

WILL AND POWER IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

I

The ancient and universal problem of the will has had a special, even peculiar, importance in the life and literature of the United States. In the various attempts to describe analytically the dynamics of the soul, the will has generally been the crucial factor that determines men's actions. The old psychologies recognized other factors — instinct, habit, reason — but the focus of consideration of man's role as a fully human and responsible actor on the stage of life was in the will. Now, the history of the United States can be thought of as a huge demonstration of the power of will in action. Viewed from the outside perhaps, as a statistical phenomenon, it might seem involuntary, as mindless and will-less as the tides of the sea, or as the migrations of bees and ants from one hive or nest to another seem to the human observer. So Edmund Wilson felt in 1961, when he wrote at the end of the introduction to *Patriotic Gore*: « The unanimity of men at war is like that of a school of fish, which swerve, simultaneously and apparently without leadership, when the shadow of an enemy appears, or like a sky-darkening flight of grasshoppers, which, also all compelled by one impulse, will descend to consume the crops ».

But to be properly understood, in its full human dimensions — as the historian probably, and certainly the man of creative imagination, sees it — American history must be viewed from the more inward perspective of many individual wills working out their destinies. All its basic movements — immigration, settlement, revolution, union, expansion — have placed a premium on the power of will. Because of the great complexity and subtlety of the problem, I want here to examine only one of its aspects — the relations between the will and power,

and in a relatively limited number of writers. But that aspect must be placed, however briefly, in the context of the problem as a whole, and I should begin by making clear that my present concern is not with theories *about* the will, but with the experience of it, as portrayed by story-tellers and poets; and that I am assuming, in this context at least, the feeling of freedom — I am not going to argue the issue of determinism. And if we turn to the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*¹, we shall find some of the necessary distinctions made in an elementary way. Locke begins by distinguishing between power active and power passive, as we must between the active and passive will. Freedom consists for Locke in the ability to suspend volition until a rational judgment of preference can be made between two possible courses of action — that is, it is a freedom of choice. And personal identity, what is called the Self, is the result of the unity of consciousness.

But Locke does not distinguish in the *Essay* among degrees of power, and I shall want to speak in addition of the strength and the weakness of will; weakness may sometimes take the form of passivity, but is certainly not identical with it; one may be passive and strong, or extremely active and weak. And, without entering into the complications of Freudian or Jungian psychology, one need only turn to William James' 1890 *The Principles of Psychology* to get a sense of how the knowledge and understanding of the Self deepened and developed in the two centuries which elapsed between the two books. Besides the awareness of unconscious and irrational forces, perhaps the greatest difficulty was experienced in assessing adequately the relationships between the individual will and the social will — related to the development of historical writing and the anthropological and social sciences. And of course the United States have been a laboratory of experiments in the relations between « simple separate persons » and « the word Demo-

1. Chiefly the chapters in Book II from XII (« Of the Idea of Power ») to XXVII (« Of Ideas of Identity and Diversity »).

cratic, the word *En-Masse* » — between individuals and society.

I intend to explore three dichotomies that emerge from any consideration of the relations between will and power: the active will and the passive will, strength of will and weakness of will, the individual will and the social will. First I shall illustrate these briefly from the wide range of American literature, and then I shall go on to consider in more detail a few representative writers of fiction in our generation who have been concerned with the problem.

II

The problem of the active versus the passive will can be seen taking shape in the transition from the generation of Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening to the generation of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. For Edwards, the act of faith was a joining of the powers of the understanding and the will in a « spiritual taste and relish of what is excellent and divine ». A delicate balance between activity and passivity was worked out in his famous treatise, which was a theoretically formidable attack on the Arminian (and *mutatis mutandis* Lockean) notion of « liberty of indifference and self-determination ». As one recent critic has phrased it, in Edwards « the faculties receive the Light in illumination by the Spirit, but in the very receiving they actively attend to the Light. . . . grace is the divine gift which operates within the living human subject »².

When we get to Emerson, both the active and passive elements persist, as one might expect, but in different proportions and to different ends. Thus, in the famous moment in *Nature* when, Emerson wrote, « I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God », the will

2. CONRAD CHERRY, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal* (New York, 1966), quotations in this paragraph from pp. 21, 192-3, 195-6.

seems thoroughly passive, even more so than when Edwards' soul awaited the gift of grace. But after the better part of a century which had witnessed so much practical action in the War of Independence and establishment of the nation, the general emphasis had shifted in Emerson's generation, from the passive to the active will; Franklin's ideals of socially useful action had replaced those of Edwards, and John W. Ward has shown, for example, how the rise of Andrew Jackson to the presidency was accompanied by the use of him as « Symbol for the Age » to incarnate a myth of « The Self-made Man » with an iron (but somewhat malleable) will³. We are familiar with this tendency in Emerson as his doctrine of « Self-Reliance »: « I suppose no man can violate his nature. All the sallies of his will are rounded in by the law of his being . . . ». And in his essay entitled « Power » Emerson says: « All power is of one kind, a sharing of the nature of the world ». Is this an active or a passive sharing? Emerson here says only that the powerful mind is « *parallel* with the laws of nature » (my emphasis) and leaves this question open. Thus, the essay on « Power » is concerned with « the education of the will », but its main point is the need for a husbandry of forces to achieve strength.

The antebellum generation was indeed going the way of physical action and expansion and Emerson tried to counter these tendencies by preaching idealism and concentration; yet the climax of the education of the scholar, in « The American Scholar », is action and the duty of self-trust. The peroration to that lecture calls especially for « patience », however, and like every wise teaching strikes a balance between extremes: « if the single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts, and there abide, the huge world will come round to him » — and this may lead in turn to « the conversion of the world ». The elements here — action and patience — are similar to those in the old Puritan faith, but with three profound differences:

3. *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (New York, 1962), esp. the section headed « Will » (Chapters VIII-X).

Edwards' clearly articulated balance of understanding and will is replaced by « instincts »; the « conversion » of the world is not to the orthodox faith, but to « principles » somewhat vaguely conceived; and the final inspiration comes, not from a biblical, covenanting God, but from « the Divine Soul » of the universe. We have clearly passed into the Romantic and modern situation: will and power are still seen to be one, in a sense, but the source, form, and direction of these governing aspects of the Self are no longer as clearly known. We have embarked on a quest whose goal is an amorphous future; and all Emerson can suggest by way of prophesy, as he invokes « the shades of all the good and great for company », is that the « spirit of the American freeman » should aspire to something great and yield in each man his own « peculiar fruit ».

In Emerson's two best disciples, Thoreau and Whitman, these problems are equally central, but also equally complex and individual — no brief summary statements about them can cover the entire ground. But we can say, generally, that Thoreau, in trying to practice what Emerson was preaching, exhibited a firmness and obstinacy of will that has become a symbol, and for many a model for action as well; and Gandhi's passivity, for sample, was certainly one of strength, in which an individual's will for justice was translated into an effective social movement. Thoreau himself, as he tells us beautifully in his « Walking » essay, made of his favorite form of action a way of life: to « saunter » was to be a « Sainte-Terrer », to seek the *Terra Sancta* or Holy Land, to be on a perpetual crusade or pilgrimage of the spirit. Like Emerson, he too followed an instinct, but one which took him westward towards the wilderness. One image he has bequeathed to us, partly inherited from his beloved Oriental poets and philosophers, is of a man sitting still in meditation, « faithfully minding my business » — which of course was that of a certain kind of writer. He was the opposite of a lazy man: though he cultivated states of physical stillness and passivity, as he tells us particularly in the « Sounds » chapter of *Walden*, it was in order to stimulate his perceptions, deepen his experience, and « Keep on his own

track » of life. In this, we feel, he was eminently successful, though recent psychoanalytically oriented critics have suggested that behind his sturdy independence of will was a « hidden Thoreau » who never outgrew his mother-fixation. Whatever the truth of this, the « peculiar fruit » of his writings remain; in Walden Pond, where sky and water meet, he found his perfect symbol; and paradoxically, his extreme individuality, even eccentricity, of personality has come to seem a true expression of American national character and will.

Practically everything we have said of Thoreau is also true of Whitman. He struck his own balance between patience and action, « loafing » to « invite his soul », on the one hand, and serving as male nurse in the army hospitals, on the other, as life permitted and demanded. In Emerson's language, « the huge world came round to him », in his old age and in its posthumous recognition of his stature as a world poet. And Whitman had his own style of stubborn « willfulness », a strength more massive, more imperturbable, than that of the wiry, higher-strung son of Concord.

In sum then, there is a line from Edwards through Emerson to Whitman and onwards, in which certain peculiarly American problems of the relations between will and power were solved by cultivating an « active passivity » and which produced a group of American literary classics. The major point of difference between Edwards and his successors is that the latter lacked the clarity of direction supplied by the Puritan's covenant theology. But for each and all the result was, not merely a series of triumphs of style, but a positive orientation in their private lives, what amounted to a peculiarly American species of salvation, which reflected broader social tendencies in American culture.

III

On this point as on so many others, however, the American tradition has been one of dichotomies, or rather polar opposites working themselves out in a complex dialectic. First of all, the reliance on Self, in Emerson's generation and in our

own, has been subjected to scathing criticism; the Self, after all, however powerful or great or magnanimous or inspired, in certain situations may seem like a slender reed on which to lean — certainly so, in contrast to the traditional conception of God the Creator and providential guide of history. One critic has written at length about the American « boot-strap » myth, the illusion that an individual can pull himself up by his own boot-straps — using an old folk image and maxim to reduce the position to an absurdity⁴. Another has translated a similar criticism into the language made popular by Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*⁵. The American's attempt to live according to his own light, his personally achieved values, can thus be made to seem comic or tragic, depending on the point of view adopted.

This is a long story, and I should like here to draw attention only to one very obvious, but very popular and influential, expression of our problem in mid-nineteenth-century America. One form of the suspension of will much used by writers was that induced by hypnosis, or « mesmerism », as it was called after the Austrian doctor who died in Switzerland in 1815. Thus, Benjamin Franklin was a member of a commission in Paris that investigated Mesmer's famous séances. In « Mesmeric Revelation », and other writings as well, Poe toyed with the phenomenon as a means of exploring « the nature of the volition of God » and the problem of immortality. And in tale after tale, Poe explored « the mysteries of the will »; as W. H. Auden has pointed out, he tended to move between two extremes: on the one hand, « states of willful being » in which « everything that happens is the consequence of a volition upon the freedom of which there are no natural limits »; and on the other, « Stories of pure adventure » in which « the hero is as purely passive as the I in dreams »⁶. And passivity and / or

4. QUENTIN ANDERSON, *The American Henry James*, New Brunswick, N. J., 1957.

5. ROY HARVEY PEARCE, *The Continuity of American Poetry*, Princeton, 1961.

6. E. A. POE, *Selected Prose and Poetry* (New York, Rinehart, 1950), « Introduction ».

weakness of will is also a central theme in certain writings of those great representatives of the « dark » or tragic tradition in American literature, Hawthorne and Melville. In Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*, for example, a wicked mesmerist plays on the weakness of a defenseless young woman and uses her for public exhibitions of hypnosis as « The Veiled Lady »; but one of the main points of the story is that the « weak » female turns out to be surprisingly strong, and Hollingworth, who at first appears almost as a parody of the strong-willed American reformer, is finally shown to be weak.

Melville gave the theme a series of developments, sometimes equally melodramatic, but more profound than Hawthorne's. In the tragic figure of Ahab, he created a hero of iron will and enormous vitality; but on one level at least Ahab is portrayed as quite mad, a monomaniac with an obsessive need to revenge himself on the « dumb brute » that bit off his leg. Will in Ahab is thus excessively active and powerful, and destructive; it leads to the death of himself and the entire crew of the *Pequod*, with the exception of the narrator Ishmael. With Melville then, we must add to our analysis of the problem of will and power the dimensions of perversity — what Poe called « The Imp of the Perverse » — and madness. Tragic Ahab has been seen as an American Prometheus, whose defiance of the « malice » he sees incarnated in the white whale is justified and truly heroic, but there are other views of his fate presented in Melville's masterpiece, which explicitly and implicitly condemn his « inhumanity », his blasphemy, and the destructive consequences of his actions. There is more than one way to take Melville's statement in a letter to Hawthorne: « I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb ».

In Melville's next novel, *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, the hero is a « willful » young American, who sets out, he thinks, to right a wrong committed by his father, and also to « gospelize the world anew » by writing a great book. Without going into the details of the plot, we need only note here that, like the month of March in the proverb, Pierre comes in like a lion but goes out like a lamb. His brilliant promise remains unfulfilled,

his book never gets written, and he tangles himself in a net of ambiguous doubts, until the brief and almost hysterical catastrophe, in the « delugewreck » of which all die. The final image is thus a double one, of a sick young man and of a crippled Titan (as Pierre sees himself in a dream) battering himself « again and yet again against the invulnerable steep ». The excellent editor of this book, Henry A. Murray, a professional psychologist, analyzed Pierre's fate as « a tragedy of downward mobility, the exact antithesis of the basic American myth », and he saw this resulting for a variety of complex reasons which at one point he summarized as « Melville's unconditional surrender to the forces of the unconscious » and at another, as Pierre's yielding « to the blast resistless until he becomes a 'doorless and shutterless house' with *no power to will* the obligatory » (my emphasis)⁷. Murray's diagnosis, if one may call it that, seems to me essentially true, but I should want to add that, in the unfolding of the plot, Pierre's failure of will seems to be initially precipitated by a mesmeric spell, an enchantment, probably unconsciously cast upon him by his half-sister Isabel.

Permutations of our problem are numerous in Melville's works, but another striking one is the pathetic tale of « Bartleby, the Scrivener », about a man of such a pale and shadowy negativism that we almost doubt his very existence. In Bartleby, who can hardly be called a hero, the assertion of will is not passive but negative, taking the form of a stubborn « I would prefer not to » pronounced in a variety of situations. This prompts Melville's narrator to look into « Edwards on the Will » and « Priestley on Necessity », and to wrestle with the problem of so perverse a response to life. The narrator is what we might call an average, normal man who assumes a « reasonable » world conformable to his own nature and needs. But Bartleby, pathetically and absurdly, refuses to fit into the so-called reasonable world: « He was more a man of preferences

7. HERMAN MELVILLE, *Pierre or, The Ambiguities*, New York, Hendricks House, 1949, pp. xxxviii, xcvi, ci.

than assumptions »; and despite his physical weakness, there is a queer sort of strength in his negations.

These few examples will have to suffice for the present to illustrate the tragic counter-pattern to the Emersonian self-reliant will, in which one may find 1) great strength perverted to mad and destructive ends, or 2) would-be virtue losing its power and clarity of purpose, or 3) physical weakness exhibiting spiritual strength. And in the nineteenth century, this counter-pattern was associated with the sort of discoveries of irrational forces in the soul represented by mesmerism. As late as 1890, we find William James, towards the end of his *Principles of Psychology*, writing a chapter on « The Will » and following it with one on « Hypnotism ». And his brother, Henry James, of course, provides many another illustration of our problem of will and power in his fictions.

IV

This sketch of the persistence of the problem of will and power in American life and literature may help us see more clearly the importance of expressions of similar themes in recent fiction. I shall look briefly at some examples in the works of Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, and Bernard Malamud.

In a sense, our problem has been the central one in Bellow's novels. This fact has been obscured, perhaps, by his triumphant achievements in the vein of picaresque adventure, *The Adventures of Augie March* and *Henderson the Rain King*, though there too problems of will are dramatized. In these two major works, Bellow seems to have broken through to a sense of vitality and freedom and created heroes of real power, a Jew and a white Anglo-Saxon protestant, not without moments of artificiality such as are associated with a *tour de force*. But the persistence of our problem becomes clearer if one reads together his first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944), and his recent best-seller, *Herzog* (1964). Though separated by two decades, they have much in common, chiefly a pair of demoralized heroes who work out their problems in writing — one by keeping a

journal, the other by writing messages to himself, and letters to others that he never mails. Both are university-trained intellectuals and have biblical names: Joseph and Moses.

In both cases, the crisis of the will results from a combination of outer and inner circumstances. In *Dangling Man*, Joseph is being dangled by the draft board, classified 1A and waiting to be inducted into the army. But he had earlier been a « creature of plans », he tells us by way of his journal, who wanted « a ' colony of the spirit ', or a group whose covenants forbade spite, bloodiness, and cruelty », and his present state of being « angry with my friends » is traced back to a party at which the lady of the house was humiliated by being put — strangely and coincidentally enough for my argument about the importance of mesmerism — into a hypnotic state. Then another humiliating incident involving a clash with a niece begins as Joseph is listening to « a Haydn divertimento for the cello, played by Piatogorsky »:

It was the first movement, the adagio, that I cared most about. Its sober opening notes, preliminaries to a thoughtful confession, showed me that I was still an apprentice in suffering and humiliation. . . . What I should do with them, how to meet them, was answered in the second declaration: *with grace*, without meanness. And though I could not as yet apply that answer to myself, I recognized its rightness and was vehemently moved by it. Not until I was *a whole man* could it be my answer, too. And was I to become this whole man alone, without aid? *I was weak for it, I did not command the will*. Then in what quarter should I look for help, where was the *power*? Grace by what law, under what order, by whom required? Personal, human, or universal, was it? The music named only one source, the universal one, God. But what a miserable *surrender* that would be, born out of disheartenment and chaos; and out of fear, bodily and imperious, that like a disease asked for a remedy and did not care it was supplied. The record came to an end; I began it again. No, not God, not any divinity. That was anterior, not of my own deriving. I was not so full of pride that I could not accept the existence of something greater than myself, something, perhaps, of which I was an idea, or merely a fraction of an idea. That was not it. But I did not want to catch

at any contrivance in panic. . . . From the antidote itself another disease would spring. It was not a new matter, it was one I had frequently considered. But not with such a desperate emotion or such a crucial need for an answer. Or such a feeling of loneliness. *Out of my own strength* it was necessary for me to return the verdict for reason, in its partial inadequacy, and against the advantages of its surrender. (My italics)

This stubborn insistence on integrity of mind is not unlike Melville's, and assumes many dimensions in *Dangling Man*; but the impasse of the situation is resolved externally, not by a divine revelation, but by Joseph's finally being taken into the army, and the journal, which is the novel, concludes:

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!⁸

In *Herzog*, Bellow uses no political force to relieve the hero of his self-determination; but there are external circumstances that precipitate and help resolve the crisis, chiefly the breakup of his second marriage. The novel begins: « If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me, thought Moses Herzog ». We are told: « There was a great deal of ruggedness, actually, in his character. He had a strong will » — but clearly that will is now in a state of collapse and confusion. « He knew his scribbling, his letter-writing, was ridiculous. It was involuntary ». Yet the doctor gives Moses a clean bill of physical health; the causes of his malaise are psychological, and the entire treatment of the theme of will is not only post-Jamesian, but post-post-Freudian. The action, what there is of it, involves a sort of self-psychoanalysis, in terms of the practicalities of Moses' family and personal situation, including a new relationship established with a woman called Ramona, the closest thing to

8. *Dangling Man*, New York, Signet, 1963, pp. 27, 33-39, 45-6, 126.

a *deus ex machina* in the novel. As he works out his relationships with the individuals in his life, Moses continues to scribble and to brood about social questions. These are his thoughts as he enters the New York subway, for example:

He dropped his fare in the slot where he saw a whole series of tokens lighted from within and magnified by the glass. Innumerable millions of passengers had polished the wood of the turnstile with their hips. From this arose a feeling of communion-brotherhood in one of its cheapest forms. This was serious, thought Herzog as he passed through. The more individuals are destroyed (by processes such as I know) the worse their yearning for collectivity. Worse, because they return to the mass agitated, made fervent by their failure. Not as brethren, but as degenerates. Experiencing a raging consumption of potato love. Thus occurs a second distortion of the divine image, already so blurred, wavering, struggling. The real question!

The plot does not so much move, as drift towards a conclusion of calm and acceptance, these being the last words Moses writes to himself:

Is it an idiot joy that makes this animal, the most peculiar animal of all, exclaim something? And he thinks this reaction a sign, a proof, of eternity? And he has it in his breast? But I have no arguments to make about it. « Thou movest me ». « But what do you want, Herzog? » « But that's just it—not a solitary thing. I am pretty well satisfied to be, to be just as it is willed, and for as long as I may remain in occupancy »⁹.

As against Dante's clear « In His will, is our peace », the will here is not specifically either divine or human, but neutral, a sort of Fate: « it is willed ». However brief the moment and uncertain the future, *Herzog* ends with its protagonist cured

9. *Herzog*, New York, 1964, pp. 6, 11, 176, 34.

of his obsessions, his private battles of the will having been, in some sense, won.

Bellow's fiction, then, subordinates problems of civilization and culture to the dramas of an individual's situation and will—surrender to regimentation in *Dangling Man*, self-discipline and reconciliation in *Herzog*. In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, published in 1952, the hero's story is really an exploration and allegorical statement of one of the central problems of contemporary America, the situation of the Negro, and is thus necessarily much less than Bellow's a story of « private lives ». It develops thoroughly two basic dichotomies: vision and invisibility, and action and hibernation — playing on the symbols contained in the name of the company which supplies electricity his fictional New York City, « Monopolated *Light and Power* ». Ellison's fable is rich in a variety of geographical backgrounds and social situations. His hero (whom we must call Ellison because he has no other name) recalls a dream in which his grandfather presented him with « an engraved document containing a short message in letters of gold . . . 'Keep This Nigger-Boy Running' ». It is partly by rejection of the constant demand for the wrong kind of actions that Ellison finally goes into hibernation and becomes invisible.

Ellison goes to college, gets to New York City, and works at various jobs, but his story comes to a focus when he discovers his gift for words, his natural and acquired eloquence, which marks him as a sort of folk artist and leads to his becoming « a kind of hero » and a member of the Communist Party in Harlem, one of whose leaders says: « The ideal is to strike a medium between ideology and inspiration. Say what the people want to hear, but say it in such a way that they'll do what we wish ». Ellison's crisis comes when a close friend, Tod Clifton, breaks with the Party leadership — or Brotherhood, as they call themselves — and gets killed by the police. Ellison refuses to repudiate his martyred « brother »; at Clifton's funeral, he is profoundly moved by a spiritual, « a song from the past », and without premeditation launches into a long eulogy in which he speaks from the heart, though « It

wasn't the way I wanted it to go, it wasn't political ». He had aroused « the crowd's emotion », which, according to the Party leadership, had rather « to be organized »; and the Brotherhood see him as a traitor, whereas he thinks: « To hell with you. He was a man! ». As a result, « for the first time, leaning against that stone wall in the sweltering night, I began to accept my past and, as I accepted it, I felt memories welling up within me » that « defined me ».

This is not too different from the situation of Bellow's Herzog, but Ellison moves from a state of strong, active willing, in which he thinks his fate as an individual has merged effectively with a political party, to a state of hibernation and invisibility, so that at the end he is living as he puts it « underground », isolated from society. This final movement of the novel is played out against the background of a riot in Harlem, based on an actual outbreak that took place in August 1943. The riot is sparked remotely by the emotion aroused by Ellison's eulogy at Clifton's funeral, but more actively provoked by the incitation of one Ras the Exhorter, a forerunner of the type of Negro leader now more familiar as Black Nationalists. One high point is reached early in this episode when a group of independent Negroes carry out effectively the destruction of their miserable slum tenement, but without any danger or loss of life: « They've done it, I thought. They organized it and carried it through alone; the decision their own and their own action ». At this point, « I was one with the mass . . . » — but soon thereafter Ellison undergoes a revulsion of feeling, when he realizes that Ras had actually been used by the Communist Party leaders for their own purposes: « 'I am no longer their brother', I shouted. 'They want a race riot and I am against it' ». But Ras calls him an « Uncle Tom », and when Ellison tries to explain his new insight his eloquence fails him. The « Nigger-Boy » has stopped running:

. . . knowing now who I was and where I was and knowing too that I had no longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience,

and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine.

He has become invisible, because of this very same absurd identity. He seems too to have lost the will for political action:

But what do I really want, I've asked myself. Certainly not the freedom of a Rinehart or the power of a Jack, nor simply the freedom not to run. No, but the next step I couldn't make, so I've remained in the hole¹⁰.

His is a negative freedom then, in some ways like that of Melville's *Bartleby*; but it has behind it a great strength of rich experience and profound insight. *Bartleby* went to a pathetic death, but Ellison emerges into a freedom without illusion, wonders whether «there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play», and concludes by asking his fellow Americans, of all complexions: «Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?».

V

Pausing to summarize our argument so far, we might say that in Bellow and Ellison the long-standing concern of American writers with relations of will and power seems to have issued in a crisis of failure of will, at least as will expresses itself in broad social relations and in political action. Now, before going on to examine Malamud's contribution, chiefly in *The Fixer* (1966), I should like to emphasize that the schematic treatment necessitated by our brief discussion does not blind me to the fact that The Will is an exceedingly complex concept with subtle relations to many aspects of experience — and that it has an old-fashioned ring today, having been replaced in some areas by other concepts that have come to seem more suitable for the discussion of contemporary literature. Indeed,

10. *Invisible Man*, Penguin, 1965, pp. 32, 289, 367-70, 375, 409, 441, 448-50, 463.

this last tendency may be yet another indication of the crisis I have mentioned.

For example, one of the most penetrating of recent analyses of contemporary American fiction, Ihab Hassan's *Radical Innocence* (1961), explores « The Modern Self in Recoil » and in its encounters with « Necessity » and « Possibility », but without emphasizing the will as such — though in his « Prologue » he briefly states his belief that « the contemporary self . . . is not . . . cravenly on the run. Its *re-coil* is . . . a strategy of its *will* ». Hassan's « Victim with a Thousand Faces » often resembles what I have called the hero or protagonist of weak or passive will; but to be « innocent », that is not to know or do evil, is an impossible ideal for man in his fallen state, radically imperfect as we know him to be; and Hassan's concept of radical innocence would formerly have been discussed, probably, under the rubric of the « good will », its manifestations and difficulties. Our problem then would seem to be one of relating the various forms that the will, if we can still think of it as a distinct faculty, may take in its manifold operations. To cite other relevant examples, Lionel Trilling has explored « The Fate of Pleasure » in Romantic and later writing and culture, involving the desire for fame and power and love, as well as the « discontents » of civilization, in Freud's phrase, culminating in the death-wish. One major form that the direction of the will has taken in modern times is, of course, social revolution and planning; another is the sort of attitude Albert Camus called « metaphysical rebellion ». Yet another has been the systematic study and organization of natural processes characteristic of the scientist, culminating in the various forms of automation; and this last may be the most fundamental, because the most pervasive and concentrated, threat in our century to the freedom or autonomy of the human will. Though it might be argued that each of these variations on what I have been positing as a central theme is so different as to imply a separate set of problems, I should contend rather that they are related to one another, in ways that cannot be spelled out here, within the integral and individual human

personality; and that the very multiplicity of these variations is a confirmation of the continued importance and centrality of our problem today.

On the one hand, we have the sort of feeling expressed by D. H. Lawrence in a letter: « As for *willing* the world into shape — better chaos a thousand times than any 'perfect' world ». On the other hand, we have the realization well expressed by C. G. Jung in an essay entitled « The Spiritual Problem of Modern Man », which we can accept as an accurate, if extreme, description and diagnosis, without necessarily subscribing to other aspects of Jung's philosophy:

The man whom we can with justice call « modern » is solitary. He is so of necessity and at all times, for every step towards a fuller consciousness of the present removes him further from his original « *participation mystique* » with the mass of men — from submersion in a common unconsciousness. . . . he has become « unhistorical » in the deepest sense and has estranged himself from the mass of men who live entirely within the bounds of tradition. Indeed, he is completely modern only when he has come to the very edge of the world, leaving behind him all that has been discarded and outgrown, and acknowledging that he stands before a void out of which all things may grow. . . . To be « unhistorical » is the Promethean sin, and in this sense modern man lives in sin.

We need not accept the pessimism implicit in Jung's scouting the *illusion* « that because something is psychic it is under our control », nor his rather special use of the term « unhistorical » — even Jung has put it in quotation marks — to recognize the reality of the problem at which he is pointing. And the conclusion of his essay assigns a special role to America in relation to this problem:

What we actually see is that the Western world strikes up a still more rapid tempo — the American tempo — the very opposite of quietism and resigned aloofness. An enormous tension arises between the opposite poles of outer and inner life, between objective and subjective reality. Perhaps it is a final race between ageing

Europe and young America . . . This is a question which history will answer ¹¹.

We have seen that this is an oversimplification, that America has also had its share of quietists and pessimists — not all of history in the United States (and clearly Jung had the States in mind when he wrote « America ») has conformed to this stereotype of « young America ».

VI

We must leave these generalizations, which could proliferate endlessly, to come back to literature and the particular case of Bernard Malamud. It has long been felt that his achievement, essentially the creation of a gallery of remarkable fictional characters, has been of special importance in America today; and I should like to suggest that his qualities are related to a peculiarly Jewish attitude towards the problem of will and power. Though sometimes his men are intellectuals or ambitious, his most memorable characters are not extraordinarily gifted; they tend to be obscure people, leading unheroic lives, and often of the type Jews would call « schlimozels », that is, hard-luck Johnnies. But they have a strength of will, often passive but also capable of positive action; they endure suffering, but never without some sparks of hope; and their quality of strength seems to spring, however remotely and unconsciously, from their relation to Jewish tradition and fate. In Jung's terms, they have « historical » roots which go back to the « participation mystique » of their people and religion.

Malamud's first novel, *The Natural* (1952), was a *tour de force* of identification with the American national sport of baseball and with a non-Jewish world, and perhaps for that reason the hero's rise and fall, while effectively narrated, is

11. Reprinted in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (New York, 1933), quotations on pp. 197-8, 205, 220.

not always quite believable and motivated. In *The Assistant* (1957), Malamud's Jewish grocery storekeeper, Morris Bober, has goodness of heart, despite a life of much labor and few rewards; the rabbi says of him, at his funeral: « He suffered, he endured, but with hope ». The novel's protagonist, Bober's gentile « assistant » who falls in love with his daughter and changes from an anti-semite to a Jew in spirit, learns this discipline of suffering. And in Malamud's first collection of short stories, *The Magic Barrel* (1958), we encounter another « assistant » (of a shoemaker this time), « pounding leather » with stubborn persistence « for his love »; a Negro angel called « Alexander Levine » who speaks of having been Jewish in his lifetime « willingly »; and in « The Lady of the Lake » an Italian woman, survivor of Buchenwald, says: « We are Jews. My past is meaningful to me. I treasure what I suffered for ». These attitudes and statements do not seem obtrusive or artificial, and the truth of life, of the infinite complexity and mystery of personality, is what we come away with. In D. H. Lawrence's sense, these people of Malamud's Jewish world are not just *willed* into being; they seem to suggest an existence that is larger than the stories in which they move; they have a life and will of their own.

In his last, and possibly his best, novel, *The Fixer*, this aspect of Malamud's characters becomes part of a powerful fable of true heroism. Not that his protagonist, Yakov Bok, wants to be a hero; in fact, the point of the first part, in which he drifts into a situation that leads to the false accusation of ritual murder, is that Yakov is a man on the run, escaping from an unhappy past, and he would even like to lose his Jewish identity: « His bag of prayer things fell with a plop into the Dnieper and sank like lead ». He even gives a false name to « pass » as a Christian. Though Yakov works with his hands, he is also a reader: « Fatigued by history, he went back to Spinoza » — the philosopher of human bondage, and of human freedom, and for some Jews with a leaning towards « enlightenment » ideals (*maskilim*), a part of an educational process that might lead even to assimilation and loss of Jewish identity

— for was not Spinoza excommunicated? But Yakov cannot escape his Jewish training, and rejects sexual intercourse with a gentile woman for traditional reasons, a rejection which helps bring on his victimization.

Nor can Yakov escape history, when he becomes the center of a storm aroused by the ritual murder accusation. Malamud's novel describes his reactions to the growing horror of irrational anti-semitism, and tells about the stages by which Yakov comes to realize the full Jewish implications of his personal ordeal, and to find the strength to stand up to the humiliations of his jailors and the accusations of the false witnesses brought against him by his persecutors. He must endure many months of solitary confinement, uncertainty, and semi-starvation; and unlike Joan of Arc, he hears no voices of angels, can rely on no miracles. At one point, Yakov epitomizes his hard luck in a Yiddish proverb: « If I dealt in candles the sun wouldn't set ». A creature of flesh and blood, his responses are not especially dramatic or heroic; when the going gets particularly rough, at the beginning, he can only articulate an untranslated « Vey iz mir ». He is not impervious to terror, and « more than death he feared torture ». His favorite philosopher, Spinoza, fails him at times — « Necessity freed Spinoza and imprisoned Yakov » — but fragmentary verses out of Psalms, remembered from his prayers, help him to survive. When his shoes wear out, they are not replaced, and he begins to fall into hallucinatory states:

He walked in his bare feet over a long rocky road and afterwards found both feet battered and blistered. He awoke to find himself walking and it frightened him when he recalled the pain of the surgeon's scalpel. He willed himself to attention when he began to walk. He took a step or two on the long road and awoke in fright.

Like Milton's Samson, eyeless in Gaza, Yakov is visited by the woman who betrayed him, his wife, as he had been earlier by her aged father Shmuel. A son has been born to her by the other man, and the child needs a father: « Whoever

acts the father », she says, « is the father. My father's the father but he's only two steps from death's door ». This is a Jewish attitude: the primacy of action, springing ultimately from goodness of heart and will, as well as other virtues; in terms characteristic of certain branches of protestant Christianity, the primacy of works over faith. And out of a concern for the innocent youngster, Yakov tells his wife who had sinned against him: « I'll write you a paper that the child's mine ». But neither would agree to a false confession about the murder, as an easy way out of the trial. His lawyer tells Yakov: « You suffer for us all » — to which he responds: « It's a dirty suffering ». Yet when he is warned that the government might find his death useful, « Yakov said he wanted to live ». His suffering makes him wiser and more humble, more aware of history, and gives him strength.

The story ends as he is taken off to his trial, weak and angry, in a confused state which is a mixture of fantasy and determination. He imagines an interview in which he assassinates the Tsar: « As for history, Yakov thought, there are ways to reverse it. What the Tsar deserves is a bullet in the gut. Better him than us ». Whatever the outcome of his trial may eventually be, the reader now feels, Yakov Bok has won a triumphant victory; he has not only survived, but has grown in stature and dignity. Together with the weeping Jews in the street who wave at him, we see in Yakov a hero, and say Amen to his final thoughts:

One thing I've learned, he thought, there's no such thing as an unpolitical man, especially a Jew. You can't be one without the other, that's clear enough. You can't sit still and see yourself destroyed.

Afterwards he thought, Where there's no fight for it there's no freedom. What is it Spinoza says? If the state acts in ways that are abhorrent to human nature it's the lesser evil to destroy it. Death to the anti-Semites! Long live revolution! Long live liberty!¹²

12. *The Fixer*, New York, 1966, pp. 28, 60, 143, 182, 207, 241, 290, 335.

To sum up, in terms of the problem we have been tracing: a weak and confused will has become strong; out of passive suffering has come a readiness to act; and an obscure individual has become, by involvement in history, a symbol of his people.

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