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HUX 502

20 May 2013

You are doing really well.

A Homeworld Lost

All of Saul Bellow's novels seem to revolve around the question of how a citizen-artist of the United States is supposed to maintain his moral compass and sense of purpose beneath the constant deluge of corruptions and distractions rained upon him by modern society. Bellow never answers that question in an unambiguous manner, though he perhaps comes closest in Humboldt's Gift, his eighth and most autobiographical novel. In our fractured cultural milieu with its massive, desperate cravings for material excess, Bellow seems to suggest in his earlier works that there are only two general paths available for the artist. The first, the one taken in this novel by Von Humboldt Fleisher, was to deny the American identity (even as he was irresistably attracted to it), and thus to be destroyed by a reality that no longer cared for poetry or art or humanism in the face of the technological marvels created by modern life. The other route is that taken by the novel's protagonist Charlie Citrine, who is seduced by the glamour of success and who falls into a life of material abundance; despite his Pulitzer and succesful Broadway play, he is filled with regret and enervated by his pace. Within the comfortable confines of his pampered existence, Citrine is increasingly aware of his desire to return to "an original world, a homeworld which was lost" (Bellow 24) and escape "the moronic inferno" (40) into which he had fallen. If this inward path is Bellow's great escape from the primal dilemma of his career, it is questionable for many reasons, not the least of which is the dubious empiricity of Citrine's spiritualist methodology, as well as his commitment to these methods. Given that most critics have echoed Jonathan Wilson's view of Citrine acting as

"an avatar of his creator" (171) as well as Bellow's admissions of having "developed an interest in the work of Rudolf Steiner," (Robson 48), these doubts extend upwards to encompass the author himself. More troubling is the message that after decades of wrestling with the question of meaning, Bellow seems to be implying that there are no longer hopes for a secular, humanistic, and progressive purpose to life, and no purely secular means of developing a healthy sense of identity in the American context. To Citrine (and perhaps Bellow), the only salve to the absurdity of life is to be found in a quest for self-knowledge steeped in the rejection of the here-and-now. A brief analysis of the character arc of Charlie Citrine will help bring this rather depressing message out from the typical Bellowian fog in which it is enshrouded.

At its heart, there is more than a hint of Dante in this novel. Like in the Inferno, this book deals with the protagonist's attempt to save his soul from damnation/oblivion. Also as in the Inferno, Citrine has clearly lost the straight path and finds himself wandering in a dark wood. Unfortunately, there is no Virgil to guide the reader upwards and outwards, and thus one is left only with Citrine's perspective, which bounces from the present tense to memory to meditation to digression to tangent to solipsism in a bewildering fashion.

Citrine's journey into the underworld begins with him losing money over a card game to Rinaldo Cantabile, a second-rate mafia wannabe. When Citrine cancels payment on the check, Cantabile destroys his beloved Mercedes 280-SL and forces the author through a series of humiliating and near-ritualistic tasks designed to help him save face. Cantabile represents the American Empire in all its vulgarity, selfish and opportunist to its core. Mark Busby refers to Cantabile as a "cannibal" (92), and indeed the similarity between the spellings of the two words is probably not accidental. What is certain is that there is a cannibal motif which pervades the early portions of the book: Citrine's

wife's divorce attorney is referred to as "Cannibal Pinkster," who wanted to "hack [him] up...chop [him] to bits with his legal cleaver" (Bellow 222). Citrine's old girlfriend Demmie Vongel was lost amongst Cannibal tribes in a plane crash in South America; there is even a film script written by Fleisher and Citrine about cannibalism. This is America as Bellow sees it: driven by the profit-motive, full of itself, animalistic to the point that it feeds off itself without the slightest hint of moral outrage.

These events cause Citrine to see himself in a new light, and he begins to meditate upon his current course and status in life. He had long hoped that by living his life in the world of a higher conscience he would produce a work which would mediate between the worlds of the artist and America; in this, he believed himself to be some sort of a messiah. He begins to realize that he has totally lost sight of this desire and goal, his self subsumed into the American context. In addition, he has lost virtually all contact with other human beings. Midway through the book he confesses as much to his former high school girlfriend, Naomi Lutz: "Now, Naomi, as I was lying stretched out in America, determined to resist its material interests and hoping for redemption by art, I fell into a deep snooze that lasted for years and decades" (310).

The major narrative movement of the novel is towards a recognition that mediation between the worlds of nature and art is less possible than he perceived. In waking to the realization that his identity had been infected by the American *Weltanschauung*, he begins to contemplate the life of his friend Humbolt Fleisher, dead now for seven years. The last time he had seen his former friend was on 46th Street in New York City; the old poet was dressed like a homeless person and was eating a pretzel. In shame, Citrine runs from him and hides. He never sees him again in this life. Humboldt represents the other path taken by artists, those who "chased ruin and death" (119) and were destroyed by America. It is widely believed that the Humboldt character was modeled on

Bellow's friend the poet Delmore Schwartz, so he had some personal views and feelings on this phenomena (Vaughn 3). Poets, in this view, "can't perform a hysterectomy or send a vehicle out of the solar system...so poets are loved, but loved because they can't make it here" (Bellow 119). By this, Bellow is stating his belief that the public has a conviction that the practical is superior to the ideal, and poets who go down in flames as Humboldt did gratify this stance (Siegel 149). Still, it must be noted that nothing is simple in a Bellow novel, and Fleisher himself actually seemed to seek the Bitch-Goddess Success with all of his might. In his failure to catch her, his life began to fall apart. When Citrine met with terrific success, this furthered Humboldt's madness and enmity sprung up between them. By ignoring Fleisher in his hour of need, Citrine turned away from his artistic self, away from art itself, and allowed himself to be carried away on a stream of money and accolades.

The novel is filled with the protagonist's internal digressive monologues, and these portions of the book lay out Citrine's attempts to redefine his identity in light of his new, mindful state. This process is roughly reminiscent of the narrative arc in James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, with both artists attempting to sever themselves from a stultifying context in order to reach a higher self. Whereas the young Stephen Dedalus attempted this feat through the sheer force of his will and vision, Citrine takes the more troubling path of pegging his self to his immortal soul, a concept lacking in objective verifiability. This is a position he has apparently always had. He states his views many times:

I do not believe my birth began my first existence. Nor Humboldt's. Nor anyone's. On esthetic grounds, if on no others, I cannot accept the view of death taken by most of us, and taken by me during most of my life - on esthetic grounds therefore I am obliged to deny that so extraordinary a thing as a human soul can be wiped out forever. No, the dead are about us, shut out by our metaphysical denial of them (Bellow 142).

Such comments are made without the slightest trace of irony, and they are not a portion of some comedic movement. Bellow himself, when asked about the appeal of Steiner's work, said: "When Steiner tells me that I have a soul and a spirit, I say, yes, I always knew that" (Robson 48). Citrine's rejection of death as the great obliterator is primarily one made on aesthetic grounds, and "satisfies an emotional imperative, since he feels that if this world is all there is, life is not worth living" (Crimmins 116). Citrine uses the anthroposophical methods developed by Rudolph Steiner to justify and frame his beliefs, a somewhat problematic position for three reasons. First, Steiner's methods were and are widely considered to be just a modern iteration of the same mystic gobbledygook spouted by shamans and men in caves for thousands of years. This is obviously a charge that Citrine would claim came from someone ensnared in a ratiocentric view of the universe, but it bears noting that Steiner requires both absolute faith and absolute credulity in order to make heads or tails of his work. Second, it bears noting that feelings of guilt and fear are not stable foundations upon which to build any system of meaning. Third, Citrine happens to be sleeping with Miss Doris Scheldt, the daughter of the Steiner "guru" he studies under, thus perhaps confusing esoteric joy with that of a more earthly variety. (For someone who wants to part with this world for another, Citrine sure does enjoy the company of younger women, it should be noted.)

In the final analysis, Citrine's methods are not terribly important; he could have just as easily chosen Catholicism or Buddhism or the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster to justify his beliefs. What is important, however, is the fact that he "had decided to listen to the voice of [his] own mind speaking from within, from [his] own depths" (Bellow 188). In other words, he was divorcing his internal identity from its previous position in the cultural circles of early 1970s era Chicago, and was seeking to redefine

it on purely personal terms. Instead of reason and "facts," he had chosen to put his trust in his own intuition, his own imagination. He pities humanity for being "hurled down into the object world" (358), but he is going to lift himself above this now through sheer force of will, to "penetrate into the depths of the soul and to recognize the connection between the self and the divine powers" (143-144).

The powers of imagination are central to Citrine's development, and, indeed, the development of any artist. They are also critical in resisting the overwhelming forces of the material world. Early in the novel, Citrine proclaims that "maybe America didn't need art and inner miracles. It had so many outer ones. The USA was a big operation, very big. The more it, the less we" (5). In the realization that he will never be the messiah come to bridge this gap, he chooses to rely instead on "the savior faculty of the imagination" (113).

This is a noble idea but troubling on a number of levels. First, Citrine does not come off as a particularly disciplined individual; compared to Stephen Dedalus he is almost comically lacking in focus and vision. He enjoys his pampered existence, despite his desire to rid himself of material excess. He is a womanizer and a poor judge of character; his major successes in life were mostly due to the work of other people, a point he readily concedes. Indeed, he is only saved from utter ruin by a series of progressively less likely deus ex machina. On a deeper level, the strength of one's confidence in an idea or subjective truth has zero bearing on its actual truth-content; only objective, disinterested, rational and empirical review can develop an epistemology which can give one actual confidence. In addition, simply living for ideas is no guarantee that one will meet with success or contentment. Every religious zealot is convinced of what he believes, and few of them ever amount to much of anything. Humboldt himself was always "accompanied by a

swarm of ideas, a huge volume of notions" (21). He was someone who preferred "ideas" to poetry, he "was prepared to give up the universe itself for the subworld of cultural values" (272). If someone is to find the elusive third path between cultural immersion and cultural destruction as Citrine wished, it is not easy to see why his ideas are any better or more effective than Humboldt's. There may be great differences between Citrine's savior-imagination-spirit-world and Humboldt's drive for cultural apotheosis, but if so, they cannot be clear to the reader because they are not clear to Citrine himself. In the end, they are simply hypotheses on the best way to live one's life. They could both be subjectively succesful, or they could both be subjectively prone to failure.

The most startling point about Citrine's criticism and rejection of a secular sense of purpose and meaning is that he never actually participated in an attempt at finding this purpose and meaning. There are plenty of philosophies about living a meaningful existence which do not require a foray into the mystic or transcendental, but Citrine in no way attempts these before his rejection. Midway through the novel, he states: "Ah, poor hearts that we were, how badly we were all doing and how I longed to make changes or amends or corrections. Something!" (270). Despite this desire, he does not willfully choose to help a single person in the entire book until the final scene. As an educated man, he could have easily used his experiences to teach the younger generation. As a wealthy man, he could have used his material goods to help the less fortunate. He does none of these things, so his claims about the emptiness of the world rest more upon his self-absorption and failure as a decent human being than they do on any failure on the world's part.

It is not clear whether Bellow himself took this view to its completion in his own life. Having grown up in a Trotskyist environment, one would have expected him to at least explore the concept of meaning through devotion to

one's fellow man, but this is a possibility only vaguely encountered in the final two pages. Though Bellow had expressed Citrine's unflappable confidence in his metaphysical stance throughout the novel, the final scene once again introduces the typical Bellovian ambiguity. Having successfully reached a settlement with the film company over the movie rights to his and Humboldt's stolen script, he uses some of the profits to rebury Humboldt next to his mother. In this scene Bellow creates another metaphor for the fate of the individual crushed beneath either the onslaught of modernity or our biological imperatives (or maybe, probably, both):

I observed, however, another innovation in burials. Within the grave was an open concrete case. The coffins went down and then the yellow machine moved forward and the little crane, making a throaty whir, picked up a concrete slab and laid it atop the concrete case. So the coffin was enclosed and the soil did not come directly upon it. But then, how did one get out? One didn't, didn't, didn't! You stayed, you stayed! There was a dry light grating as of crockery when contact was made, a sort of sugar-bowl sound. Thus, the condensation of collective intelligences and combined ingenuities, its cables silently spinning, dealt with the individual poet (493-494).

Walking away, Citrine's old friend Menasha notices some small flowers on the earth: "What's this, Charlie, a spring flower? Here's another, but what do you suppose they are called, Charlie?" (494). "Search me," he replies. "I'm a city boy myself. They must be crocuses" (494). This is generally understood to be a message of rebirth: from the grave, Humboldt had spoken via his newfound script, and Charlie had been blessed once more by material wealth and a newfound purpose. This is certainly one way to read the ending, but there is another, one tinged with far less certainty. While crocuses are amongst the first flowers of spring, if one reads Citrine's tone of voice as being ironic, this suggests that he is "not certain of them being crocuses, but only that all of us croak" (Siegel 163). This uncertainty brings us full circle to Bellow's previous novels, where answers are few and the search for meaning still active and

uncertain. If spirituality is to be the answer to the great riddle, Citrine is a sorry guide to this path. He does, however, illuminate the difficulties and inevitable uncertainties encountered on that type of journey, as well as the faith needed to see it past the initial longing for more than the world offers. Whether such an attempt is worth the forfeiture of the cold comforts of the ratiocentric world is unanswered, and, indeed, may in fact be unanswerable.

A+
Excellent
work

There are two other elements. Take the Gas by Pam, this also about the hollownes America's obsession w.R.

A+ is also about the Jewish American mob - and his way of being as a

kind of Woody Allen Character - with a certain weakness.

is of America's consumerism.

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