

The Implication of Humboldt's Gift

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1 Matter and Mind

Humboldt's Gift, Saul Bellow's sixth novel, is published in 1975. It was so highly valued that it was thought to have contributed to his winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in the next year. It is a tragicomedy mainly about the lives of modern American literary figures, full of funny and farcical stories, exploring as the main theme the significance of art, literature and the individual existence of human beings in the modern world, where science and technology, that is, things material and physical, hold great predominance over art and literature, and human inner spirituality.

The story of the novel is briefly as follows. In 1930's a young poet named Von Humboldt Fleisher published a book of ballads entitled *Harlequin Ballads*, which immediately attracted the readers' and critics' attention. He was welcomed with great applause by the reading public as a new type of long-awaited avant-garde poet.

In those days, Charles Citrine, the protagonist of the novel, was a student at the University of Wisconsin, absorbed in literature. He was so much impressed by Humboldt's ballads that in no time he managed to go over to New York, riding on a bus for fifty hours to meet Humboldt and study literature under his strong influence.

However, Humboldt's success lasted no more than ten years. He indulged himself in alcohol, drugs and women, at one time he was taken into a mental hospital suffering from manic-depressive psychosis, and was finally buried in oblivion.

By contrast, Citrine became well-known as a prominent playwright, biographer and historian. His play *Von Trenck* was a great hit, running for eight months on Broadway. He won a Pulitzer prize twice and was awarded the Legion of Honor by the French government. Of course, he got a great sum of money and became acquainted with many great figures in political, economic and scholastic circles, including President John F. Kennedy. Later he moved to his hometown Chicago and was highly esteemed as a celebrity in that locality, which is the main stage of the story.

Thus, Humboldt and Citrine, close and friendly literary comrades, once teacher and faithful disciple, were alienated because of the reverse of fortune and the money troubles between them. Humboldt even felt enmity against Citrine, yet Citrine continued to entertain a measure of good will towards and respect for Humboldt as a literary superior and true poet.

Humboldt's offbeat behavior became worse in time, and even his wife Kathleen abandoned him because of his violent illusion of her faithlessness. He died a sudden

death from a heart attack, alone in a shabby apartment in New York. Shortly before his death, Citrine happened to catch sight of him on the street in New York. Citrine was so shocked by Humboldt's miserable appearance that he could not speak to Humboldt but left at once, in spite of himself, as if to flee from him.

Citrine feels so much remorse for this unfriendly behavior of his that ever since he has thought of Humboldt as often as not with poignant regret as well as nostalgic sweetness. This accounts for the significant role played by the dead Humboldt throughout the story.

Meanwhile Citrine's worldly fame and success gradually tends towards decline. He is required to pay an exorbitant sum of money to his ex-wife Denise for compensation as a result of the divorce suit. He also needs a lot of money to curry favor with his mistress Renata, who is extravagant and "as full of schemes and secrets as the Court of Byzantium (313)". Besides, he squanders a huge sum of money and runs into bad debt backing his friend Thaxter's project to start a literary magazine, *The Ark*. Furthermore, a small-time gangster named Ronald Cantabile, who cheats him at cards at George Swiebel's house, puts Citrine deeply in debt and then extorts money from him. Cantabile keeps hanging on to Citrine to take advantage of him and squeeze money from him.

One day Cantabile orders Citrine by phone to pay the debt at a Russian Bath. When Citrine goes there with the money, Cantabile is suddenly gripped by the need to relieve himself. He forces Citrine to go into the toilet with him at gunpoint. "He was seated now with the gun held in both palms, his hands between his knees, his eyes first closing then dilating greatly (83)."

In this unusual, scary and yet somewhat humorous situation, watching Cantabile defecating, Citrine thinks about the human condition over-all. He thinks the reason why Cantabile wants to humiliate him is that he is a celebrity who has received public honors, a man of culture or intellectual attainment. He supposes that perhaps fantasies of inflicting severe punishment on him, beating his brain out, has loosened Cantabile's bowels. (83) He continues to think further:

It was even possible that I was a more limited person than a fellow like Cantabile in spite of my concentration on intellectual achievement. For it would never have occurred to me to inflict anger on anyone by such means. This might have been a sign that his vital endowment of natural imagination was more prodigal and fertile than mine. (83)

This shocking scene reminds us of the similar scene of the black pickpocket who exposes himself to Mr. Sammler in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. Both imply a severe attack on the brain by the body, on intellectual attainments, including worldly success, fame and money, by man's more natural and primitive powers. Further, as Roger Shattuck points out, "Both scenes establish an emphatically physical base for the action and

certify the authenticity of the works that contain them (Shattuck 196)."

Two well-trying themes are noticeable in the story. The comedy of a vain man's attempt to age is depicted gracefully or even honorably. There is a persistent clinging to the second theme: the peril of worldly success and its connections with money, sex, power, and crime. The setting for the themes is Chicago, a vibrant city of people and places with a myriad of associations. Other places in the story such as New York, Corpus Christi, Madrid, and Paris, are only used for the characters in transit. In contrast, Chicago has its own personality or character, not to say mind, with an exciting material existence. Cantabile is really part of its entrails. (Shattuck 195)

The outrageous gangster Cantabile comes near to overshadowing Humboldt, a more orthodox hounded genius, in New York. Cantabile plays his role as the male Fury who beats Citrine awake to his predicament as no woman can do. Cantabile is intended to awake Citrine from a kind of slumber. (Shattuck 196)

Citrine goes on a trip to Europe with his girlfriend Renata, fleeing from his dreadful situation in Chicago. In the plane, having taken off from O'Hare, Citrine feels really happy, temporarily free from his worldly ordeals, and his happy feelings lead him to wakefulness or a kind of revelation:

Once in a while, I get shocked into upper wakefulness, I turn a corner, see the ocean, and my heart tips over with happiness—it feels so free! Then I have the idea that, as well as beholding, I can also be beheld from yonder and am not a discrete object but incorporated with the rest, with universal sapphire, purple blue. For what is this sea, this atmosphere, doing within the eight-inch diameter of your skull? (I say nothing of the sun and the galaxy which are also there.) At the center of the beholder there must be space for the whole, and this nothing-space is not an empty nothing but a nothing reserved for everything. (313)

In this meditation of Citrine's, there is a revelation which suggests that the physical, symbolized by Cantabile's defecation, and the intellectual, emblemized by the Legion of Honor, are the same in essence and that our individual existence is so widely open to everything and so closely related to the rest that we do not have to worry about the limitation of individual death.

A "personal connection" to "the creation", which Citrine has sought to discover throughout the story, is implied to be within reach of each person by the novel's structure and the way the writer narrates the story. The work suggests that mind and matter should not be against each other and that matter should be taken advantage of to create a 'distinctively known world', discerning the true reality beyond appearances. (Pifer 150)

On arriving in Europe, however, Citrine finds himself betrayed and abandoned by Renata, who gets married there to a wealthy undertaker with whom she has secretly

schemed. She goes on honeymoon with her new husband, leaving Citrine alone. Thus, Citrine has really lost everything, and is nearly broke, finding difficulty in paying living expenses in Madrid.

At this critical moment, Citrine receives a letter from Kathleen, Humboldt's ex-wife, informing him that they have discovered Humboldt's will and gift for Citrine. His will is a letter of reconciliation full of warm and affectionate words for Citrine.

Humboldt's gift for Citrine turns out to be two drafts of scripts. One is the scenario which they once collaborated on when they taught at Princeton University, and the other is a summary of a play written by Humboldt himself. The scenario has already been turned into a movie, and it becomes very popular in the United States and Europe as well. A contract is made to film the summary, too. Thus, a large sum of money unexpectedly falls into Citrine's hands and saves him from his sad plight. At this point Citrine asserts himself against Cantabile.

At the end of the story, Citrine reburies Humboldt and his mother side by side in new graves at the Valhalla Cemetery. In this last scene of the reinterment, symbolizing the friendship between the two literary figures, crocuses are found to be beginning to bloom close to Citrine's feet:

Menasha and I went toward the limousine. The side of his foot brushed away some of last autumn's leaves and he said, looking through his goggles, "What's this, Charlie, a spring flower?"

"It is. I guess it's going to happen after all. On a warm day like this everything looks ten times deader."

"So it's a little flower," Menasha said. "They used to tell one about a kid asking his grumpy old man when they were walking in the park, 'What's the name of this flower, Papa?' and the old guy is peevish and he yells, 'How should I know? Am I in the millinery business?' Here's another, but what do you suppose they're called, Charlie?"

"Search me," I said. "I'm a city boy myself. They must be crocuses." (487)

And then there is Citrine's very off-hand way of recognizing the flowers.

The "crocuses" in Humboldt's reburial scene at the end of the story seem to have both literal and figurative meanings. These herald, of course, returning spring as a seen phenomenon, but at the same time, more significantly they imply the "unseen" process of revival beyond the death of each flower, that is to say, the enduring reality of the flowers. (Pifer 150)

It may be true that the ending of this novel with the "crocuses" is typical of Bellow in its vagueness, but the reader can discern that Citrine will now aim to lead a different life, beyond the phenomenal world, against the determinism refined by scientific materialism. By focusing on the crocuses, Bellow and Citrine reject and unsettle the "collective abstractions" of contemporary "head culture", literally standing

on their head. Citrine's unusual practice of standing on his head is meant both for his health and for his reversal and revival of life. (Pifer 150-151)

2 Collective Abstraction and Self-deception

According to Cowles, a human being wants, from his or her inner nature, to maintain his or her state of mind in order to survive. We usually like to have a worldview that makes us comfortable, satisfied and coherent, living in harmony with outer world, while the world itself baffles our expectation, going on its own way with unexpected changes, unfavorable uncertainties and confusion set against our wishes for order and stability. In these circumstances, we cannot help in most cases twisting ourselves from our real self, out of our necessity to survive, evading the conflict between ourselves and the world or reality where we live. This is self-deception. It is, as it were, our natural self-defending instinct, which may be justified in some cases, but at the same time it is our fearful and misleading inner temptation which not only seeks a compromise between ourselves and reality but also destroys our identity or our true self. More dreadfully, self-deception is accompanied within our mind by sincerity, not by faithlessness, entailing collusion with other social elements. (Cowles 210)

In *Humboldt's Gift* self-deception takes various kinds of forms. Escaping from self-deception and trying to regain the authenticity of the true self is the central issue for Charlie Citrine, the protagonist of this novel. He tries to abandon his false self, which is socially imposed and sexually diverted, and return to his true self by listening to the cry from the depth of his soul. (Cowles 211)

Throughout the story, Citrine often refers to collective abstractions, self-deception, faked idols or the public colonization of the private sphere. These may be the same in essence or essentially closely related to one another. In the following example Citrine tells us much about these illusions:

Quite recently, last spring, I found myself thinking about this in an odd connection. I was in a French train with Renata, taking a trip which, like most trips, I neither needed nor desired. Renata pointed to the landscape and said, "Isn't that beautiful out there!" I looked out, and she was right. Beautiful was indeed there. But I had seen Beautiful many times, and so I closed my eyes. I rejected the plastered idols of the Appearances. These idols I had been trained, along with everybody else, to see, and I was tired of their tyranny. I even thought, The painted veil isn't what it used to be. The damn thing is wearing out. Like a roller-towel in a Mexican men's room. I was thinking of the power of collective abstractions, and so forth. We crave more than ever the radiant vividness of boundless love, and more and more the barren idols thwart this. A world of categories devoid of spirit wait for life to return. Humboldt was supposed to be an instrument of this revival. This mission or vocation was

reflected in his face. The hope of new beauty. The promise, the secret of beauty. (16-17)

Citrine shows us that we are unconsciously imposed upon by collective abstractions, stale idols and led into self-deception. In other words, we are unknowingly trained not only how to think but also how to see and how to feel. Citrine also shows us here that he looked up to Humboldt as an iconoclast and expected that Humboldt would break plastered idols and destroy collective abstractions.

Humboldt is really the most important of all the characters surrounding Citrine and representing various options. His poetry teaches Citrine a traditional means of transcendence through imagination. But unfortunately America cannot accept true poets and so it destroys Humboldt for its own defense. (Cowles 212)

America is making its point to the public, exposing to them its miserable victim Humboldt in order to defend its materialism: "Fellow Americans, listen. If you abandon materialism and the normal pursuits of life you wind up at Bellevue like this poor kook." (156) Though defeated, Humboldt fought bravely against the collective abstractions of materialism and the usual American pursuit of life.

Unfortunately, however, Humboldt has a dual personality. He is partly self-deceptive himself, affected by the collective abstractions of money and the American dream. Thus, in a sense, he ruins himself in his attempt to gain money and social status, losing his identity as a true poet.

There are two outstanding characteristics immediately noticeable in this novel: one is the world of distraction, more wild and hectic than ever, and the other is the mystical nature, outstanding and significant. The mystery is related to Steiner and his anthroposophy. Citrine takes advantage of his odd nature, for example, his liking for the sensational, to get whatever spiritually significant experiences he can. Like other familiar protagonists Bellow has produced, Citrine is comically willing to have new experiences, however eccentric they may seem, as long as he can get something spiritually higher. Though he thinks that Steiner's theories may be lunatic, he becomes interested in Steiner's anthroposophy with a view to getting some possible knowledge about the transcendental. Thus, Citrine is parallel to Henderson trying Dahfu's lion-therapy and Herzog resorting to crazy letter-writing to recover his mental balance. However, Citrine's attempt at metaphysical exploration is no less ambiguous than ever, showing a familiar Bellowian ambivalence. (Schraepen 203-5)

The ambiguous and ambivalent in this case means first of all that Steiner's anthroposophy is intended here to have a dual implication. It may be helpful to hear the inner voice beneath the deceptive-self and eventually reach the true-self. Thus, it possibly serves to break out collective abstractions. But at the same time there is a possibility that anthroposophy itself may be another extended and lunatic collective abstraction itself.

Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) was a German literary scholar and philosopher who

founded anthroposophy, his brand of theosophy. His chief works are *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and Its Attainment*, *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*, *Between Death and Rebirth*, and *The Occult Significance of Blood*. Characteristic of his doctrines are metempsychosis and spiritual communication during sleep. The headquarters of anthroposophy is the Goetheanum, or Rudolf Steiner Institute, near Basel. He also founded theaters, schools and study centers, and some of them still exist. Twentieth-century artists like Kandinsky have turned to Steiner for a new content in art, just as an earlier generation did to Swedenborg. (Shattuck 199)

Citrine is somewhat serious about Steiner's ideas, partly because they are closely related to sleep. One of the reasons why Citrine comes back to settle in Chicago is that he has a secret motive for writing a significant work, wanting to do something on what he sees as the chronic war between sleep and consciousness that goes on in human nature. Citrine takes the characteristic of the present moment in civilization as boredom. He thinks that Chicago is the ideal place in which to write his master essay "Boredom", on a conspicuous symptom of the human spirit under industrialism. (108) Citrine explains further:

Then my respected friend Durnwald mentioned, kidding, that the famous but misunderstood Dr. Rudolf Steiner had much to say on the deeper aspects of sleep. Steiner's books, which I began to read lying down, made me want to get up. He argued that between the conception of an act and its execution by the will there fell a gap of sleep. For one of man's souls was a sleep-soul. In this, human beings resembled the plants, whose whole existence is sleep. This made a very deep impression on me. The truth about sleep could only be seen from the perspective of an immortal spirit. I had never doubted that I had such a thing. But I had set this fact aside quite early. I kept it under my hat. These beliefs under your hat also press on your brain and sink you down into the vegetable realm. (109)

Boredom can be a mental situation in which the human spirit is paralyzed by the collective abstraction of industrialism. Citrine's practice of standing on his head is not only a strategy for preventing age but also metaphorically for keeping himself awake to the spiritual concealed under his hat.

Thus, Steiner and his anthroposophy are also very effectively utilized to show the process to and the efforts for the true-self, breaking through the trap of the collective abstractions and taking off the costumes of self-deception.

3 What Humboldt's Gift Impies

This novel is certainly an excellent farcical comedy. However, its most important significance is thought not to lie in its comical character but in its different allegorical implications concealed behind the farce, based on such traditional European

allegories as *Aesop's Fables* and *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift. In order to suggest the allegorical character of this novel, the author himself cleverly inserts a few episodes with reference to Jonathan Swift, for example, as Citrine's following remarks show:

What a human being is—I always had my own sense of this. For I did not have to live in the land of the horses, like Dr. Gulliver, my sense of mankind was strange enough without travel. In fact I traveled not to seek foreign oddities but to get away from them. I was drawn also to philosophical idealists because I was perfectly sure that *this* could not be *it*. Plato in the Myth of Er confirmed my sense that this was not my first time around. We had all been here before and would presently be here again. There was another place. Maybe a man like me was imperfectly reborn. (89-90)

Just as *Gulliver's Travels* was an allegorical form of accusation against human beings, *Humboldt's Gift* is a book which sharply reminds the reader of the perilous situation where art and literature are set, captured by material civilization in an America full of confusion and lunacy, as Bellow himself argued in his Nobel Lecture:

Every year we see scores of books and articles by writers who tell Americans what a state they are in. All reflect the current crises; all tell us what we must do about them—these analysts are produced by the very disorder and confusion they prescribe for. It is as a novelist that I am considering the extreme moral sensitivity of our contemporaries, their desire for perfection, their intolerance of the defects of society, the touching, the comical boundlessness of their demands, their anxiety, their irritability, their sensitivity, their tender-mindedness, their goodness, their convulsiveness, the recklessness with which they experiment with drugs and touch therapies and bombs. The ex-Jesuit Malachi Martin in his book on the Church compares the modern American to Michelangelo's sculpture *The Captive*. He sees "an unfinished struggle to emerge whole" from a block of matter. The American "captive" is beset in his struggle by "interpretations, admonitions, forewarnings and descriptions of himself by the self-appointed prophets, priests, judges and prefabricators of his travail," says Martin.

If we take a little time to look more closely at this travail, what do we see? In private life, disorder or near panic. In families—for husbands, wives, parents, children—confusion; in civic behavior, in personal loyalties, in sexual practices (I will not recite the whole list: we are tired of hearing it)—further confusion. It is with this private disorder and public bewilderment that we try to live. We stand open to all anxieties. The decline and fall of everything is our daily dread; we are agitated in private life and tormented by public questions. (Bellow 1994 92)

This is Bellow's serious insight into and description of the situation of present American civilization, which is also depicted and described in *Humboldt's Gift* through the eyes of Humboldt and Citrine. This lecture was delivered in Stockholm on December 12 in 1976, only one year after the novel was published. So it is helpful for the reader to understand that the civilization which has captured Citrine and other characters is really problematical, serious and even perilous, however comical and farcical it may appear.

Then, what implications do Humboldt's life and death have? Citrine thinks about it, meditating according to anthroposophic methods on the green sofa. "For after all Humboldt did what poets in crass America are supposed to do. He chased ruin and death even harder than he had chased women." So did Edgar Allan Poe, found dead in the gutter, Hart Crane, Jarrell and John Berryman. "The weakness of the spiritual powers is proved in the childishness, madness, drunkenness, and despair of these martyrs. Orpheus moved stones and trees. But a poet can't perform a hysterectomy or send a vehicle out of the solar system." (117-118) He adds, lamenting:

Miracle and power no longer belong to him. So poets are loved, but loved because they just can't make it here. They exist to light up the enormity of the awful tangle and justify the cynicism of those who say, "If I were not such a corrupt, unfeeling bastard, creep, thief, and vulture, I couldn't get through this either. Look at these good and tender and soft men, the *best* of us. They succumbed, poor loonies." So this, I was meditating, is how successful bitter hard-faced and cannibalistic people exult. (118)

It is not merely Humboldt but art or the spiritual itself that died miserably lost on the street of materialistic civilization. Citrine's deep insight into the significance of Humboldt's life and death reflects Bellow's poignant criticism of modern American civilization.

What does Humboldt's posthumous gift mean then? The news of the gift reaches Citrine when he has lost fame, money, and woman, everything, and is adrift on the streets of Madrid. It really comes as if Harry Houdini, a genius in jugglery, slipped out of the coffin and as if Humboldt's immortal soul came up out of the grave, justifying Steiner's theory of immortality. It seems as if Humboldt came in disguise to give Citrine in distress a new artistic inspiration as a token of the true friendship between them.

In order to give some reality to Humboldt performing this kind of feat at the end of the story, Bellow carefully and elaborately introduces into the story at its early stage the real famous juggler Harry Houdini, who was born in Appleton, Citrine's birthplace.

Humboldt was especially attached to the World Historical Individual, the

interpreter of the Spirit, the mysterious leader who imposed on Mankind the task of understanding him, etcetera. Such topics were common enough in the Village, but Humboldt brought a peculiar inventiveness and a manic energy to such discussions, a passion for intricacy and for Finneganesque double meanings and hints. "And in America," he said, "this Hegelian individual would probably come from left field. Born in Appleton, Wisconsin, maybe, like Harry Houdini or Charlie Citrine." (18)

This also suggests how elaborately the novel is constructed, however digressive and written at ease it may look.

Symbolically enough, it is not until both Humboldt and Citrine are stripped thoroughly of their material and worldly trappings and ostentation that they get momentum for their spiritual reverse and revival. From a slightly different viewpoint, however, either Citrine or Humboldt can be taken for Bellow's alter ego. Then, the denouement of the novel suggests the possibility of the harmonious fusion between the material and the spiritual, between Americanism and Judaism inside Bellow's mind, implying the revival of civilization as well.

Saul Bellow believes in the significance and validity of the traditional style of fiction, sharing the same views on art and literature as Joseph Conrad (1857-1924). Though many people nowadays think that science and technology have replaced art and literature, Bellow does not lose his faith in them.

In his Nobel Lecture in 1976, he confesses his absorption in reading the novels of Conrad in his college days, saying, "One semester I registered for a course in Money and Banking and then concentrated my reading in the novels of Joseph Conrad (Bellow 1994 88)." Then he continues his lecture on Conrad's literary views:

He stated in the preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* that art was an attempt to render the highest justice to the visible universe: it tried to find in that universe, in matter as well as in the facts of life, what was fundamental, enduring, essential. The writer's method of attaining the essential was different from that of the thinker or the scientist, who knew the world by systematic examination. To begin with, the artist had only himself; he descended within himself, and in the lonely regions to which he descended he found "the terms of his appeal." He appealed, said Conrad, "to that part of our being which is a gift, not an acquisition, to the capacity for delight and wonder... our sense of pity and pain, to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation—and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts... which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living and the living to the unborn." (Bellow 1994 88-89)

It goes without saying that these literary views of Conrad's are really Bellow's. It

might be better to say that on this very important occasion Bellow expressed his most cherished literary conviction through the voice of Conrad, whom he ardently admired.

Therefore, the word 'gift' means not merely material objects like scripts but also our inherent artistic talent. In this case, however, a gift, an artistic talent, has profound implications, as Conrad explained. In short, a gift is the inherent human capacity for appealing to and perceiving true human feelings and for binding together all creation—dead Humbolt to living Citrine and living Citrine to reviving crocuses.

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