The Significance of Existence Deeper than Sorrow
— A Study of *Seize the Day* by Saul Bellow —

Yoshihide Mase

Jewish-American writers have contributed a good deal to American literature since the end of World War II. Saul Bellow (1915-) is an important figure among those contemporary novelists.

Bellow started his literary career, bringing his first novel, *Dangling Man*, in 1944 against the literary trend of "the hard-boiled" (*DM* 9), and after publishing *The Victim* (1947), *Looking for Mr. Green* (1951), *The Adventure of Augie March* (1953), *A Father-to-be* (1955), he wrote *Seize the Day* in 1956.

Seize the Day is the medium length story of artistic completion noteworthy in many ways, especially in excellent characterization, exquisite use of water images and Reichianism running through the novelette. The work is a story of one special day, the morning through the afternoon, in New York in the life of a middle-aged ex-salesman, Tommy Wilhelm, who is compelled to live in a hotel in the city away from his wife and children. His easygoing way of life has brought him into a difficult situation economically, physically and mentally, so that he is at a loss what to do to escape from his distress. He is laid off because of being involved in some trouble in the company for which he works.

His married life is finished, but his wife refuses to divorce, demanding money to support the children and herself, and so he cannot marry his mistress whom he loves. He asks for financial help from his aged father, Dr. Adler, a famous retired physician, but his father turns down his request, insisting that he should find his way out of the difficulty for himself. At his wit's end, he consults Dr. Tamkin, a quack doctor, and finally he is wiped out on the commodity market.

Meanwhile in these difficulties, Wilhelm recalls and traces his past life, trying to find its significance. At the end of the story, he wanders aimlessly along the streets, being flat broke, jostled among the crowd, until he is induced to enter a Jewish chapel where a funeral service is being conducted, and he looks at a stranger's dead face, shedding tears. The story is admirably depicted as Eusebio L. Rodrigues note:

> With marvelous economy Bellow makes every movement of Wilhelm's brief day vibrate with rich resonance. Every character he meets, every conversation he has, almost everything he sees, does, or remembers, serve simultaneously to resurrect the past, unfold the present, and propel him toward the final moment of truth. (Rodrigues 83)

The novelette is very allegorical, though depicted in realistic style, symbolizing modern society and people living there. Wilhelm's life described in his recollections has been, so to speak, a dupe's one tossed about in the people's lives alienated in dehumanized society. In other words, his life can be said to be that of a victim. As Rodrigues says:

> Bellow focuses on New York as the unreal city. Its inhabitants, too, are unreal, the elderly and the retired, undone by their fear and death, whose nearness they refuse to acknowledge. The old ladies wait out the day wearing rouge and mascara and costume jewelery (sic). Actresses all, they use blue hair rinse and eye shadow to disguise their age. Wilhelm has a terrifying impression of a swirling, tumultuous, carnival crowd, each determined to act out his own particular fantasy role, each one babbling a language of his own: "And the great crowd, the inexhaustible current of millions of every race and kind pouring out, pressing round, of every age, of every genius, possessors of every human secret, antique and future, in every face the refinement of one particular motive or essence — I labor, I spend, I strive, I design, I love, I cling, I uphold, I give away, I envy, I long, I scorn, I die, I hide, I want" (115). (Rodrigues 84)

Dr. Adler is a respectable, intelligent, sensible, successful man in the information-oriented, highly systematized modern society. However, he does not seem to have so much compassion and sympathy for other people and even for his own son Wilhelm, only calculating and reasoning as to how to behave in relation to others. He is as clever in dealing with people in general as in diagnosing and treating his patients. He is really a specimen of a self-maid man in modern society.

On the other hand, Wilhelm is an exemplification of a foolish son who is not so clever as his father, as to tide over difficulties in this world of free competition.

However, he is superior to his father in only one thing. He is more foolishly compassionate, so that he makes fanatic efforts to the end to raise money for his wife and children, cruelly pressed by her. Wilhelm is more humane than his father, a coo perfect man, though he commits many foolish mistakes.

Dr. Tamkin lives in the same hotel as Wilhelm and his father live. Wilhelm attends the card gambling game held at the hotel and becomes acquainted with him there. Dr. Adler takes Tamkin's measure better than Wilhelm. According to Adler's perspective, Tamkin is a dubious person and must be a quack, though he himself pretends to be a psychologist and psychiatrist. Tamkin is a clever and never says that he practiced in New York, but Dr. Adler believes that Tamkin practiced as a doctor in California. They do not have much legislation there to check these things, and, Dr. Adler heard, a thousand dollars would get one a degree in medicine from a correspondence school. Wilhelm is deluded by Tamkin's clever rhetoric and brought into the mire of speculation in the stock market, which culminates in Wilhelm's complete breakdown.

Bellow vividly depicts these three typical characters living in the industrialized, mechanized, money-oriented society. Dr. Adler represents an intellectual and egoistic elite, Tamkin a clever, successful swindler, and Wilhelm a social failure. Keith Opdahl comments on Bellow's admirable creation of characters:

> "Seize the Day" is also significant because it marks a change in Bellow's art. Although much has been written about Bellow's shift from the Flaubert-James to the picaresque tradition of the novel, the most important shift in his art has been in characterization. Much like Henderson, Wilhelm is as different from Augie March as he is from Leventhal. Bellow drew Joseph and Leventhal with the fine detail that creates identification on the part of the reader, but he draws Tommy Wilhelm with the broad strokes of Dickensian caricature. (Opdahl 99)

Another significant feature of this novelette is that Bellow admirably uses four kinds of images—water, acting, sight, religion,—which mingle with each episode and the whole story, bringing highly symbolic and allegorical effects to the fiction, as Rodrigues points out:

> Bellow makes brilliant use of these four images—water, acting, sight, religion—that dissolve and merge into one another to highlight ironically the false, hollow world that surrounds Wilhelm. The same images blend together to characterize Dr. Adler, the perfect incarnation of the world that has created and conditioned Tommy Wilhelm. (Rodrigues 85)

Among these four images, water images are especially conspicuous throughout the story from the very beginning to the end. The story begins in the morning, when Tommy Wilhelm leaves his room on the twenty-third floor to go down to the lobby on the mezzanine for his mail and breakfast. This part is depicted as follows:

> On the fourteenth floor he looked for his father to enter the elevator; they often met at this hour, on the way to breakfast. If he worried about his appearance it was mainly for his old father's sake. But there was no stop on the fourteenth, and the elevator sank and sank. Then the smooth door opened and the great dark-red uneven carpet that covered the lobby billowed toward Wilhelm's feet. In the foreground the lobby was dark, sleepy. French drapes like sails kept out the sun, but three high, narrow windows were open, and in the blue air Wilhelm saw a pigeon about to light on the great chain that supported the marquee of the movie house directly underneath the lobby. For one moment he heard the wings beating strongly. (3-4)

In these opening sentences, there are scattered words like 'sank and sank,' 'billowed' and 'sales,' which provoke water images, and, of course, 'the marquee of the movie house' brings about acting images, which are related to Wilhelm's youth, when he devoted himself to acting in vain hoping to be a movie star in Hollywood. This day of Wilhelm's is in a sense a stage symbolizing an ordinary person's whole life.

Influenced by Dr. Tamkin, who knows the great English poets, involuntary memory brings Wilhelm English poems he studies in his college days.

> ...The textbook was Lieder and Lovett's British *Poetry and Prose*, a black heavy book with thin pages. Did I read it? he asked himself. Yes, he had read it and there was one accomplishment at least he could recall with pleasure. He had read "Yet once more, O ye once more, O ye laurels." How pure this was to say! It was beautiful.
>
> Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor...
>
> Such things had always swayed him, and now the power of such words was far, far greater. (13)

These are the first line and the 167th line from *Lycidas*. *Lycidas* is one of John Milton's lyric poems, in which the poet lamented his close friend Edward King's death in a shipwreck disaster in the Ireland Channel, 1637. Milton earnestly wished the revival of his life in heaven in the lines as follows:

> So *Lycidas* sunk low, but mounted high
> Through the dear night of him that walked the waves;
> Where other groves, and other streams along,
> With *Nectar* pure his oozy Locks he laves.
> And hears the unexpressive nuptial Song,
> In the blest Kingdoms meek of joy and love.
> There entertain him all the Saints above
> In solemn troops and sweet Societies
> That sings, and singing in their glory move,
> And wipe the tears for ever from his eyes.
> (Milton 45)

Bellow's quoting lines from *Lycidas*, which is full of water and revival images, is very significant and deeply involved in the important themes of this novel. The writer's compassion and sympathy are felt to be directed toward simple, caricatured Wilhelm. Bellow is to Wilhelm what Milton is to Lycidas. Bellow implies Wilhelm's revival after his complete breakdown at the end of the story. Robert R. Dutton makes an important remark:

> Here, Tommy indeed sinks "beneath the wat'ry floor," sinking "deeper than sorrow" to the "Heart's ultimate need." And we might recall the line from "Lycidas" — "Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor" with particular attention to the ward "though." Obviously Milton intend that the drowned Lycidas shall rise spiritually, shall be reborn. So does Bellow intend that, though "the sea-like music came up to his ears" and though he "sank deeper than sorrow," Tommy is to have such a rebirth. For Tommy sinks *deeper* than sorrow—not to sorrow, but beyond—to a certain peace. Interestingly enough, then one of the major themes in the novel might well lie in the single line from Milton's elegy. (Dutton 96)

In the very last scene, Tommy Wilhelm, completely heart broken, wanders hopelessly and absent-mindedly along the streets into a funeral chapel and sheds tears endlessly, looking at a stranger's dead face. The scene is described as follows with images of drowning:

> The flowers and lights fused ecstatically in Wilhelm's blind, wet eyes; the heavy sea-like music came up to his ears. It poured into him where he had hidden himself in the center of a crowd by the great and happy oblivion of tears. He heard it and sank deeper than sorrow, through torn sobs and cries toward the consummation of his heart's ultimate need. (118)

The characterization in this fiction is too sophisticated and twisted in a sense to be fully and rightly understood. The hero, Tommy Wilhelm, for example, is caricatured as a dupe, a dropout in modern society. At the same time, the author depicts him as a son superior to his father only in one thing. He is more foolishly compassionate, more human, warmer at heart than his cold father, so that he makes foolish but fanatic efforts to the end to raise money not for himself but for his wife and children, cruelly pressed by her. This superiority, humanity, is very important and the author places greater value on this quality of Wilhelm's than anything else.

Thus the writer's compassion and sympathy are felt to be directed toward simple caricatured Wilhelm:

> ...love that well which thou must leave ere long. Involuntary memory brought him this line. At first he thought it referred to his father, but then he understood that it was for himself. (12)

This poetic line is quoted from the 73rd sonnet of Shakespeare's. Here the author's love for the hero is felt to be implicitly expressed. The quoted line from *Lycidas* is also intended for Wilhelm's redemption and revival through drowning. The last scene at the chapel reminds the reader of Lycidas' drowning and imaginary revival. John Clayton comments on this point:

> The image of death-by-drowning offer hope. Tommy, who "dies" amid sea-like music, sinking "deeper than sorrow," has quoted, "Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor." If in the death of Edward King, Milton expressed not only anxiety for his own life but also hope for the future ("Tomorrow to fresh woods and pasture new"), then by analogy the image of death-by-drowning hints at Tommy's rededication to life and the living, his at least partial redemption from Selfhood. (Clayton 134)

Thus Bellow not only depicts the hero's final breakdown, but also suggests his revival, or eternal return as Irving Malin also points out:

> The end of *Seize the Day* suggests that Tommy discovers the "eternal return." After his loss on the stock exchange, he wanders into a funeral parlor. Here it is "dark and cool"—time is forgotten. Only the terrible fact of the human condition is present. Tommy is "past words, past reason, coherence"—past entrapment by time. He has a vision of all men in the coffin and when he sobs incessantly, he is cleansed of his problems. He suffers ecstasy. (Malin 75)

In this way, the water image has great significance in relation to the important themes of this fiction. It begins with the sinking of the elevator to the lobby in the morning. It continues to flow downwards along with Wilhelm's declining destiny. But the water turns upward for Wilhelm's revival at his final

breakdown, by the insertion of the water image of Lycidas, symbolizing the eternal flowing of human life.

Another interesting feature of this fiction is that psychoanalytical ideas are penetrating through the story. The description that Tamkin, an important character, pretends himself to be a psychologist and psychiatrist and has some of Freud's works in his library suggests that psychoanalysis is deeply involved in the whole story as an essential component.

The relation between Wilhelm and his father Adler can be read from the standpoint of psychoanalysis. However, it is also rather twisted. According to Sigmund Freud, the son has an Oedipus complex; he has unconscious feelings of adoring his mother and those of repulsing his father. In the case of this fiction, quite a twisted relation can be seen between them. Wilhelm loves his father and expects his father to help him out of the difficulties. He wishes at least his father's compassion, sympathy, warm affection for him, even if he cannot get his financial help. Dr. Adler rejects his son's request flatly and does not show any fatherly affectionate feelings to Wilhelm. This implicitly indicates that money-oriented consciousness in modern society disrupts natural human feelings and emotions.

Dr. Tamkin, dubious psychoanalyst, is a clever, successful swindler, cheating others with guile, taking advantage of others' weakness and goodwill, abusing and circumventing law, bewildering others with his intoxicating rhetoric like this:

> "'What are thou?' Nothing. That's the answer. Nothing. In the heart of hearts—Nothing! So of course you can't stand that and want to be Something, and you try. But instead of being this Something, the man puts it over on everybody instead. You can't be that strict to yourself. You love a *little*. Like you have a dog." (Scissors!) "or give some money to a charity drive. Now that isn't love, is it? What is it? Egotism, pure and simple. It's a way to love the pretender soul. Vanity. Only vanity is what it is. And social control. The interest of the pretender soul is the same as the interest of the social life, the society mechanism. This is the main tragedy of human life. Oh, it is terrible! Terrible! You are not free. Your own betrayer is inside of you and sells you out. You have to obey him like a slave. He makes you work like a horse. And for what? For who?" (70-71)

Tamkin also has a twist, a contradiction in his personality. He is, so to speak, a two-sided person. He is good and bad, white and black. He is a swindler and destroyer of Wilhelm on one side and at the same time a psychiatric therapist, a savior who cures Wilhelm of his mental sickness hurt by the earthly problems and raises him for the revival from drowning. There is much truth in what Tamkin says. He rightly criticizes the living conditions of the modern world. He sharply points out the poverty and disruption of people's mind.

The creation of the peculiar character, Dr. Tamkin serves greatly to the success of the novelette. It is certain that the combination of the author's imagination and the recreation from the real model has given birth to Tamkin, from the following acknowledgment:

> The mysterious Dr. Tamkin is a fascinating creation, a protean figure who assumes a variety of roles that shift and dissolve as he swindles Wilhelm, educates him about the real business of life, propels him to the last of the Yom Kippur rituals, and finally vanishes just before the moment of Wilhelm's rebirth. Tamkin's literary progenitor is surely Melville's confidence man, who also plays a number of shifting roles and teaches a bitter wisdom about the human condition. Tamkin owes part of his fictional existence to Yellow Kid Weil, a real con man of Chicago, one of the many who haunted Bughhouse Square in front of the Newberry Library. Fascinated by these self-appointed pundits and pseudo philosophers, Bellow has written two short stories about them, and also published an interview, laced with irony and admiration, with the Yellow Kid, "one of the greatest confidence men of his day." (Rodrigues 94)

In addition to the fact that Tamkin is informed of the transactions in the commodity market, modeled on a real con man in Chicago, he is well versed in psychoanalysis. He teaches Wilhelm philosophical lessons of the human existence and psychiatric analysis of human mind. Rodrigues comments on the background to Tamkin's secret personality:

> Bellow has casually referred to his fascination with Reichianism in a 1962 tribute to his friend, Issac Rosenfeld, where he mentions the fact that Reichianism absorbed them both for a time. Rosenfeld (who died in 1956) was apparently a charmingly eccentric Reichian: he even constructed a homemade orgone box which he used to produce better tomatoes and to treat the headaches of his friends. Bellow did not immerse himself in Reichianism the way his friend did. He borrowed what he needed from Reich for his own creative purposes, disguising, dissolving and adapting Reichian elements so that they are not immediately apparent. *Seize the Day* is powerfully charged with Reichianism, but the deliberate restriction of fictional space and time, the need to pack thematic concerns into this complex novella, and the continuous shifting of narrative perspectives did not allow Bellow to maneuver its Reichian elements with ease. (Rodrigues 86-87)

Here lies the secret of Tamkin's contradictory personality. He is not only a swindler to direct Wilhelm to his final ruin, but also a kind therapist to heal Wilhelm's troubles to lead him to his revival and salvation. The telephone booth in which Wilhelm is bitterly nagged, abused and blamed by his wife over the phone symbolizes the orgone box where Wilhelm is cured of his agonies, as Rodrigues points out:

> Lacking a human agent who acts as a Reichian therapist, Bellow had to resort a parody of a Reichian therapeutic device to stage the breakdown of Wilhelm's armored condition. Invented by Reich in 1940, the Orgone Energy Accumulator was a six-sided box that consisted of several layers of alternating organic and metallic material in which the patient sat and absorbed concentrated orgone energy. According to detractors of Reich, like Robinson and Rycroft, it was shaped like a narrow telephone booth. It is in a telephone booth that Wilhelm's final ordeal takes place. With deliberate care Bellow sets down the details that indicate the furious upheaval within Wilhelm.
>
> ...Bellow's "orgone-box" is a parodic device, which has also to be regarded as an enclosure where Wilhelm, whose armor is in the process of breaking down and who is therefore porous, can be charged by the

energy the box radiates. It is also a place where Wilhelm experiences genuine pain and suffering. (Rodrigues 102-103)

Wilhelm Reich was born of a Jewish family in Austria in 1897. He studied medicine in the University of Vienna. He was Sigmund Freud's most important disciple and assistant, but he was alienated from Freud because he joined the Communist Party of Austria. He was a devoted Freudian and fervent Marxist. He also inaugurated the theory of orgone energy. In 1939, he exiled himself in the United States and died in a federal penitentiary. That Tommy Wilhelm and Wilhelm Reich share the name 'Wilhelm' cannot be regarded as a coincidence.

Dr. Tamkin's remarks about the true self and the false self are based on Reich's psychoanalytic theory that a man will put on an armor to protect himself against forces from the outer world. Through Tamkin's therapy, Wilhelm begins to take off his armor. At the final scene in the dark and cool funeral chapel reminding the reader of the first orgone energy accumulator that Reich built in the basement of the laboratory on a lake in Maine, Wilhelm finally takes off his armor completely and gets back his true self, that is to say, seizes the day at last.

Bellow has created masochistic heroes in his earlier works. Joseph in *Dangling Man* leaves his freedom to the iron discipline of the army, bringing to light the most sadistic evil of war that mankind has ever brought to the earth. Asa in *The Victim* is appalled to find in his self-appointed masochistic personality of a Jew sadistic elements unconsciously formed in himself by the influences of the outer world. Like these heroes, Tommy Wilhelm, who is also masochistic, would rather choose his self-destruction exploding himself of his own accord than endure his sufferings, thus drastically disclosing the hideously sadistic characteristics of modern civilization.

Works Cited

Bellow, Saul. *Dangling Man.* New York: Vanguard, 1944.

Bellow, Saul. *The Victim.* New York: Vanguard, 1947.

Bellow, Saul. *The Adventure of Augie March.* New York: Viking Press, 1953.

Bellow, Saul. *Seize the Day.* New York: Penguin Books, 1974.

Clayton, John J. *Saul Bellow: In Defence of Man.* Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1968. The second edition, 1979.

Malin, Irving. *Jews and Americans.* Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965.

Milton, John. *Poems.* London: F.M.Dent & Sons, 1976.

Opdahl, Keith M. *The Noverl of Saul Bellow.* University of Pa.: Pensylvania State University Press, 1976.

Rodrigues, Eusevio L. *Quest for the Human.* East Brunswick, N.J.: Associated University Press, 1981.

Works Consulted

Bradbury, Malcollm. *Saul Bellow.* London and New York: Methuen, 1982.

Reich, Ilse Ollendorff. *Wilhelm Reich: A Personal Biography.* Tokyo: Serica, 1970. (This book is published in Japan by arrangement with St. Martin's Press through Japan Uni Agency.)

Reich, Wilhelm. *The Sexual Revolution.* Tokyo, Gendaishichosha, 1970. (This is the Japanese translation by Yasuhiro Ono and Toshio Fujisawa.)

Reich, Wilhelm. *The Function of the Orgasm —Sex-Economic Problems of Biological Energy.* Tokyo, Taiheishuppansha, 1970. (This is the Japanese translation by Takesato Watanabe.)

Scheer-Schazler, Brigitte. *Saul Below.* New York: Ungar, 1972.