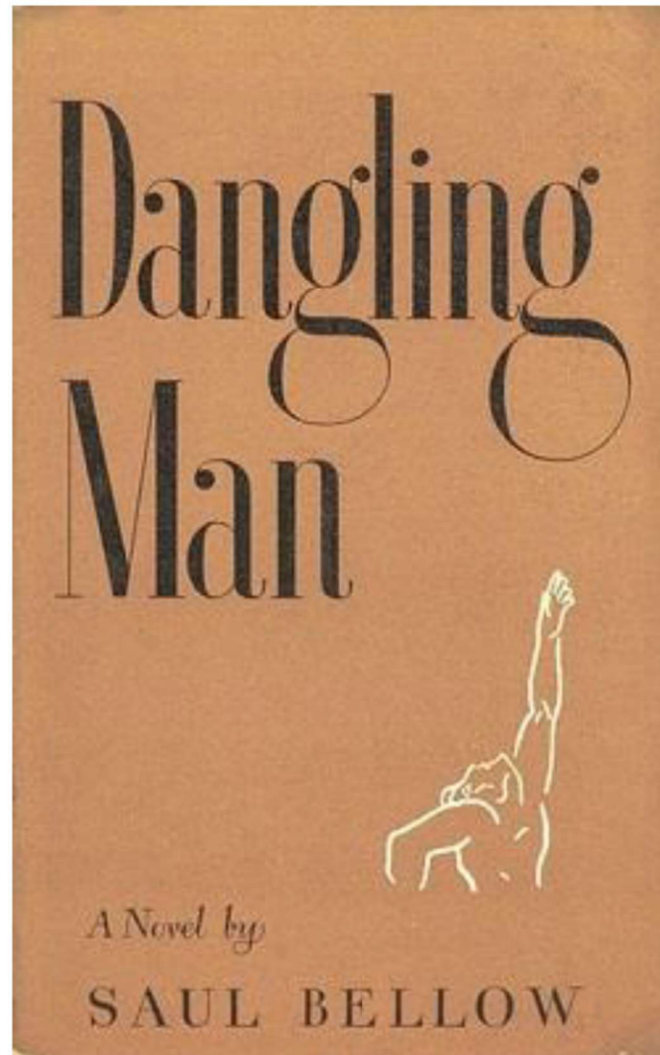


Dangling Man



An essay By Garry Victor Hill

By 1940 the American radicalism of the 1930s had dissipated. The Great Depression, which had caused so many American intellectuals into being radicalised had faded. The radical anti-fascism that had become entwined with the economic devastation of the 1930s had also collapsed. In the second half of the 1930s, the restrictive, even oppressive realities of being a Communist Party member or supporter, the obviously trumped-up Moscow show trials, the Republican defeat in Spain and finally the Nazi-Soviet Pact of Steel a few months later in August 1939, all combined to drain away the enthusiasm and optimism of many radical American writers. Some, such as Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos, Richard Wright, Phillip Dunne, Max Eastman, Clifford Odets, Irwin Shaw and Ralph Ellison, while not totally disillusioned, refocused their radicalism into an anti-fascism that fitted into America's wartime effort, which was essentially a conservative defence of democracy.

Others, ether members of a radical leftist party or fellow travellers, including Dalton Trumbo, Lillian Helman, Dashiell Hammet, Alvah Bessie and until 1956, Howard Fast, stayed loyally unchanged in their radical beliefs. They followed the party line, which was to ally themselves with America's war effort for the duration.

As Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* shows, those individuals opposing both their own army, the enemy and the horrors of war were almost certainly doomed to fail, even at a personalised level. Despite this powerlessness, the very act of describing what was happening was a form of resistance, whatever the writers

intended, as America during its participation in the Second World War and after, until well into the Vietnam War usually favoured rosy pictures of their society at war. The notable exceptions were three of the most famous and popular novels of the postwar era *The Naked and the Dead* (1949), *The Young Lions* (1949) and *From Here to Eternity* (1951) Particularly in mass culture if not literature, conservative American values were frequently defended by happy, victorious warriors.

To describe the loss of idealistic beliefs, especially in those who are supposed heroes or trying to be heroes, was part of the disillusionment with all forms of authority and organization. The focus was not on solutions for society, but on the passivity of the helpless, their exploitation and their situations. Such works showed that the world was dominated by repressive forces, which whatever their ideological differences, crushed individuality. Describing this process was to challenge the image of normality and patriotism which were part of the exploitation. Increasingly any organization was seen as repressive and any ideology was false, or unable to fully make its ideas a reality. At best they may have some small partial success. Survival was the becoming the replacing aim.

Some of these stories were not even set in the Second World War and some were not published until the early 1960s. They described conflict from an almost powerless victim's viewpoint. Apart from *The Young Lions* *The Naked and the Dead* and *From Here to Eternity*, such stories focusing on the American experience of the Second World War included *Dangling Man*, Gore Vidal's *Williwaw*, (1946) James Hilton's *Nothing So Strange*,

Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny* (1951), Leon Uris's *Mila 18* (1960). Heller's *Catch 22* (1961), E.M. Nathanson's *The Dirty Dozen* (1966) and William Eastlake's *Castle Keep*. (1968)

Novels with other earlier settings that still are permeated with the disillusionment that came from the thirties and the ensuing global conflict include two of Kenneth Roberts novels of the American Revolution *Rabble in Arms* (1939) and *Oliver Wiswell* (1941), Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom The Bell Tolls* (1940) which was set in the Spanish Civil War, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, Glendon Swarthout's *They Came to Cordura* (1958) which he set in the turmoil of the Mexican Revolution, Howard Fast's reconstruction era account of the suppression of Black rights in *Freedom Road* (1944) and also *Spartacus* (1951), Hamilton Basso's Civil War novel *The Light Infantry Ball* (1959) and Thomas Berger's western *Little Big Man* (1964).

Such disillusionment, hostility to society and pessimism went beyond the military world. Troubled veterans finding that there is no real peace to come home to, only different forms of stress and conflict would be the focus of Sloan Wilson's bestseller *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (1956), Larry McMurry's *Horseman Pass By* (1961) and Howard Fast's *The Outsider* (1974).

Also reflecting this pessimistic mentality were novels dealing with various aspects of the media and education. Such works include Aldous Huxley's *Ape and Essence* (1949), Irwin Shaw's *The Troubled Air*, (1951), Mailer's *Barbary Shore*, (1951) and Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academie* (1952) In these works the

focus was on mass communicators of differing kinds. That the media at this time was becoming a battleground in fiction between individuals and their organizations was no coincidence. Truth telling was not limited to the military naval and intelligence worlds, As advances technology and literacy levels spread the media became more pervasive and therefore more influential and therefore ore powerful

In all of these previously mentioned stories almost powerless characters also expressed pessimistic worldviews in gloomy stories in which determinist elements, not the individuals involved, decide the character's fate. Most of these stories centre on war, military people or veterans. The military became a focus for the increasing pressures many people felt in organizations outside the military world, particularly those organizations which could be used for political and military propaganda. War was becoming a metaphor for a world in conflict.

Amazingly, not one of these previously listed novels depicts the hero winning a clear victory – and this was at a time when the victorious United States was emerging along with Soviet Russia as one of the world's leading superpowers. By 1946 the United States was dominating the entire globe militarily, politically, economically and culturally. In all of these different fields this ubiquitous domination came with an astounding pervasiveness, leading to imitation. No other nation had ever dominated so much of the globe. Yet curiously, although Hollywood, dime store paperbacks and comic books manufactured endless narratives depicting American victories, in

literature the heroes were usually battling to survive – and frequently failing at that, let alone winning victories.

In his essay “The White Negro” (1957) Norman Mailer comments on how the revelations about Nazi concentration camps and the atomic bombings on Japan had a profound and dismaying effect on his generation. To Mailer and his generation, for the first time in history the barbarism and chaos inherent in warfare had been replaced with an orderly, sinister pervasive and mechanical power. Although there were earlier examples such as the Romans, the Aztecs and European powers in what was the colonising process the barbarism that was associated with a destructive wildness had been replaced by orderly civilised processes. This led to commercial benefits gained by mass murderers by systematically weighing, counting and valorising the teeth and hair of millions of murder victims. The victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not even get that recognition: they went into total and anonymous obliteration. Since the Renaissance advancing sophisticated technology and planning had been seen as leading to civilization becoming more beneficial, but in August 1945 it became obvious it could also lead to the obliteration of all life on the planet – through an orderly mechanical process made by the individual technicians working as an anonymous cog in the machine.

Despite this revelation, these previously mentioned novels did reveal a remnant of hope. Samuel Hynes’s comment in *The Soldier’s Tale* that many wartime memoirs, which he aptly labelled as “dark books” are often “stories of the victims” who

defiantly tell the truth. This last way of fighting their oppression also applies to the protagonist and to major characters in each of these gloomy novels.

The difference between American victories

Despite its protagonist's ultimate capitulation, Joseph in *Dangling Man* is for a time among these characters who strive to hope. This introspective, nihilistic protagonist and narrator writes a diary while waiting to be drafted in late 1942. His story reveals his discontent and the hollowness of 1940s life. In the 1930s he was a communist, but now he lacks purpose and hope. His Chicago environment is dreary and claustrophobic. His family give little solace. Their advice does not go beyond the platitudinous and their expectations are mundane. His friends are silly and his wife is often sullen and uninterested in him. He observes that the people he knows as well as himself are educated in quietness to be significant and to accept various wrongs before dying quietly. (119) When a daredevil friend dies in the war Joseph writes that to be human is to be dismal and that his friend understood that life was about avoiding that dreary escape. (83)

Joseph has few ambitions, little hope and less energy. Like many romantics, he builds up a nostalgic image of a secure past society he has never seen and believes that he lives in an age of decay. He regrets the loss of security which the Christianity of the Medieval church supposedly gave and consequently rejects the emphasis on individual thought, identity and self-responsibility which for him came with the Renaissance (89). For

him individuality became intense as people searched for success over others who they held in contempt. This personal search for great success lead them to try to become dictators, criminals, warrior leaders and great lovers.

This thought anticipates his eventual renunciation of free will in exchange for security and an end to doubt. Here Joseph has hit on an idea very similar to Joseph Campbell's 1949 concept of the holdfast hero who possesses a greed for greatness based in insecurity and a desire to avoid the prosaic world. Such greed is destructive and exploitative.

In the era of Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini and Franco, and in the city of Chicago where Al Capone ruled a decade before, Joseph describes a very real danger. However, he has forgotten a good deal to construct this rosy image of a secure past. The Medieval era was a desperately insecure, war-ravaged time, this was not just due to armed conflicts. The most obvious other example of disorder was the Black Death and this was not only the well-known pandemic of 1346- 1353 as later outbreaks were frequent. Even before this were the widespread famines of the early fourteenth century which killed millions in Western Europe. Wars were not remote from civilian populations: much of Europe was frequently and savagely plundered and this occurred, not only in foreign invasions, but in what are now called civil wars. Barbara Tuchman's popular history *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (1978) depicts overall the worst century for being alive within the Medieval era, but other medieval centuries were little better. Back breaking labour, poor diets, diseases without cures

and onerous taxes always existed. Joseph's idea that the church gave solace, certainty, order and a sense of community is also one sided. Medieval Christians lived in fear, of hellfire and excommunication, and also of assorted superstitions, some of which were connected to Catholicism. The church was far from being stable. At one point three rivals were claiming to be the real pope, each with their own court and a large following. In Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit Of The Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (1957) the Catholic church emerges as being frequently under threat from dissenting mass movements. The supposedly modern individuality that Joseph rails against as a development coming out of the Renaissance and then the Enlightenment was also really nothing new. The Middle Ages produced many megalomaniacs who fit his concept of unbridled individualism just as well as the dictators and criminals who were his contemporaries. If this is realised his emphasis on the difference between the eras collapses. When such factors are considered Joseph's apparent revelation appears as the highly selective logic of someone hungering for conformity that will give him a security which does not exist outside of his imagination. His use of powerful images, vivid examples and shrewd phrasings and criticisms conceal this essential mistake

Like Campbell in 1949 and the poststructuralists in the 1960s, he sees concepts as explanatory fictive constructions that emerge from different social needs, but he believes that his view are not like this: instead his description is a revelation of truth. Joseph sees such constructions take different forms in different cultures, which means that no one can impose total, permanent

order onto all of life's chaotic patterns. Each construction works as a role and he lists several professions as ideal roles in these delusions and states he could name hundreds more. Supposedly they serve some noble purpose and are the only possible way to avoid chaos. (140)

Although he does not seem to know it Joseph also plays a role, he occupies the position of the observing, objective outsider. Ignoring his own constructions about the Middle Ages, he sometimes patronises people who "prize oneself crazily" and so follow "plans and idealizations" which suck them dry and "leave us lifelessly prostrate." (88). The use of "us" in the latter passage is interesting, suggesting that Joseph describes here what he has experienced rather than observed, probably during his time in the Communist Party, which had "plans and Idealizations" leading to a way of leaving disillusioned members exhausted, cynical and passive if not literally "lifelessly prostrate." Joseph has a way of creating vivid descriptions and images which exaggerate and therefore detract from his interesting observations.

Despite such warnings, Joseph's plans to rush into the army are also likely to leave him "lifelessly prostrate," as he realises. As he muses on his former friend Jefferson Foreman's death he sees that after he is drafted "he may die in action, his life being taken by some force he cannot have any control over. (84). Just before leaving he visits his childhood bedroom, assessing the objects there. He stares at a favourite print of a woman scattering petals on a lover's grave and muses on his

mortality. This also seems to be part of a process of searching for comfort and solace from a woman, as if his apathetic wife will not mourn for him. He unsuccessfully attempts to link his wife, their home and childhood memories into his search for some form of security. The assessing and rejecting of old objects in his childhood bedroom also becomes part of this process which ties in with his enlistment, his humiliating visits home and the arguments with others which he often loses. He describes his voluntary enlistment as a decision to surrender and compares military control to a leash (152). This will clearly begin in boot camp. For Joseph this will clearly be a degrading ceremony, part of a traumatic infantilization process. This process so aptly described by Michael Paul Rogin as involving degrading rituals designed to separate individuals from their previous beliefs, personalities and sense of worth. Such tactics create regressive even infantile tendencies which lead to an acute longing for security. (208) Although Rogin does not refer to the army it then provides that security at the cost of conformity and obedience

Joseph is knowingly ready willing and able to fall into this trap. He also knows that he has deep mental problems. He realises that living with existentialist views is driving him crazy and he needs certainties and company. He muses on how he has not done well alone but wonders if anyone could. (191). He looks forward to learning through the war's violence and realises that he also needs plans and constructions, life is too meaningless without them, so he abandons any illusion of freedom. He regretfully leaves his wife to gleefully become a cog in the machine. and he reveals how the infantilization process:

Superficially this seems as if Joseph is maturing. He is abandoning a pointless rebellion, abandoning an unhappy marriage and put his childhood in perspective as something irretrievable, accepted social limitations and become a responsible part of society by volunteering to defend it, all of these changes are part of a traditional man's role. (159)

A closer examination however, reveals an infantile regression. The use of "hurray" "Long live regimentation" points towards childishness and he says he is abandoning both responsibility and the adult role of the married man for being supervised, a relief from self-determination. The desolate, insecure environment has contributed to this process.

Michael Paul Rogin's comments about American Indians who gave up opposing overwhelming odds and looked to the government for protection through assimilation also applies to Joseph's embracing of government control: Like the native Americans on reservations Joseph's environment is bare, and tightly controlled and where he will also be dependent on his superiors, the authorities who reward and punish and supply rations for sustenance and determine values. For some broken infantilized people they comply to survive (Rogin 208)

Ironically, for Joseph there was more maturity in rebelling against society than in becoming a part of it. By enlisting he takes on the hero journey, leaving his wife, family and home to protect them from an evil menace, but he does so with an ironic abandonment of these people and places. He also abandons

heroic qualities; maturity or a desire to mature, optimism, dedication to those he is defending; and a belief in goodness. Even his declarative enthusiasm is ironic and may be sarcastic, yet even here, whatever he intends, Joseph is still bearing witness for the truth. Few military propagandists could admit that militarism was about the things Joseph cheers for, and even among those who would, fewer would admit that these characteristics of military life were anything more than temporary tactics to defend freedom, rather than its replacement.

In postwar literature few characters who abandoned their rebellion and conformed to society's expectations were as open about their choice or as jubilant as Joseph. Most of those who surrendered to conformity did so with sullen acceptance, or with such a quiet passive manner that they seemed odd, almost dehumanised. Some characteristics which had staples in American narratives from its beginnings, the hero's optimism, luck and triumph, were obviously replaced by their opposites.

What has also been replaced by its opposite is the strong sense of independence of being in some form of rebellion or defiance against authority, of not even seemingly fitting in with American society's expectation of conformity and obedience. From Natty Bumppo's first appearance in 1826 onwards the American warrior hero had usually displayed these characteristics and frequently had something of the wilderness pioneer about him. That way of life and its mentality becomes untenable for Joseph, an urbanite in the world of 1940s Chicago.

Conformity or quixotry are his options and the latter option suggests foolishness and immaturity.

When Joseph calmly considers his own death, cheers “Long live Regimentation,” is gleeful over his loss of freedoms and looks forward his spirit” coming under supervision he also has taken orthodoxy and a passion for order to the point where it is bizarre. While such order may be a natural part of life for machines, it is unnatural and destructive for humans, a point made in many postwar novels.

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This work is an excerpt from the not yet published *From the French and Indian War to Afghanistan: Tradition and Change in the Concept of the American Military Hero*.



Saul Bellow 1915-2005

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