and to Lacan an image of "dismemberment, dislocation" is "the worst thing in the world" (quoted in Easthope 60), reconstituting the fear of castration, signifying fragmentation of the self.

Like a typical American hero, Tommy attempts at asserting his identity and independence, only he does it a different way, through dismemberment and modification. The very name we call him by --- 'Tommy' --- is "Wilhelms' own invention. He adopted it when he went to Hollywood, and dropped the Adler" (SD 14). Thus:

Wilhelm Adler → Tommy Wilhelm Adler → Tommy Wilhelm

'Tommy' is then a new name, a new identity, a new external signal to identify Wilhelm in a new situation, his first step to assert his independence by the vocation of an artist. This scissoring is Tommy's rebellion against his father --- an internalized image of a punishing authority assuming the form of superego, this is a subversion of patriarchal order, of what Silverman calls the "dominant fiction" of male and patriarchal authority (quoted in Girgus 78). Tommy is castrated by himself but he castrates also. It is at once a "linguistic fulfilment of the threat of castration" (Girgus 78) and a linguistic

revenge on the threat of castration by returning the threat in a realized form.

Confusing superego with the punishing Father/father entails a problematic approach to life. If superego refers to the source of positive drives that keep humans in track, it associates itself with order, regularity, neatness. In refuting the father figure, Tommy was refuting the order, regular, neat, the superego. This does not, however, mean that he is consciously going against social norms or civilization. His 'ego' has chosen to subvert the status quo of success by trying shady characters and risky chances, deliberately disobeying the *warnings* of intuition --- or should we say, the 'superego,' the father. We must not miss the point that though he often accuses his father of indifference, Dr. Adler had warned him of Dr. Tamkin; yet --- *or, so?* ---he gave his last money to Tamkin.

This is another example of Tommy's sadism. Throughout the novel, we find many an instance. In fact, being the very antithesis of his father, almost every movement and behaviour of Tommy is disgusting to Dr. Adler. And Tommy is well aware of it! At breakfast table, he "battered" his egg and a "faint grime was left by his fingers on the white of the egg" which the very neat Dr. Adler "saw with silent repugnance": "What a Wilky he had given to the world!" (*SD* 36) Tommy knows his father does not like his habit of drug taking, yet he delays only to take a Phenaphen sedative and Unicap before him (*SD* 34). He indulges in sloppy habits which he knows his father is disgusted with. He does not feel shy in detailing how Margaret has been draining his money; he demonstrates before his father how Margaret has been exhausting (castrating?)⁷ him:

... Wilhelm took hold of his broad throat with brown-stained fingers and bitten nails and began to choke himself.

"What are you doing?" cried the old man.

"I'm showing you what she does to me."

"Stop that---stop it!" the old man said and tapped the table commandingly. (*SD* 48)

In all these masochistic self-abusing postures, Tommy knows he is trying his father's patience, yet he keeps doing. In fact, the image of Tommy the son as a failure, an exhausted waster, is itself a torture to

Dr. Adler the father, as it typifies a visual castration, reconstituting the castration complex in Dr. Adler. This is Tommy's response to the threat of castration.

Tommy in Fagman shirt

In no way, however, this can be the final word for Tommy. His sadomasochism---quite interestingly---also derives from an equally strong need for love. This is what he chiefly inherits from his mother that he finds lacking in his father, and that he wants his father to respect. Again and again Tommy, now complaining, now demanding, now forgiving, looks for the hand, the word, at least a caring eye, from his father:

I wouldn't turn to Tamkin, he thought, if I could turn to him. At least Tamkin sympathizes with me and tries to give me a hand, whereas Dad doesn't want to be disturbed. (SD 11)

He saw his son's hardships; he could so easily help him. How little it would mean to him, and how much to Wilhelm! Where was the old man's heart? (SD 26)

"When I suffer--you aren't very sorry. That's because you have no affection for me, and you don't want any part of me." (SD 54)

Granted, he [Adler] should not support me. But have I ever asked him to do that? Have I ever asked for dough at all, either for Margaret or for the kids or for myself? It isn't the money, but only the assistance; not even assistance, but just the feeling. (SD 56)

"You love your old man?"

Wilhelm grasped at this. "Of course, of course I love him. My father. My mother---." As he said this there was a great pull at the very center of his soul. (SD 92)

"It isn't all a question of money---there are other things a father can give to a son." (SD 109)

Love. Concern. Sympathy. These are what a father can give to his son. These are what Tommy was looking for in his father. But these are what

his father never believes in much. Girgus suggests a curious point regarding Tommy's emotional relation to Dr. Adler. We have already learnt that a negative way to master Oedipus complex is to shift the drive to the father, which may assume the form of homosexuality. A careful reading may let us see that the narrative subtly drops homosexual suggestions. The first reference to homosexuality comes rather casually, but not without deliberation of course:

"That's the real knocked-out shirt you got on," said Rubin.

"Where's it from, Saks?"

"No, it's a Jack Fagman⁸-Chicago." (SD 5)

The issue reappears in the father-son's talk about Tommy's leaving his last job. When Adler enquires if there is any sexual scandal :

Wilhelm fiercely defended himself. "No, Dad, there wasn't any woman. I told you how it was."

"Maybe it was a man, then," the old man said wickedly.

Shocked, Wilhelm stared at him with burning pallor and dry lips. His skin looked a little yellow.

"I don't think you know what you're talking about," he answered after a moment. (SD 51)

Tommy's reaction overcompensates, and leaves even us doubtful. But the thing gets complex in the massage room scene. The scene starts with details of naked male figures lying there, especially of "an athlete, strikingly muscled, powerful and young, with a strong white curve to his *genital* and a half-angry smile on his mouth" (SD 107-8; italics added). Girgus finds in the very eroticism of the description Tommy's "latent attraction to the naked man" (82). He refers back to Silverman who comparing in the athlete image "the male mouth with the female genitals" argues that in this model "the homosexual subject does not so much flee from the mother as relocate her within himself." In his symbolic fight against the father, the son may identify himself with the mother, the feminine, which may result in emasculation or homosexuality. Tommy might not be aware of the femininity he internalized through his unconscious identification with his mother, but his relation to Dr. Adler has something mysterious in it, a fusion of the feminine and the masochist. And the output is not simply passive. If we consider Tommy's masochism a response to patriarchy, his revenge

involves not only the return of the fear, a visual demonstration of emasculation, but also an attempt to reconstruct the order. If we extend our thesis to the extent that Tommy fails and exhibits his failures and sufferings with an objective to concern his father, we might not over-exaggerate. Tommy tries Adler's patience to elicit the softness in him, to generate a feeling called love, to develop a concern which he always has denied him. He even presents himself as an example: he rationalizes his masochistic relation with Margaret on the ground that he must look after his own sons, as if a kind of lesson to his father. And here lies the chief paradox in Tommy's masochistic commitment: he needs to fail to castrate the castrating father, but he also needs to fail to reconstitute the patriarchy.

Tommy fails with the second objective!

teshuvah

"*For I desire not the deaths of anyone,' says the Lord God; 'Therefore, return and live.'*"

(Hertzberg 193)

Only at the finale does Tommy manage to evade failure when he refuses after a sort of spiritual venture to respond to death drive. In the massage room, Tommy admits his mistakes before Dr. Adler: "I couldn't agree with you more," said Wilhelm with a face of despair. "You're so right, Father. It's the same mistakes, and I get burned again and again" (SD 109). But should we call it a regret? Repentance? Has Tommy ever regretted? According to Judaism, "Regret is a great art in which few are expert. The chief purpose of regret is not to feel sorry for evil actions but to uproot evil from its very source. Whoever is not expert in this art tends to use his power of regret to strengthen the evil within him and not to weaken it" (Hertzberg 192). Tommy fails to regret in the full Hebraic sense. In his drive towards challenging and injuring the ever-punishing superego, he could detect, if not identify, his problems and blunders, and attempts at compensating it wrongly. This rather further boosts up his masochistic inclination to commit wrongs. He fails to repent, so he fails to come back, until he is dead.

By the end of the novel, we actually find a naked Tommy, stripped bare, like Lear. He is cut up from the world---no position, no money, no place to live, no person to go. He is socially dead. Stripped and picked

out. And it is at this point of crisis, he meets the person. The corpse, actually. And gets mesmerized: "On the surface, the dead man with his formal shirt and tie and silk lapels and his powdered skin looked so proper; only a little beneath so---black, thought Tommmy, so fallen in the eyes" (*SD* 117). Throughout his life, Tommy has tried to become more/other than what he really is, centring on a more-than-human image of himself. This ideal construction does today culminate at the "dead man": a tuxedoed corpse, the ultimate image of frozen unreality, of a created reality. The image works in two ways. First this finished perfection clothed in satin coffin mirrors what Dr. Tamkin calls Tommy's "pretender soul" (*SD* 70). In Tamkin's philosophy, the real soul tries constantly to kill this impostor soul, and until it succeeds the pretender soul keeps seeping away the energy of the true soul. 'Tommy,' his superhuman reality, the ever-tempting id, is a pretender soul which has smothered the Wilhem in him, the ego. The corpse then reflects the 'Tommy,' even the mourners associate the crying Tommy with the dead man, assuming he is his brother.

Brother!

That Tommy cries before the dead body does, socondly, account for a release from the burden of selfhood. It is a cry of pleasure, of "letting go." But the cry comes from far within. From that mysterious centre that "pulls." Fuchs observes rightly that if Tommy has vulnerability to betrayal and failure, it is this same quality that leaves him vulnerable to love and compassion. A few days ago, Wilhem experienced a manifestation of brotherly love, a sense of a "larger body" in the Times Square subway station. In this unlikeliest of places, crowded and claustrophobic, "all of a sudden, unsought, a general love for all these imperfect and lurid-looking people burst out in Wilhelm's breast. He loved them. One and all, he passionately loved them. They were his brothers and sisters" (*SD* 84). When the epiphanic ecstasy passed away, he had dismissed this feeling as an almost biological quirk. "But today, his day of reckoning, he considered his memory again and thought, I must go back to that. That's the right clue and may do me the most good. Something very big. Truth, like" (*SD* 85). Placed in the long, dark subway station, the womb, Wilhelm experienced, now does he identify, his essential self. Tommy's cry for the dead man revives this love and concern for people, a sense of belonging that he has attempted but failed to raise in Dr. Adler. Paradoxically, it is this failure that renders Tommy sane enough to come out his masochistic cocoon, to

understand and appreciate the affirmation, "the consummation of his heart's ultimate need": it is no revenge, no victimization, no death, no killing; the need is to live, to love.

Bellow the moralist thus moves to what European Jewish culture termed *menschlichkeit*, comprising much of the "ethical optimism of Judaism"--- " 'good,' 'humanity,' 'dignity,' 'responsibility' " (Goldman 59). Stuffed with a strong humanitarian drive, Wilhelm cries like a newborn. It might not be a miracle cure; Bellow's heroes go through a learning process but are not necessarily offered a solution. But it is a new birth for Wilhelm after all. A birth with corollary complexes perhaps, but it is a new beginning, a returning to one's essential self, the *teshuvah*. For the first time in his life, Tommy is able to seize the day. Good luck Tommy!

Notes

¹ In a conversation with Ada Aharoni about absence of female protagonist in his novels, Bellow commented that "it's easier for me to understand someone who wears trousers." (Cronin and Goldman 111)

² "Returning" in Hebrew (Hertzberg 192). Repentance in Judaism is more than a passive act of repenting; it is an active "turning back to [one's] truest nature." This point is detailed in the last section of this article.

³ Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken."

⁴ All the following quotations are from Airaksinen unless mentioned otherwise.

⁵ Airaksinen refers to Erasmus' notorious *Ichthyophagia*, or *Concerning the Eating of Fish*: "In it the Fishmonger responds to the Butcher's alarming proposition that a new law will allow the consumption of meat without religious restrictions. The fishmonger claims, predictably (but somehow surprisingly), that when it becomes permissible to consume meat, there will be an increased demand for the less desirable foodstuff, fish.

Butcher. What I tell you is too true for jesting. But please tell me how you are assured of a better trade in the light of this [new law].

Fishmonger. Because people by nature are more desirous of that which is forbidden to them. ... When they are free to eat flesh, they will eat less of it. Then there will be no entertainment greater than the eating of fish, as it used to be in the past. So I shall be glad if there is a license to eat flesh. I also wish the eating of fish was prohibited; then people would desire it more intensely. (23-24)

⁶ There is a sharp distinction between 'drive' and 'instinct.' See Easthope.

⁷ After the divorce, Herzog thinks, "A woman who squandered her husband's money, all psychiatric opinion agreed, was determined to castrate him" (*Herzog* 202).

⁸ 'Fag' is an offensive substitute for 'gay.'

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