

Memory, Death And Desire:

A New Protean Consciousness

In Saul Bellow's Fiction (3)

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Sometimes men adopt a mocking tone when they confront the existential anxiety caused by death: Sammler calls it the “degraded clowning of this life through which we are speeding” (MSP, p. 286). Through this tone Bellow's characters also reject tones of moral earnestness and righteousness. Herzog, for instance, adopts a mock-serious moral tone as he satirizes the Lord's Prayer. “O Lord! he concluded, *forgive all these trespasses. Lead me not into Penn Station*” (H, p. 30). The exact words of the Prayer are: “Lead me not into temptation but deliver us from evil.” The deliverance is sought not in or through God but through a mocking tone which changes ‘temptation’ into ‘Penn Station.’ The tone, however, turns into a complaining whine when it becomes a pretense. His letter to Dr. Edvig begins with polite reasoning, turns into a complaint, a whine, and ends with an arraignment. Herzog blames Dr. Edvig for plotting with Madeleine to “dump” him (H, pp. 81–84). Herzog essentially laughs at himself, analysing his own foolishness, conceit and misconceptions: “When he jeered in private at the Dionysiac revival it was himself he made fun of. Herzog! A prince of the erotic Renaissance, in his *macho* garments” (H, p. 230)! Towards the end he acknowledges that he has turned his personal life “into a circus, into a

gladitorial combat” and made a “joke” of his “shame” (H, p. 375). Charlie too mocks the contemplative modern tendency. He wants his daughter Mary “to carry on” the work he has begun—“a very personal overview of the Intellectual Comedy of the modern mind” (HG, p. 74).

The mocking tone also reveals intimate details of self-humiliation and sexual promiscuity. At the Palm Court Restaurant, Charile sexually stimulates Renata under the table with his foot, till she reaches climax. Afterwards she takes away his shoe in her handbag (HG, pp. 350–356). Other examples revealing intimate details are Sammler’s fascination with the member of the Negro pickpocket and Herzog’s retelling of his rape during childhood by an unknown man whose penis “burst out foaming” between his thighs. Herzog wonders if the world is “nothing but a barren lump of coke” (H, pp. 351–52). Though Ithiel claims to be committed to high “civility” and upon Clara Velde’s insistence presents her with an expensive diamond ring, he still takes “chances with women.” Ithiel and Clara talk dirty over the phone. Clara confides in him: “What do you think I’m doing to myself? Where do you suppose my hand is, and what am I touching?” (STRMB, “The Theft,” p. 123). The mocking tone gets invariably anchored in the fear of death that would cut short the acquisition of total physical gratification. Therefore, the protagonists search for a short-cut to happiness. The shortest and easiest way to realize total felicity is through sex.⁴⁷ Herzog tells Asphalter that in this “hedonistic world” where “All you have to do is open your fly and grasp happiness” (H, p. 332).

The pursuit of happiness through sex is expressed in the novels by a skillful use of erotic imagery. They are parts of the female anatomy, especially the female breasts and fingers, and some exotic flowers. Women with enormous breasts fascinate Bellow’s men, as they do Joseph Heller’s (Gold, for example):

“the shape of a woman’s breasts mattered greatly” (H, p. 25). Charlie describes the geometry of Renata’s breasts thus: “Renata’s breasts, when the support of clothing was removed, fell slightly to the right and to the left owing to a certain enchanting fullness at the base of each and perhaps because of their connection with the magnetic poles of the earth” (HG, p. 344). In his words, one needs to be indulgent towards women who are “obliging,” and “beautiful,” and who possess “marvellous breasts.” (HG, p.57). Worrying about his daughter Mary’s somewhat artistic inclination, Charlie admits that his preference is for voluptuous females: “And personally I prefer plump women with fine breasts” (HG, p. 74). Women, like Thea Fenchel, Ramona Donsell, Renata Koffritz, Mtalba, Queen Willatale, Treckie and Caroline Bunge are heavy-breasted women. When Queen Willatale takes his hand and buries “it between her breasts” as a form of greeting, Henderson’s mouth opens, his eyes grow “fixed;” and in her “calm pulsation” he senses “the rotation of the earth” (HRK, p. 69). Adolescent Louie is aroused by seeing the naked Winona Street female: “Her breasts, as she lay there, had kept their shape. They didn’t slip sideward. The inward lines of her legs, thigh swelling toward thigh.... Yes, a beauty, I would say” (STRMB, p. 212). Similarly, plump fingers and knees become sexually stimulating objects to the protagonist. For instance, the “blond little cushioned knuckles” of Wanda, and the “sexual” fingers of Ramona, arouse strong desire in Herzog (H, pp. 37, 240), while Demmie’s “sublime sexual knees that touched” are titillating to Charlie (HG, p. 133). Ithiel seems “crazy” about Clara’s knees (STRMB, “The Theft,” p. 108).

Desire is also suggested through aromatic flowers—for instance, the rose and honey suckle. The rose helps to keep up Charile’s interest in his erotic life (HG, p. 228); while the honeysuckle refurbishes Herzog’s sexual energy. At Ludeyville, Herzog watches pregnant Madeleine through “a cover of honey-

suckle that bent the screen inward” and imagines that her “beauty makes men breeders, studs and servants” (H, p. 152). Again he picks up “a bouquet of violets dropped from the hands” of a supposedly unhappy bride which smelled “like female tears” and remembers his own house in Ludeyville: “By now the peonies were wide open, the mock-orange bushes fragrant” (H, p. 275). As he leaves his aged foster mother, Tante Taube, by the back door, he notices the honeysuckle: “Honeysuckle grew along the rainsprout, as in his father’s time, and fragrant in the evening—almost too rich.” And his fear of Denise vanishes (H, p. 310). At the end of the novel when he returns to his Ludeyville house, he looks through the lavatory and sees the rose that “gave him comfort;” and finds it “shapely,” “red” and “genital” (H, p. 379). And once more he sees the honeysuckles growing profusely, pulling the screen down (H, p. 379). He lies under a locust tree looking at its “light, tiny, but delicious flowers” and feels happy and free (H, p. 397). He plucks flowers, yellow lilies and peonies, and waits for Ramona in atonement for once rejecting the idea that such a gift to her could symbolize a promise of matrimony (H, p. 415). Flowers become symbolic of freedom, rejoice and independence in the novel. Charlie too finds greater satisfaction in “contemplating flowers” than in the “Romance of Business” (HG, p. 457). And it is not without significance that after he reburies Humboldt a spring flower, a crocus, blooms suggesting rebirth (HG, pp. 474-5).

Olfactory images inflame amatory feelings and are indicative of a strong belief in complete felicity. Herzog embraces Ramona on Lexington Avenue and she “gives him still another perfumed kiss” (H, p. 253). Whenever Ramona’s shoulder perfume reaches Herzog’s nostrils there is an immediate “lustful quacking in the depths. Quack. Quack” (H, p. 410). It is no coincidence that she owns a flower shop on Lexington Avenue (H, p. 23). Herzog remembers the “country girl” charm of his first wife Daisy in her “bare neck and shoulders”

and how “he inhaled the fragrance of summer apples” (H, pp. 157-8). After the estrangement with Madeleine, at the police station, Herzog feels “that sweet and sour fragrance of hers ... would never again have the same power over him” (H, p. 364). Charlie sees Renata as “a beautiful palooka, a dumb broad.... Kama Sutra dream girl;” “like a leopard or a race horse, she was a ‘noble animal’” (HG, p. 188). Auditory and olfactory images enhance Renata’s appeal; her “light voice,” her laughter “ventilated her entire being—down to the uterus.” Her strong feminine smells remain even after she is gone. He finds the “fragrant hankie,” that she gives him to dry his eyes, is “oddly redolent, as if she kept it not in her pocketbook but between her legs.” As he puts it to his face he feels “some comfort” (HG, p. 333). Charlie finds sleeping with her “a distinct event,” for “her odour alone was a great solace at night” (HG, p. 319). Her personal emanations affected even the skins of the animals which composed her coat” (HG, pp. 188–90). When Renata passes out on the sofa after a couple of martinis Charlie discovers she is naked under the coat: “The deep female odour arose from her. When I saw how things were I buttoned her up from sheer respect.... Next I raised the window. Unfortunately it drove off her wonderful odour but she had to have fresh air” (HG, p. 213). Charlie remembers petting Naomi Lutz behind the rose garden in winter. Warming himself inside her racoon coat he smells “a delicious mixture of coon skin and maiden fragrance” (HG, p. 77). When Louie unstraps the naked winnowa Street woman he is excited by her “acid” and “sweet aftersmell,” her chocolate “fragrance” (STRMB, pp. 196, 214).

The desire for self-centeredness and complete felicity prevent Bellow’s characters from making long-range commitments. This is true especially in love and marriage. They are always eager to encounter new sensations, experiences, and relationships and, as such, cannot keep long-range commitments. Their condition is aptly described by the sea that symbolizes constant change. The

“invading sea,” Sammler points out, in his own learned way, is a “metaphor for the multiplication of facts and sensations. The earth being an earth of ideas” (MSP, p. 8). It seems as if Sammler is enumerating the traits of the Greek sea god Proteus. Whenever Charlie sees the ocean his “heart tips over with happiness—it feels so free!” He wants to know what the sea is “doing within the eight-inch diameter of [his] skull?” (HG, p. 306). Herzog seems hopeful that “Life is something more than such a cloud of particles, mere facticity” (H, p. 325). Augie finally accepts that “the only possessing is of the moment” (AAM, p. 407).

A typical Bellovian protagonist locates himself in the flux of society by cultivating new ideas and changing partners. Sammler points out that “human beings, when they have room, when they have liberty and are supplied also with ideas, mythologize themselves. They legendize. They expand by imagination and try to rise above the limitations of the ordinary forms of common life” (MSP, p. 135). Herzog tests ideas of many philosophers—like Teilhard de Chardin, Whitehead, Fichte, Kierkegaard, Robespierre, Rousseau—but finds that he cannot believe in any for long. This attitude also manifests itself in his relationship with women. He establishes extra-marital relations with other women like Ramona, Wanda, and Sono Iguchi during the time he is married to Madeleine. Augie too cannot sustain a relationship for long. His infatuation with the beautiful heiress, Esther Fenchel, wanes when she does not reciprocate. His love for Lucy Magus starts as make-believe and quickly ends. Similarly his infatuation with Hilda Novinson and desire for Willa Steiner and Sophie Geratis die out too. In Thea Fenchel’s case, he falls in love with her only to oblige and this is soon over when he meets another woman, Stella Chesney). He marries Stella but as the novel closes, it is not certain if the marriage would last. Already Augie’s loyalties have begun to shift. He admits having an extra-marital affair

with an alluring Texan girl on a ship. Seen by women as a philanderer, a wolf, seeking his own pleasure, Augie has pretensions to be a philanthropist, a kind-hearted soul, seeking the kindness of others in response. An irresistible impulse compels him to be irresolute, till he begins to believe that love “was so rare that if one had it the other should capitulate to it” (AAM, p. 302)? The transitory love that the men feel toward others is what Herzog calls “potato love.” He describes its symptoms: “Amorphous swelling, hungry, indiscriminate, cowardly.” When Sandor advises Herzog not to be “such a rolling stone,” calls him “my innocent, kind-hearted boy” and kisses him, Herzog feels the potato love (H, pp. 114–5). Characters are unwilling to make long-term commitments, as such commitments demand compromises and threaten a self-centered self-image. Charile’s ex-wife, Denise, wants a reunion for everyone’s well-being. But she realizes that Charile “couldn’t bear a serious relationship” with her or the children (HG, p. 45).

Not desiring limited happiness in compromises, Bellovian heroes either reject the company of women or purchase their favors to avoid any obligation. The aging protagonist Sammler is an example of the former type, while Augie March is of the latter. The purchase of physical love is clearly illustrated in the three mature novels of Bellow, namely The Adventures of Augie March, Herzog, and Humboldt’s Gift. For instance, Bellow presents Augie’s relationship with women as “basically only a transaction” (AAM, p. 124). It is interesting to note that he moves from the purchase of sexual favors from women like Hilda, Willa, Sophie, and Thea, through purchase of social class from Lucy Magus, and finally purchase of innocence from Stella. Deep within he discerns that his latest acquisition—Stella’s childhood innocence, “simplemindedness,” “deception,” and “naive seriousness”—would soon be over (AAM, p. 527). Charlie admits that he was so passionately attached to Renata that it became a

kind of “erotic bondage.” And when she withholds her favors, having attached herself to Flonzaley, Charlie wishes “to purchase her consideration.” He informs us: “The more facts I put into her the more I needed her, and the more I needed her the more her price increased” (HG, p. 347).

Boredom sets in when the relationship peters out. Herzog finds that “endless repetition threatens sanity” (H, p. 92). Augie gets into a stagnant state which causes “deformations” of the self. He finds out that “Boredom is the conviction that you can’t change. You begin to worry about loss of variety in your character, and the uncomplimentary comparison with others in your secret mind, and this makes you feel your own tiresomeness” (AAM, p. 504). When Augie’s romance with Thea turns routine, he escapes her by playing cards and refusing to go to the Mexican mountains to hunt iguanas with her. The iguana or the lizard, again referred to in Mosby’s Memoirs, absorbs “heat with its belly”. It symbolizes passion and heat. Therefore symbolically, Augie denies his passion for Thea when he refuses to go hunting. He mourns “how impossible it is to live without something infinitely mighty and great” (AAM, p. 413). When he falls from his horse and breaks his teeth he understands that insecurity and uncertainty are better options than staying with Thea. Henderson too sets out on a path of self-discovery after he breaks his bridgework in Africa (HRK, p. 153). Charlie imagines the boredom of a life with Naomi Lutz, if he had married her: “Fifteen thousand nights embracing Naomi and I would have smiled at the solitude and boredom of the grave. I would have needed no bibliography, no stock portfolios, no medal from the Legion of Honour” (HG, p. 78).

Surrogates and new partners always create an exciting emotional equilibrium in Bellow’s characters. On the one hand, they heighten insecurity and, on the other, accelerate the pace of felicity. Implicated in an imbroglio by Cantabile

and detained by the Homicide Department, Charlie frets about his seven o'clock dinner appointment with Renata because he knows Renata has a temper. He thinks: "Substitutes are forever haunting people's minds. Even the most stable and balanced individuals have a secretly chosen replacement in reserve somewhere, and Renata was not one of the stablest" (HG, p. 274).

When women leave, characters confront a deep emotional crisis. In Herzog this is stated in detail. Herzog sought an accomplished wife, who would care and comfort him, but discovers that Madeleine falls short of his expectations. She is dirty in her habits, careless about the house (H, p. 75), and is self-centered. Desperately, he forces her to conform sexually and psychologically and instead accelerates the process of falling apart. His relationship with her is an ongoing process of rape, till finally she leaves him for Valentine Gersbash. Herzog admits that living with Madeleine "filled a very special need" in him as she brought "ideology" into his life (H, p. 406). He complains that his "sexual powers had been damaged by Madeleine" (H, p. 12). His castration is complete when she forcibly keeps the car (which expresses his manhood). He accepts the situation meekly (H, p. 101). Later he complains to Aunt Zelda that the reason why he has "been reckless about women" was that he was "trying to get back [his] self-respect" (H, p. 52).

Hortense, Charlie's sister-in-law, comments on his relationship with Denise: "The guy is pissing against the wind in Chicago. He needs broads, but he picks women who cripple him" (HG, p. 391). Charlie admits about the bewitching but disabling charm of Renata: "No doubt she was a dangerous person but I would never be greatly interested in any woman incapable of harm, in any woman who didn't threaten me with loss" (HG, p. 403). Similarly, Wilhelm, in Seize the Day and Charlie in Humboldt's Gift, complain of castra-

tion by their wives. Dr. Tamkin sums up the phenomenon accurately: “Innately, the female knows how to cripple by sickening a man with guilt. It is a very special *deconstruct*, and she sends her curse to make a fellow impotent.” But some men answer, “You can’t do that yet. You’re a half-way case” (STD, p. 105). Incidentally the loyal “tiger wife” represented in *Sorella Forstein* is a dying breed belonging to an old world of Jewish certainties (STRMB, p. 26). Modern women in Bellow seem more concerned about their own satisfaction. The theme of castration in Bellow’s novels, perhaps, could be a modern version of the Samson-Delilah legend. The breakdown of love or marriage becomes a metaphor for coming down from the peak experiences of sex and love.

In moments of crisis, Bellow’s heroes approach their friends for help, especially those who, they think, are worldly wise. This is a recurrent motif in Bellow’s fiction—from *The Adventures of Augie March* to *Humboldt’s Gift*. Augie shares his unhappiness with a Russian after he is jilted by Thea. But the Russian has seen bigger dissappointments than love and says: “You are lucky to be still disappointed in love. Later it may be even more terrible” (AAM, p. 412). Herzog goes to Ramona for advice as Madeleine harasses him, and to his father for money as Denise demands more (H, p. 303). In the second case Charile goes to Thaxter for comfort as Cantabile threatens him and Renata runs away from him. Charlie seems to exploit the good offices of his family and friends. His brother, Julius, is about to have an open-heart surgery at Houston and Charlie goes to see him. Julius, however, suspects, and rightly so, that Charlie is angling for some advantage. On his side Charlie feels that Julius hates him. When suspicion on both sides are allayed, strong family feeling surface. Julius makes Charlie promise to marry his wife, Hortense, if he does not survive the operation. Charlie could feel “a mass of love” between them (HG, pp. 345, 388). With Alec Szathmar, his boyhood friend, Charlie’s relationship is similar. Charlie

requests Szathmar to arrange a meeting with Renata once he catches the “West Side sex malaria” (HG, p. 200). Afterwards he criticizes Szathmar and retreats from him. In brief, protagonists do not wish to share the fraternity once their crisis is over. They only seek help, and once the crisis is over the relationship is temporarily suspended.

The family acquires greater significance in *More Die of Heart-Break*. The strength and weakness of nuclear and extended families are explored in some detail. A condescending story-teller, Kenneth explores his relationship and friendship with his uncle Benn Crader—a world renowned botanist, who possesses a special gift of looking into the heart of plants, drawing sustenance from it (MDHB, pp. 105, 127). Through a series of love entanglements (both Benn’s and Kenneth’s) the novel tries to understand the world of feelings and strong emotional ties. The title of the novel itself suggests the strong value Uncle Benn attaches to companionship and sexual needs. However he does not want to give himself completely to the other person; “self interest is the very heart of capitalist ethics” (MDHB, p. 89). Kenneth admits that it is difficult to make “a case of enduring human bonds” (MDHB, p. 43). His parents dislike his strong attachment to Uncle Benn. They feel that Uncle Benn’s unstable family life is affecting their son’s ability to establish a happy family of his own. Treckie, the mother of Kenneth’s daughter, refuses to marry him. His uncle, a widower, marries a second time to a beauty Matilda Layamon, but happiness is nowhere in sight. Kenneth wonders if this is the fate of successful people: “The greater your achievements, the less satisfactory your personal and domestic life will be” (MDHB, pp. 38–9). Girlie shows in Kyoto and contact with Professor Komatsu does not take care of “the erotic gratification” both are seeking (MDHB, p. 69). Uncle Benn admits in the end that he probably is “a phoenix who runs with arsonists” and wonders if he “can rise from these ashes” to take control of his

life (MDHB, pp. 334–35). The twin themes of love and death occupy the protagonist completely. A somewhat different Saul Bellow emerges in this novel. Though the farcical humor and intellectual hesitation still exist, the intense emotions of a Herzog or a Henderson are missing. Too many allusions, asides and arraignments affect the natural flow of narration. Undigested responses, touristy descriptions of Europe and Japan, and sketchy characters mar a potentially interesting novel.

Notes and References

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.