

Memory, Death And Desire :

A New Protean Consciousness

In Saul Bellow's Fiction

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Shorn of conventional ways of making sense of their experience, protagonists depend more on their own awareness of facts. Mostly, they eschew conventional explanations and adhere to their own intuition. Augie March believes in his "own counseling system" from the start. "It wasn't infallible," he tells us, "but it made mistakes such as I could bear" (AAM, p. 204). Moses Herzog too keeps "one corner of his mind" always "open to the external world" (H, p. 8). Instinctively Corde fixes his "attention on certain particulars, in every situation to grasp the detail He was temperamentally an image man. To observe so much was not practical, sometimes it was disabling, often downright painful, but actualities could not be left out" (TDD, pp. 18-19). He gets these "fits of vividness" which leaves him "highly nervous, ragged, wild, uncontrolled, turbulent" (TDD, p. 167). Perception becomes intense when it is combined with sharp intuition; but such activity demands its pound of flesh. Corde complains that after "this emotional state, 'investigative reporting' was utterly out of the question" (TDD, p. 167). When Asa finds out that Allbee has been spying on him he wonders how little he knows about his environment. He "really did not know

what went on about him, what strange things, savage things. They hung near him all the time in trembling drops, invisible, usually, or seen from a distance" (TV, pp. 81-82).

Einhorn in *Adventures of Augie March*, cannot be "tracked." And when you thought you "were about to capture him, you found yourself not in the center of a labyrinth but on a wide boulevard, and here he came from a new direction" (AAM, p. 83). Einhorn seems somewhat Dickensian in resilience and unpredictability. Characters in Bellow cannot be pinned down or defined; they are "always undergoing transformations" (*Henderson the Rain King*, pp. 220-1).³⁸ Pondering upon the Hegalian concept of tragedy, emotions and modern individuality, Herzog concludes that his own character was "cut off at times both from facts and from values." He also apprehends that "modern character is inconstant, divided, vacillating, lacking the stonelike certitude of archaic man..." (H, p. 134). Allen Guttman comes close to understanding the protean content of Bellow's characters when he says that Joseph grows aware of his personality as an "intersection of sets, the fabric woven by the crisscross of social roles."³⁹ However Joseph has only a premonition of the course his personality might take.

At fifty-six Eugene Henderson seems to be a well-settled, rich man, having inherited "three million dollars" from his father. However, there is "a disturbance in his heart," a "growling" in his mind that would not quieten whatever he does (HRK, pp. 26, 152). His heart seeks reality, "only essentials," and cries out in pain: "*I want. I want. I want*" (HRK, pp. 51, 26)! Careful "to guard against hallucinations," he also realizes that he lacks the "intuition" he "constantly require[s]" to "guess the aims and purposes hidden in his heart" and "understand" others. Henderson admits that understanding would be really

impossible: "It would be like extracting an eel from the chowder after it has been cooked to pieces. The planet has billions of passengers on it, and those were preceded by infinite billions and there are vaster billions to come, and none of these, no, not one, can I hope ever to understand. Never" (HRK, p. 151) ! But he tells himself he must not give up. Reading books in his father's vast library he finds a sentence which impresses him most: "The forgiveness of sins is perpetual and righteousness first is not required" (HRK, p. 7). However he loses the reference and never finds it. As he shakes the books only dollar bills, used as book markers, fall from them. He marries Lily Simons who loves him dearly but Henderson is basically a "bum" who cannot value love. He drinks "harder than ever" and makes a complete nuisance of himself (HRK, p. 19). Lily, on the contrary, understands the value of love and togetherness, She tells him that "when we're together, I know." But he finds this utterly impossible to believe: "Hell you know. How come I don't know anything! Stay the hell away from me. You tear me to pieces" (HRK, p. 22). Though he feels disgusted with love and reality his soul is seeking the real and beautiful: "I wanted reality. How much unreality could it stand" (HRK, p. 297) ?

Henderson leaves everything and sets out on a journey to Africa to find himself. In Africa, the dark continent of the psyche, the soul, he befriends King Dahfu —"who read[s] Wilhelm Reich"— and gets transformed.⁴⁰ Henderson does not understand that his real self is "unkillable" as Lucy understands ; in the end he repeats the same word to Romilayu, "I'm unkillable" (HRK, pp. 10, 308). Confronting death in lioness Atti Henderson finally overcomes his fear of death (HRK, pp. 206-10) Noticing Atti's love for Dahfu, "animal love," he discovers the meaning of love and togetherness (HRK, p. 212). From Dahfu he understands that "A brave man will try to make the evil stop with him. He shall keep the blow" (HRK, p. 201). But then, perhaps, it is too late. Dahfu is dead and

Henderson has to make a bitter choice in the cave beside the dead king : to step into Dahfu's shoes and be a stud to his sixty-seven harem wives or return to America to Lily (HRK, p. 300) ? He chooses to return and escapes with his African guide Romilayu, but with growing wisdom. While exploring the Africa of his unconscious he discovers that "the universe itself being put into us, it calls for scope. The eternal is bonded onto us. It calls out for its share. This is why guys can't bear to be so cheap... . I wish I could have opened my heart entirely to that poor guy. I'm all torn up over his death" (HRK, pp. 297-98). Henderson at last understands that the "grass should be my cousins." There is no reason to suffer for the dead. They are immortal ; "In us" (HRK, p. 307). As his life opens he acquires a capacity to love, share and rejoice. This is the new found land which the city Newfoundland symbolizes as his plane stops to refuel. Henderson dances and leaps in the "gray Arctic silence" with the orphaned Persian boy, impatient to meet Lily (HRK, p. 318). After all the name Lily, a diminutive of Elizabeth and in Hebrew will be Elisebha meaning "my God is happiness." Therefore, it would not be incorrect to say that Henderson returns to meet his happiness personified in Lily.

Charlie, on the contrary, is conscious of the changing nature of his personality. He, therefore, forbids his friend Thaxter to quote him to others. Charlie feels that he himself may not believe in what he has said earlier. "Put away that paper,' I said. 'For God's sake, don't quote my big ideas at me...'" (HG, p. 263). The "animal ridens" in him "the laughing creature" is "forever rising up." It hastens the hero to make seemingly arbitrary choices, loosening the grip of convention and setting him on a journey like Columbus to find himself (AAM, p. 536). Ramona's philosophy of renewal through sex seems appealing at first : "the body is a spiritual fact, the instrument of the soul." But such "theorizing," Herzog feels may lead to "more high minded mistakes" (H, pp, 256-7). He

wonders whether making out with a “sexual professional” like Ramona was “the secret goal of my vague pilgrimage” (H, p. 36)? The “erotic bees” whip up the cells of desire, making him “drunker and drunker on sexual honey” (STRHM, p. 197) and lead him on the path of felicity. Augie concludes the novel in his indubitable fashion, internalizing his wandering and asserting the power of the individual to make choices :

Look at me, going everywhere! Why, I am a sort of Columbus of those near-at-hand and believe you can come to them in this immediate terra incognita that spreads out in every gaze. I may well be a flop, at this line of endeavor. Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America.

(AAM, p. 536)

Here is a truly protean image of man adrift on a sea of change ; everything is transient and evanescent. The protean image becomes a logical extension of the wandering stage.

Is the image of seafarer Columbus accidental in the works of Bellow and Philip Roth or does it reveal the psyche of the protagonist? Like his Greek ancestor Proteus, Augie assumes different sometimes contradictory roles in society. Possessing no core personality, distrusting social symbols, and given to self-gratification, he increasingly depends on himself for direction. There seems a clear progression in the personality of the heroes from *The Victim* to *The Dean's December*. Bellow's typical protagonist grows from a conventional man grappling with contradictory forces in a metropolis to a well-adapted urban man wearing different masks to suit the occasion.

Erik Erikson defines a protean man as “a man of many appearances.” He

is a man who can operate in “many disguises ; a man of chameleon like adaptation to passing scenes ; a man of essential elusiveness.”⁴¹ He is constantly on the move and seeks orientation from objects and events themselves. Robert Jay Lifton identifies him as a person who is in a process “of interminable exploration and flux, and his self-process[is] characterized by relatively easy shifts in belief and identification.”⁴² Corde admits to himself that his confession of love for his wife’s dying mother could just be momentary : “This ‘I also love you,’ which made her squeeze his hand, might be true, but it might be the truth merely of an agitated moment, no good within an hour. He could see that, yes. It was very painful to him, too” (TDD, p. 146). From this point of view the characters do not remain “very much themselves at the end of their stories,” as Tony Tanner believes.⁴³ They gradually become different people.

The imagery of the automobile reinforces the concept of protean change. The automobile represents the protean mind in perpetual motion, while the attitude of the protagonist toward it expresses his self-assessment. Charlie purchases a “eighteen-thousand dollar” silver Mercedes 280-SL for Renata because she wants it and caresses it lovingly : “The touch of her palm was sensual. Even what she did to the car I felt in my own person.” He agrees that his estranged wife Denise had “correctly identified Renata with this automobile” (HG, pp. 46, 42). Wilhelm’s old Pontiac aptly symbolizes the state of his life in New York. He finds a great “strain” to use “alternate parking.” This image could easily be extended to his relationship with women. Wilhelm’s relationship with Olive is like a marital alternate parking and he faces difficulty there as well. Just as Wilhelm is dirty in his habits so is his Pontiac : “The upholstery of his Pontiac was filthy with grease and ashes.” His father refuses to ride with him because he finds Wilhelm absent-minded and argumentative while driving (STD, p. 38-9). As Herzog’s rented Falcon meets with an accident (when he takes his

daughter June away for a ride in Chicago), he realizes that instead of protecting her he had nearly killed her. The police gets him for carrying Father Herzog's loaded and unlicensed Cherry Street revolver (H, pp. 346-47). The incident reflects his loss of self-worth. Finally, Charlie's inability to protect his Mercedes against the attack of Cantabile's thugs symbolizes his helplessness and vulnerability. In short, the image of the automobile represents various aspects of personality and city life as well.

The personality of the protagonist acquires a new flux as it encounters new experiences. Augie realizes to his discomfiture that to go on a quest of self-discovery implies insecurity: "Personality is unsafe in the first place. It's the types that are safe. So almost all make deformations on themselves so that the great terror will let them be" (AAM, p. 402). Many give in making "deformations on themselves" in order to avoid the "terror" of the unknown. Charlie believes that the real "historical assignment" is "to break with false categories. Vacate the personae." Employing Rudolf Steiner's ideas to understand Renata's sexual angularities, Charlie argues with himself that, "if Being is also a form of knowledge" then she "was not a dumb broad." This leads him to a bigger question about selfhood and self-satisfaction: "Programmes of uninhibited natural joy could never free us from the universal tyranny of selfhood. Flesh and blood never could live up to such billing (HG, p. 394). The self is in a state of flux: "The zero self sought diversion. It became an actor. This was the situation of the Consciousness Soul as I interpreted it. But there now passed through me a qualm of dissatisfaction with Rudolf Steiner himself" (HG, p. 275). Resolving to start once again with Renata, on a "more tender" and "more faithful" note, Charlie admits that: "I had been a complete idiot until I was forty and a partial idiot after that" (HG, p. 396).

Allbee is convinced that individuals cannot succeed by their “own efforts” anymore. “Groups, organizations succeed or fail, but not individuals any longer” (TV, p. 68). Ithiel Regler too admits that “in the U.S., the status of the individual was weakening” (STRMB, “A Theft,” p. 118). Retreat and isolation become inevitable which are expressed effectively through the image of a lone wolf in *Seize the Day*. Dr. Tamkin points out that a “lonely person begins to feel like an animal” in New York. At night “he feels like howling from his window like a wolf” (STD, p. 72). Later Wilhelm understands that “Howling like a wolf from the city window” means “to marry suffering,” to live with “one hundred falsehood” and pretentions. However, release from suffering is essential to reveal “at last one truth” (STD, p. 105). In *Humboldt’s Gift* the wolf image becomes vicious as it acquires the meaning of dominance and control. The “defeated wolf offered his throat,” says Charile, “and the victor snapped but wouldn’t bite. So I was bowing my head” (HG, p. 82). The lone wolf image can also represent the self-centered individual because the “narcissistic problem” of characters in the novels “is plenty severe” (STRMB, “The Bellarosa Connection,” p. 87).

Each to himself, man becomes self-centered and self-seeking. Sammler points out that “Love is the most potent cosmetic.” The “educated masses” needed “a great amount of copulation” (MSP, pp. 29-30). Society becomes a vast mirror of self-reflection alone, preventing man from finding a suitable partner, or being one with his surrounding. Charile believes that “to be fully conscious of oneself as an individual is also to be separated from all else” (HG, p. 199). However, it thwarts his attempt to find a meaningful love relationship. In other words, Charile cannot find the right sort of woman he is looking for, one who would merely reflect him. His childhood sweetheart, Naomi Lutz, tells him: “So you go around looking for a woman like yourself. There ain’t no such animal.” (HG, p. 292). The most telling comment on Charlie’s personality

comes from his brother Ulick : “You’re a sexy little bastard, never mind your big-time mental life” (HG, pp. 377-78). When Thea goes to Talavera, Augie is worried of “dying a lonely man.” Now he admits : “I had wanted to marry her, but there isn’t any possession. No, no, wives don’t own husbands, nor husbands wives, nor parents children. They go away, or they die. So the only possession is of the moment. If you’re able. And while any wish lives, it lives in the face of its negative. This is why we make the obstinate sign of possession. Like deeds, certificates, rings, pledges, and other permanent things.” (AAM, p, 407).⁴⁴ Ramona explains to Herzog that he had placed his hopes in the wrong person. She concludes that Madeleine is “nothing but a packaged beauty” for she does not understand Herzog’s worth. Ramona encourages Herzog and tells him that his “skin has a delicious odor,” he has a “great capacity for life,” and is “a very loving person” (H, pp. 243, 246). She does all this to make sure that she wins Herzog’s commitment. Kenneth, an Assistant Professor of Russian literature, voices his concern about modern man’s dependence upon sex as a wonder drug : “Whatever troubles people run into, they look for the sexual remedy. Whether it’s business, a career problem, character difficulties, doubts about one’s body, even metaphysics, they turn to sex as the analgesic” (MDHB, p. 86). There seems to run a strong Reichian belief in Bellow’s characters in the therapeutic effects of total genitality.⁴⁵

Self-centeredness when coupled with unstable beliefs makes characters vulnerable. The feeling of vulnerability, which is only a psychological dread of the city in Chaim Potok and Joseph Heller, becomes real in Bellow. The protagonist is easily manipulated by characters like Dewey Spangler, Ronald Cantabile, Allbee and Dr. Tamkin. Asa Leventhal starts believing that he has wronged Allbee gravely as the latter repeats his charges. It is not at all surprising to find a remarkable similarity between Bellow’s early novel, *The Victim*

and later ones such as *Humboldt's Gift* or *The Dean's December*. For in all three the protagonists are doubtful of their interpretation of their situations and, as such, are easily won over by the other party.

The absence of stable beliefs lead to a feeling of absurdity. Charlie explains in his characteristic intellectual, highbrow style that he identifies two “sources of tedium” in himself : “(1) The lack of a personal connection with the external world... But it is not the world, it is my own head that is disenchanting... (2) For me the self-conscious ego is the seat of boredom” (HG, p. 199). The lack of any connection between objects and ideas makes his inner cosmic space absurd. He feels unrelated to the world. In the absence of acceptable symbols of life and death he also suffers from existential anxiety as he confronts boredom or death : “In modern times the question had been dealt with under the name *anomie* or Alienation, as an effect of capitalist condition of labour..., or the neglect of Unconscious powers, or the increase of Rationalization in a technological society ...” (HG, pp. 195-96). He tries to overcome absurdity and anxiety through promiscuity and self-mockery. Herzog’s “scribbling” in the wake of his divorce from Madeleine expresses his lack of inner coherence, while his constant preoccupation with death, his existential anxiety. He imagines that, “*There is someone inside me. I am in his grip. When I Speak of him I feel him in my head, pounding for order. He will ruin me*” (H, p. 19). Herzog’s sense of absurdity leads to his preoccupation with death. He writes profusely to the dead and believes that “... life was life only when it was understood clearly as dying” (H, p. 225). This “strangeness, of not belonging to the world” (DM, p. 24), this “slightly outer space feeling” (HG, p. 348), and this “interminable squalling” of the mind increase the “anxiety level of the disengaged soul” (HG, p. 57).

In Bellow, death as a Hebraic symbol of divine justice leading to afterlife

has lost its significance, and has acquired a new meaning. Death is equated more with some of the events of the boring present than with the mysterious unknown that people once feared. Though Citrine studies the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, he cannot find answers about universal finalities. Neither German transcendentalism as seen in Goethe's *weltanschauung* nor American transcendentalism as seen in Emerson and Walt Whitman, seem to satisfy an ideal Bellovian protagonist.⁴⁵ "Immortal longings" for a satisfying love life seem to preoccupy aging Benn Crader. However, he also believes that he should "be sensible and sign off early" (MDHB, p. 11). In "Him With His Foot In His Mouth" Dr. Shawmut sees poet Allen Ginsberg as "the only authentic living representative of American Transcendentalism" (HWHFHM, p. 22). Studying Steiner and Hegel only whets Charlie's appetite to ruminate some more. He wonders if he could ever discuss his philosophical readings with the "big-time hoodlum" Vito Langobardi: "Could I say that, that morning I had been reading Hegel's Phenomenology, the pages on freedom and death? Could I say that I had been thinking about the history of human consciousness with special emphasis on the question of boredom" (HG, p. 70). For him, death is understood in terms of inertia and boredom. "O those eternities of non existence! For people who crave continual interest and diversity, O! how boring death will be! To lie in the grave, in one place, how frightful!" (HG, p. 198). The state of inertia, that death will bring, is most painful to the protean man whose existence is movement. The earlier meaning of death as a movement into a spiritual state is replaced by death as non-movement of the organism, that is, man.

Notes and References

38. Saul Bellow, *Henderson the Rain King* (1958; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1959). All future references to the text are from this edition and marked as HRK, except where the novel is named; the references are incorporated in the chapter itself.
39. Allen Guttman, p. 179.
40. Fiedler, p. 99.
41. Erikson, p. 51.
42. Lifton, p. 152.
43. Tony Tanner, "Paranoia, Energy, and Displacement," *The Wilson Quarterly*, 2, No. 1 (Winter 1978), p. 145.
44. Fiedler cannot resist seeing Augie as a "reimagined" Huckleberry Finn who is regarded in American literature as the "loneliest of Americans," p. 85.
45. Fiedler sees Bellow's "flirtation" with Reichianism as "a discontent with simple or conventional plot resolutions" (p. 93).
46. Herbert J. Smith, "Humboldt's Gift and Rudolf Steiner," *Centennial Review*, 22, 4 (1978), pp. 479-89. Smith points out that Rudolf Steiner's understanding of the "comprehensive soul world" is close to Emerson's "concept of the Over-Soul" (pp. 481, 487).
47. Fiedler writes: "It is Wilhelm Reich who moves the young, with his antinomianism, his taste for magic, and his emphasis on full genitality as the final goal of man. The cult of the orgasm developed in his name has won converts in recent years, even from members of the generation of the Forties and Fifties, approaching middle-age and disillusioned with orthodox Marxism and Freudianism. Isaac Rosenfeld, Saul Bellow, Paul Goodman, and especially Norman Mailer, trying to live a second, menopausal youth, have chosen to live it, for longer or shorter periods, under Reichian auspices..." p. 160.