

## CRISES OF THE SPIRIT: DANTE AND BELLOW

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The thematic similarities between three of the late-life novels of my father, Saul Bellow, and Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* cause me to consider them as parallel narratives of a mid-life crisis of the spirit. The three novels and Dante's three-part epic revolve around personal faults, errors of judgment, and moral failures that are, to a greater or lesser extent, confessional. The deepest similarities reside within what my father called "the big questions facing mankind" – issues common to two great writers as they were tested by adverse life circumstance, advancing age, and the contemplation of death. *Inferno* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) take up the prevalence of evil. *Purgatorio* and *Humboldt's Gift* (1975) examine mortality, the necessity of a spiritual cleansing to prepare for the afterlife, and the influential role of the artist in society. *Paradiso* and *More Die of Heartbreak* (1987) address the nature of and forms taken by love.

My reading and the personal and literary conclusions I draw are those of an elder son who shared sixty years of mystification at the incomprehensibility of life with his father. I connect themes, thoughts, and reflections upon them to events I witnessed, lived through, and spoke about with Saul. I cannot say whether he considered the three novels to be linked in the manner I am asserting but I tend to doubt it. However, Saul often spoke about feeling compelled to write about the "big questions" as death approached. In contrast I am firmly convinced that throughout his writing career Saul Bellow lodged his deepest personal concerns in the voices of his narrators. I describe my filial reactions to the breadth of his literary works in *Saul Bellow's Heart*, a memoir I published several years ago from which I will quote:

In the novels I often find what amount to familiar snapshots from the Bellow family album: images of people, stories, and lives I know well. Thoughts and feelings my father places in the

mouths of narrators are, on occasion, so clear to me that, at moments I feel as if I am peering over the shoulder of Saul Bellow the author as he writes in my father's diary. My reading strengthens impressions I had garnered in our quiet conversations, and I take them as an invitation to move thoughtfully between works of fiction and the life of a man who took pains to protect what Saul called his "inner life."

I will link life events during his fifth and sixth decades upon Saul Bellow's novelistic contemplations of their deeper implications. Bridging the life-literature gap is one of several leaps – some imaginative, some of critical tradition, and some personal – I will take. Another, implied by the terms by which I refer to him, is that have endeavored to parse my once-unitary experience into three aspects of him – that can, and should, be considered separately in order to understand him as fully as is possible. As I am closest to the young, idealistic man who raised me, I will use "my father" when referring to deeply personal matters and to our relationship. Next I will use "Saul" to describe the man who underwent a crisis of the spirit during those decades that coincide with my twenties and thirties. I am most distant from the famous author he became and whom I will call "Saul Bellow." I found his public persona most troubling, avoided it if possible, and fought its effects in private as I labored to protect our familial tie. Saul certainly made a firm distinction between life and art but the father, the man, and the author appeared seamless within him.

My interest centers on the effects of a crisis of the spirit upon Saul, the man, though I will move between all three aspects of him. I will use Dante, a great author who described three aspects of himself as being a man, a pilgrim, and a poet as my guide. This is but one of many parallels amplified by a brief course I took offered by OLLI in conjunction with the University of California at Berkeley that made Dante's *Divine Comedy* (henceforth shortened to the *Commedia*) come alive and

precipitated many of the ideas about him, about the *Commedia*, and about thematic parallels that are contained in this paper.

Another leap is to foreground shared themes between three novels written in prose and published over almost a twenty-year span with the *Commedia*, one epic poem divided into three. My rationale lies in Saul's choice of "big questions" – evil, spiritual purification, and love – each of which is a thematic centerpiece for the three sections of the *Commedia*. The Bellow Scholar Professor Andrew Gordon, whose comments about an earlier draft I solicited, noted in a comment that he did not know of a scholarly study that centered on multiple major novels by Saul Bellow.

Employing Dante's narrative of a spiritual crisis as a template is yet another of my leaps. The *Commedia* so thoughtfully considers events in, around, and beyond Dante's life that his epic poem has come to typify a mid-life shift wherein worldly accomplishments fall into the background as facing one's mortality, seeking meaning in life, and matters of transcendence take precedence.

Four common elements run through Dante's poetic account and characterize its essential components: a mid-life disruption of customary life patterns that jolts one's personal consciousness; a recognition of one's error and the assumption of full responsibility; an arduous journey of soul searching, self-reflection, and spiritual cleansing; and a broadened self-understanding that reveals a more correct path to be pursued thereafter. I will apply these four elements as an organizing sub-structure to amplify similarities that highlight the larger issues of evil, spiritual quests, and love that the simple linear comparisons do not. Saul Bellow's literary characters Artur Sammler, Charlie Citrine, Benn Crader and his nephew Kenneth Trachtenberg face life's challenges and, in contemporary forms, exhibit the four elements I find in Dante. The personal and wider meanings Dante and Bellow experienced and wrote about during their mid-life crises of the spirit reveal shared concerns as well as crucial differences about the dangers facing humanity in a pre-Renaissance world

dominated by a failing Catholic Church and during the epistemological chaos of the late 20th century and, likely, between the two men.

Myriad legitimate objections can be made to the leaps I take: comparing poetry to prose; the innumerable social and religious changes during the seven hundred-year gap between the literary works; combining the Bellow novels on a thematic basis; compressing a spiritual into four key elements; and departing from conventional scholarly practice where papers are grounded in multiple quotes from the original text. I find that a singular emphasis upon original language, while important, tends to place insufficient emphasis on either the shared themes or the widest parallels about human nature two aging literary giants felt compelled to address. Thus I will quote sparsely in favor of general summary, paraphrase, information gleaned about Dante from a brief but stimulating course, and my conclusions about intertwining themes that reveal fundamental similarities between these men and their ideas. As I put conventional modes on the back burner, my analysis may make errors that come with summary and paraphrase or with asserting my filial privilege. My hope is to stimulate a wide range of thoughts about matters upon which Dante and Saul Bellow felt compelled to put before their readers.

### *EVIL, INFERNO, AND MR. SAMMLER'S PLANET*

Dante begins his account at thirty-five – well into what would be considered mid-life seven hundred years ago. Florentine politics had been in chronic turmoil before 1300 when the faction with which Dante had been allied was suddenly removed from power and he was banned from his beloved home, never to return. With his roots severed, a disoriented and despairing Dante reflects upon his life path, on ethics in Florentine society, and on matters of sin and salvation in light of the rampant corruption that had contaminated the church of Rome.

Dante considers his error: to have so fully embraced earthly matters, political power, and superficial pleasures that he ignored the higher concerns of morality and faith. He embodies this concern in a poetic metaphor of being lost in a dark wood and unable to find his way. Without personal hope, Dante finds himself before the gates of Hell above which he finds the inscription "Abandon Every Hope, All You Who Enter." The source of the light Dante seeks to escape his personal and spiritual darkness is Heaven. In 1300, any veering away from the path of righteousness is clearly choosing a path of sin.

At first the worldly Dante seeks a shortcut to Heaven but any easy path is denied him. Stymied at the gate, he encounters the epic poet Virgil whose hero Aeneas successfully passed through the ardors of Hell before being able to found Rome. Knowing he is venturing into the unknown as a pilgrim and poet, Dante chooses Virgil, a man also associated with reason in 1300, as his initial mentor and guide. Virgil convinces Dante of the necessity of absorbing the lessons of Hell as the only way to become worthy of exiting its bowels, passing through Purgatory, and entering Heaven.

On their descent through the morally ordered levels of Hell, Dante converses with sinners and discovers that the lower they go, the more severe become the forms of sin. He, and by extension we, learn about the nature of sin and of the potential for its forgiveness. Dante's sinful errors are pride, heresy, and lust. Pride, for Dante what we might call extreme self-inflation, is the exaggerated arrogance characterized by Farinata, whose interest in others extends only to the pedigree of their family. Pride is the most pernicious of the deadly sins because it opens the way for a host of unbridled passions. Dante extends the meaning of heresy beyond embracing false religious beliefs to include secular pride - a conviction of being so correct that it blinds one to the merits of alternate views. In the realm of politics pride becomes so divisive that it often leads to factionalism and to war. The sin of lust was so deeply impressed upon Dante, once the author of seductive love poems, that he fainted

before its personifications, Paolo and Francesca. As she continues to evade moral responsibility for their sins – infidelity and the murder of Paolo's brother – her lover sits passive and silent. Over and over Dante hears such rationalizations from sinners until he comes to realize the full meaning of the inscription upon its gates, which is that living in Hell forever is a self-imposed condition. In order to leave one must abandon *false* hope, self-deceptive rationalizations for committing one's sin (Francesca) or the evasion of moral responsibility (Paolo). Only after absorbing the full implications of one's sin can the spiritually cleansing journey through Purgatory and eventual entry into Heaven begin.

*Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) is a sociopolitical novel written during a time of tumult in America precipitated by the Viet Nam War and the struggle for Civil Rights. Thematically it sets the darkness of human nature, the hell of war, and of genocide against the hope that scientific rationality will prevail as mankind is about to explore a celestial environment so far uncontaminated by human evil. Thus read it is a novel about awakenings with sight, blindness, second sight, foresight, hindsight, and insight as recurrent metaphors for man's chronic failure to appreciate the true impact of the evil that is right before one's eyes.

Saul was fifty-five when *Mr. Sammler's Planet* was published. Therein my father bravely and publicly confessed to having turned a blind eye to the full implications of the Holocaust for twenty years. In 1970, for the first time Saul Bellow wrote as an old man, a father rather than a son, looking back at his life and at his interpretation of history through the faulty, or perhaps not so faulty, vision of Artur Sammler.

I find striking parallels of life history and events in Saul's life and Saul Bellow's title character: a youthful disavowal, sparked by ambition, of their Jewish origins; early praise from admiring audiences; false political idealism that distracted them from the full implications of the Holocaust; a

journalistic assignment to cover the Six Day War between Israel and its surrounding Arab neighbors; and a visceral awakening thereafter that broke through the self-imposed blindness they shared.

#### DISRUPTION AND A JOLT IN SAMMLER

The personal jolt to Saul's consciousness was witnessing the Six Day War in 1967. By then he was comfortably established on the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought and I was attending graduate school in another department of the same university. Uncharacteristically my father did not promptly return the phone message I left at this time. After several days I began to worry and called a friend of his who told me he had left town to cover the war as a journalist. My worry was only heightened to know he was in a war zone. When my father returned I chided him for failing to tell me he was leaving town beforehand and for exposing himself to such danger.

His answer was, "I had to go," which I take to mean that something deep inside my father was stirred by Israel's existence hanging in the balance. It was Saul's first exposure to war but I knew he could only be satisfied by having observed its palpable hell with his own eyes. The sights, sounds, and smells of death and decay cut through the intellectual view of himself he had constructed. Saul's eyes were opened wide and Saul Bellow confessed, in novelistic form, to having failed to grasp the full implications of the Holocaust as well as to the current dangers posed by the political tumult he feared would cause a breakdown in the greater social fabric of the world.

#### ERROR AND MATTERS OF RESPONSIBILITY IN SAMMLER

Several false vanities contributed to Saul's and Artur Sammler's shared inability to see the causes and effects of the Holocaust and to having followed the wrong course for decades. Before World War II both had bought into the optimism about human nature that underlay their youthful political idealism. Saul Bellow's first published short stories received high praise from a circle of

brilliant political radicals associated with the *Partisan Review*. Intertwined with their interest in literature were Marxist and Trotskyite ideologies about change to come after the Russian Revolution that Saul now came to think had obscured an accurate understanding of the historical causes and ethical implications of World War II. Artur Sammler was also the object of praise from a similarly idealistic circle of writers and intellectuals in pre-war London.

Errors of a more personal nature were allowing literary ambition and early success to pull them away from their religious roots. When Saul was a student, academic Departments of English, much to the chagrin of my father and his talented literary friends, were pervaded by the view that Jews were not capable of understanding fiction, let alone writing it. A young Saul Bellow's talents made him a likely candidate to disprove such notions. To become a great writer concerned with universal questions, however, Saul distancing himself from the parochialism he associated with his Jewish heritage and participating in the intellectual dialog available in large cosmopolitan cities such as New York and London after World War I.

As World War II broke out, Artur Sammler left London, became caught up in the chaos of war, was captured, and narrowly escaped death – a blow from a Nazi rifle butt cost him the loss of sight in one eye. Despite such direct experience and being a Holocaust survivor, Mr. Sammler remains blind as he, like many Jews among whom Saul now counted himself, kept both eyes closed to the enormity of its evil.

Saul Bellow's metaphor for gradually regaining his sight is awakening from a twenty-year sleep. Not yet fully awake as the novel begins, his title character watches a city and a world he fears is slipping into chaos from his place of self-imposed exile, the Upper West Side of Manhattan. However, certain experiences, by no means all good, penetrate Mr. Sammler's soul. The deepest levels of his humanity, long deadened in order to survive the war and his personal losses, remain accessible. If his

soul is hearty enough to survive the Holocaust, the din caused by contemporary social chaos can also be overcome. Saul Bellow advises proffering quiet respect to the human soul so that the moral knowledge therein, knowledge we human beings so desperately need, can be revealed.

*Mr. Sammler's Planet* is the kind of genuine and full confession of error which, to Dante, was necessary for one to exit Hell. As a cosmopolitan, twentieth-century Jew, Saul sought neither absolution from sin nor access to heaven. But I find my father's repeated refrain about "coming late to the Holocaust," his insistence that evil was "a perfectly good four-letter word," and his decision not to back away from painful personal truths, moral challenges, and "the big questions" in this and subsequent novels indicate the depth of responsibility Saul took for having been so blind.

#### AN ARDUOUS JOURNEY OF SOUL SEARCHING IN SAMMLER

Their journalistic assignments to Israel were brief in time but long in implication. Forcing himself to witness the pain of war was new for Saul. But for Artur Sammler it was a return to pain from which he had insulated himself for a generation. Purposely inflicting pain upon himself is, to me, reminiscent of the scene in the 1964 film *The Pawnbroker* where Sol Nazerman, a Holocaust survivor, has to force an iron spike through his hand to regain the capacity to feel *anything*. In contrast, for Artur Sammler an almost identical journey was a return to pain he had long ago experienced. The intensity with which Saul Bellow describes the suffering his character endured makes it hard for me and likely others to understand how Artur Sammler could block it out. But, as Saul Bellow makes clear, Mr. Sammler had successfully insulated himself for a generation.

As a man who thought of himself as a clear-eyed rationalist, soul searching for Saul meant rethinking his analysis of history. The origin of the nightmare to which Mr. Sammler awakens, my father concluded, was a version of the false hope about human nature that once blinded both men to the Nazi threat. Saul's re-analysis found a contemporary echo of the Marxist rhetoric to which he had

been susceptible within the anarchy of the late 1960's – ideas he thought had grown like a cancer in the permissive atmosphere that prevailed while he slept. Saul now came to believe a version of the same ideas was responsible for the unbridled freedom he saw everywhere and abhorred. Saul feared that notions carried threats going forward: the abandonment of cultural traditions, the unraveling of the bonds that hold society together, and the exportation of human evil beyond earth's gravity.

#### TAKING A BETTER PATH IN SAMMLER

Dante's spiritual journey is also brief in time but extensive in its implications. He returns to his point of departure with a deeper knowledge of evil, of good, and of the subtle shadings of human ethics – a man better prepared to love and to attain the Heaven he aspired to reach.

Saul's soul searching produced a collective novelistic remedy as well as a personal one. Saul Bellow's collective remedy was a warning not to blind ourselves to a host of current evils on earth, to the risks of the scientific rationalism which enabled the trip to the moon, or to the traditions and social glue contained in the Western canon. His metaphysical prescription was that we trust the wisdom afforded by the beleaguered *human* soul Saul Bellow calls a "poor bird" in the novel's first lines. Closing the novelistic circle, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* ends with a plea: "The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows. As I know mine. As all know. For that is the truth of it – that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know." I take Saul Bellow's beautiful, repetitive lines as an appeal or perhaps a prayer for the human collective to attend to the moral wisdom, however obfuscated, that he felt resides in our souls. The better path for the human race remains crystal clear and rings as true it did in 1970. We must stop blinding ourselves to a host of evils before we have but one choice: to live with their moral and practical consequences as we do the Holocaust.

However poetic and moving Saul Bellow's novelistic entreaty, my father's personal remedy turned out to be a reversal of sociopolitical attitudes from the man I call "young Saul" in my memoir – the idealist who raised me – into "old Saul": the crusty cultural conservative intent on re-identifying with his Jewish roots. I find my father's proposed solution embedded in Artur Sammler's generational attitudes. He felt that my generation had been so spoiled after World War II that we saw no evil in indiscriminate sex, anarchic violence, or drugs. Now writing as a father rather than a rebellious son, his better path lay in the wisdom of the fathers, personal and collective, rather than in the passion of the sons for a better world. The personal side of my father's reversal involved persistent pressure that I abandon the well-established autonomy of a grown son's sociopolitical attitudes and religious agnosticism fostered by my then-radical parents. To me and to my generation, the course of conduct advocated in the novel by Saul Bellow and in person by my father's arguments was more of the "trust your elders" thinking that had gotten us into an immoral war in Viet Nam and failed to solve a plethora of social ills that still haunt us.

In my own words, Saul Bellow's plea about the soul amounts to "listen to your heart," a phrase that is the central theme of my memoir *Saul Bellow's Heart*. Therein I assert that my father's heart was in a lifelong battle with his keen intellect, both of which often led him astray. This echoes Dante's assertion that the right road could easily be obfuscated by either unbridled passion or misapplied reason. Taking Saul Bellow's plea/prayer to quietly listen to one's soul or heart was advice my father, the self-appointed clear-eyed rationalist with a plethora of blind spots, had an impossible time following consistently.

The novel's "big questions" about a better path for the human race remain. Can we stop blinding ourselves to a host of evils before it is too late? Will we have to live with their consequences after the damage is done?

## *SPIRITUAL CLEANSING, PURGATORY, AND HUMBOLDT'S GIFT*

Dante is still in need of Virgil's guidance in Purgatory, a place of repentance and spiritual cleansing which is required in order for the soul to enter Heaven. Purging one's sins involves taking full moral responsibility and accepting the harm you have caused to those sinned against and to yourself. The orderly moral universe of Hell is mirrored in assigning a suitable burden to be fulfilled as proof of full understanding and repentance. Atonement is lengthy and difficult, but hope, absent in Hell, is essential in order to achieve forward movement towards Heaven.

The sin of pride is countered by the virtue of humility. Having falsely elevated themselves, the once-proud are bent over by carrying heavy burdens. Their eyes, once cast too high, must look down at allegorical sculptures of the virtue to be acquired carved upon the ground. The images of the Virgin Mary, King David, and the Roman Emperor Trajan represent their shared humility that, in these exceptional individuals, could easily have yielded to pride.

Dante chooses well-known statues by contemporary real-world artists like Giotto that show the influence of a burgeoning revolution in the conceptualization of man. Traditional flat, idealized portraits were being replaced with three-dimensional images that were more realistic, signifying the budding Renaissance view of human beings that show levels of subtlety and nuance absent in earlier representations of faith. Dante's choice carries an implication about the moral influence exerted by art, plastic and poetic, in society.

Handmaiden of pride is heresy which, to Dante, includes clinging to divisive beliefs that pit man against man, country against country, and theology against theology in endless battles that were current in Florentine politics and beyond. In an echo of Aristotle, Dante reminds us that good

government is moderation of the personal, political, and theological passions that get away from us so readily and destructively.

In *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), several themes intertwine that closely parallel Dante: the battle between corporeal pleasures of success and the need to cleanse one's spirit; the inevitability of death and the hopes my father harbored for an afterlife of the spirit; and contemplating the role of the author in a society corrupted by materialism and spiritual poverty. For reasons he cannot fully fathom, Saul Bellow's narrator Charlie Citrine has become a critical and financial success. Though ill-suited to the fast life, he basks in the fortune that comes with fame in America. The death of his old friend Von Humboldt Fleisher (Humboldt), a poet whose talents were unrecognized and who died in poverty and madness, suddenly confronts Charlie with its permanence. From beyond the grave Humboldt accuses him of having lost sight of the essentials: their youthful love of literature and the duty of a serious author to stand outside of society so as to better observe and comment.

#### DISRUPTION AND A JOLT IN HUMBOLDT

My father had become well known and wealthy by the time *Humboldt's Gift* was published. The personal jolts I associate with the novel are early deaths of his friends: Isaac Rosenfeld in 1956, Oscar Tarcov in 1963, Delmore Schwartz in 1966, and John Berryman in 1972. Schwartz and Berryman were poets who, in Saul's mind, paid dearly for remaining true to the artistic ideals, beliefs, and values of a youth they shared. My father's grief was heightened by comparing the success he was enjoying with the shortened and economically impoverished lives of men whose gifts had not been and may never be recognized.

Like the *Commedia*, *Humboldt's Gift* offers a harsh self-analysis about how temporal concerns and corporeal pleasures have usurped essential matters of the spirit. Charlie confesses to allowing these seductions to so permeate his life that he has lost sight of the enduring values and lessons

contained in art. Charlie realizes that he has succumbed to the material corruption that has sapped American culture. Worse, he fears that the pollution has so crept into his soul that it must be cleansed of worldly attachments.

#### A SOUL SEARCHING JOURNEY IN HUMBOLDT

In 1300, a successful spiritual quest meant to become sufficiently free of sin to be able to enter Heaven. It was the sale of indulgences by the church – instant forgiveness of sin for money – that so enraged Dante. His journey through Purgatory indicates how arduous gaining true forgiveness of sin ought to be. Seven hundred years later the troubled spirits of Saul and his creation, Charlie Citrine, would be in a more ambiguous situation. My father was distinctly uncomfortable with yet drawn to the eternity of the soul offered by the New Testament. Thus Saul earnestly searched for a more palatable guide to point a way for him to break his tenacious bonds to the material world.

Saul Bellow and many of his literary characters, acutely aware of being unworldly men, constantly sought advice from a host of advisers all too willing to proffer it. My father called them "reality instructors." Over and over these worldly "experts" had led both he and his fictional creations astray with a plethora of tempting ideas and schemes that would prove disappointing in application. But none offered guidance about realms of the spirit such as Virgil offered Dante.

Saul so faulted his pernicious worldly attachments that he turned from these secular guides to Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian philosopher who held complex notions about the possibility of an expanded consciousness that continued after physical death. Though he rejected Indian mysticism, Steiner claimed to be a clairvoyant who developed an explanation of an evolving consciousness that included individual and collective memories as well as past, present, and future lives. In other words, Steiner offered Saul a relatively secular form of spiritual immortality that transcended the body. As far as Saul was concerned, Steiner claimed that anyone who took the time and effort to

develop their faculties could gain such expanded capacities. In private, my father put Steiner's meditative techniques into regular practice for years and spoke about them often.

Like Saul, Charlie undertakes a decade-long intensive study of Steiner's complex writings on the realms of the spirit and engages in meditative exercises to eschew the personal and try to connect with the universal. Both sincerely hope that such practices will cleanse their soul and, hopefully, prepare it to outlive the body Saul's rational side knows will not survive.

Eventually Saul's quest hit two obstacles. Despite a decade of studies and practices, the sting of three family deaths in rapid succession shook my father more deeply than he had hoped. As well, Saul came to believe that continuing to follow Steiner required an abandonment of one's doubts. To my father that was a leap of faith that entailed disavowing his precious ability to think critically - something he simply could not do.

On a journey of self-transformation, all guides, secular or spiritual, must eventually fail. As they leave Purgatory, Virgil knows that his rational approach has no more to offer in pursuing matters of the heart and leaves Dante. He is replaced by Beatrice, a beautiful Florentine girl whom Dante had admired from afar but who died young. She takes over as his to guide to the love of Heaven. For the opposite reason, Saul's unwillingness to take the leap of faith he thought was required, prompted him to abandon Steiner as a mentor. But my father never ceased to be preoccupied with matters of the spirit or lost his abiding interest in questions of immortality.

#### A BETTER PATH IN HUMBOLDT

The cause of Charlie Citrine's spiritual ills was departing from artistic values and embracing the material world. In contrast, Von Humboldt Fleischer was a casualty of his choice to stay outside of human society in order to observe it more clearly. Humboldt well understood the price: self-imposed

isolation, poverty, anonymity, and scorn for his immaterial ways that the poet must pay in modern society. Humboldt's gift is to remind my father that he must remain true to his fervent belief in the transformational value of art in a society that has lost its way.

The better path remains being dedicated to artistic ideals exemplified by the flowering of culture during the Renaissance, partially ushered in by Dante. Saul and his idealistic friend Delmore Schwartz hoped for a second Renaissance that would come from a political change ushered in by the Russian Revolution which Leon Trotsky would spread around the world. Somehow Delmore had, in his manic yet compelling madness, convinced himself that the election of Adlai Stevenson in 1952 would bring about such an era in which he would play a part.

Neither Saul Bellow nor his narrator was equipped to deal with the unforgiving spotlight that accompanies fame and fortune in American society. Enmeshed in a costly divorce, Charlie fights to preserve ownership of assets and pleasures he ought to be able to relinquish but cannot. He tries hard but fails. In the end, the corporal trumps the spiritual as Charlie's girlfriend goes off with a wealthy funeral director, a man who knows how to profit from death, leaving him to babysit while they honeymoon.

My father's personal grief was not relieved by the solace he hoped to find in Steiner. Being unable to abandon the pleasures life offers left Saul with a sense of having failed to right himself. However, in a faint echo of Dante, my father retains the hope offered by Humboldt's twentieth-century message from beyond the grave - that one's spirit, while not bound for Heaven any longer, may return in a more purified form and offer a chance to do it right next time.

A "big question" in the novel, that of the proper role for the artist in society, is answered by Saul Bellow's penetrating novelistic observations about the material world in which he found himself. If Saul, immersed in American society, can see it so clearly, perhaps Humboldt's costly departure from

society as the precondition to create art was more extreme than necessary. Perhaps Saul Bellow is implying that the artist must participate fully in life to understand the evil and the good therein. That answer would be consistent with Dante's finding celestial harmony in apparent heretical divisiveness on earth.

The bigger question of the immortality of the spirit, of course, remains unanswered. But after a public reading when Saul Bellow was asked about life after death, my then-aged father answered, "That is the only *real* question." While I do not agree with his so glibly writing off questions about bettering life on earth, Saul's answer reveals how prominent spiritual matters remained until his death. For all we know these questions may no longer remain unanswered - to him.

### **LOVE, PARADISO, AND MORE DIE OF HEARTBREAK**

For Dante, life on earth is filled with division, strife, and injustice. In Heaven, harmony prevails, but yet another hierarchy, that of the forms taken by love, emerges. Dante's initial differentiation of love's earthly forms divides the sinful forms of selfishness and lust from altruistic forms of love that include family. But his hierarchy extends beyond earth's confines to the indivisible love of God – a form that moves the universe.

The unspoiled love a young Dante felt for Beatrice was his first hint of its purer forms. As pilgrim and mentor reach Heaven, she takes over from Virgil, whose guidance is limited to the rational. Beatrice leads Dante through the complexities of the human heart. Far from a painless process, her initial lesson was to berate Dante for the sin of lust for having written poems that promote love's selfish forms.

However, as they move away from earth, through the planets toward the stars, Dante again learns from the wise residents of Heaven about a hierarchy of virtues: faith, hope, love, wisdom,

courage, justice, and temperance. Worldly divisions fall away and are replaced by harmonies until Beatrice, whose knowledge of love is limited to its earthly forms, is replaced by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux who takes Dante into a realm unknowable from an earthly perspective. A contemplative mystic, church reformer, and poet, Bernard ponders the apparent paradoxes of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Suggestively Dante, like Bellow's Artur Sammler, suffers a period of temporary blindness. The shared experience implies that the inability to see sharpens perception. What Dante comes to better comprehend is that worldly difference and paradox are contained within larger symmetries. Armed with this final lesson, Dante can return to his point of departure prepared to change the world for the better by being a crusader for virtue with pen, rather than sword, in hand.

*More Die of Heartbreak* (1987) was published fifteen years after *Humboldt's Gift*. The novel explores the forms taken by human love – what my father called "family feeling" – the deep loyalty he felt toward his family of origin. As well, the often-contentious forms of love between men and women are contained in two distinctly different "love stories" that, like Dante, distinguish between its selfish and selfless forms.

Family feeling, or the lack of it, is illustrated in the story of the Crader family homestead – a plot in the center of a town that became a metropolis. One family branch, taking advantage of another, took control of the property upon which a skyscraper was built. The original owners were paid what turned out to be a pittance compared with the millions the shrewder branch made on the real estate. Over and over Benn Crader appeals to the communal notions within "family feeling" – a cohesive force that once held the Craders together – for a modicum of economic equity. But concern for justice has been lost by the branch spoiled by material wealth.

Love and the complex relationship between the sexes continue to baffle Benn and his beloved nephew Kenneth as, frankly, it always had Saul. Love has proven difficult if not unattainable for Benn

to find after the death of his first wife. A scientist unskilled in matters of the heart, he is still at sea after a series of painful romantic failures. Eventually Benn runs away from yet another relationship that shows all the signs of yet another marital disaster. He flees a world of human passions to a cold, cruel, and equally inhospitable environment, the Arctic, to study lichen that can enter a state of suspended animation that for all appearances is death. Kenneth, despite being a scholar of the mysticism he and his uncle Benn often discuss, also appears to fail in worldly matters of the heart. Over and over he continues to seek the love of Trekie who does not care for him. Eventually he gives up.

#### DISRUPTION AND A JOLT IN MORE DIE OF HEARTBREAK

The personal jolts that precipitated *More Die of Heartbreak* were the failure of Saul's fourth marriage and the deaths of my mother and my Uncles Morris and Sam in the course of a few short months. Losing members of his beloved family of origin coupled with yet another marital failure forced him to ponder the frailty of human relations, familial and marital, as well as whether it is possible to preserve a very private form of love in the rough game that often prevails within families and between men and women.

#### ERROR AND MATTERS OF RESPONSIBILITY IN MORE DIE OF HEARTBREAK

The branch of Benn's family that has become rich by taking advantage of those naive in matters of business has lost sight of the loyalty that once prevailed, if not in the Crader home, certainly in the Bellow home during their first years of immigrant privation in Canada. The right and wrong paths are unambiguous as my father expected and, on occasion demanded, that loyalty to continue even from subsequent generations merely because blood ties exist. The logic and reason Benn uses to convince the shrewder branch to act equitably makes no dent in their greed. Pleas

grounded in emotion fare worse as they consider him at best an anachronism, at worst a fool for not understanding how America works.

In love Benn has temporarily taken the wrong course - allowing the materialism of his second wife to take precedence over his scientific pursuits and the detachment from human affairs they entail. As their marriage fails he blames her and his scheming in-laws that sweep the hapless (and thus blameless) Benn into complex schemes to buy and furnish gloriously a residence he does not care about. Benn readily admits that his singularity of scientific purpose, an analog to Saul's dedication to literature, makes him hard to live with as a mate. But Benn makes no deeper confession. He, like all who do not take personal responsibility, cannot exit his self-created Hell of romantic victimization. Kenneth has taken another wrong path in matters of the heart by trying to appeal to a love and loyalty Trekie does not feel. After considerable sacrifice for her and for a child they share, Kenneth also realizes his pursuit is futile.

#### A SOUL-SEARCHING JOURNEY IN MORE DIE OF HEARTBREAK

Benn's life in the Arctic is simply a change of scene where the forms of pain he selects to live with are physical cold and human isolation. His soul searching does not go beyond an analysis I find limited - that human concerns have once again forced themselves upon him. He is now relegated to the correct place in his life through a self-imposed exile that confirms the rationalizations he offers himself. At best, exile is an end-run on Benn's love problems. In contrast, my father's deepest views on love are far from that simple and reside in Saul Bellow's metaphor, the biological behavior of the lichen Benn chooses to study. My broken-hearted father and Benn wait patiently for harsh external conditions to change, that is for the human warmth they crave to become available, so that love can bloom in the unlikelyst of places.

The solution Benn seeks may parallel the form of human love Dante finds in Heaven - love uncontaminated by selfishness. But Dante the pilgrim labored hard to attain human love and is granted but a glimpse of its celestial form – the love of and for God. In a stark contrast that brings Francesca’s lover Paolo to my mind, Benn sits passively in the cold and waits. What appears to be a form of purification raises the question, who or what is being purified? Dante returns with a spirit cleansed and prepared to do the poetic work of trying to offer, in words, the unworldly harmony he glimpsed to his readers. Benn hopes for heavenly conditions to come down to purify the world he had fled.

Kenneth, who is no more changed by all his reading and philosophizing than is his uncle, finds a romance with the real potential to blossom in a place it had never occurred to him to look. He is offered an earthly form of love uncontaminated by selfishness when a different kind of woman, Dita, enters his life. Their relationship begins as non-romantic, but in an extreme act of self-sacrifice Dita decides to undergo a painful and risky facial surgery to make herself more attractive to him. As she recovers Kenneth's feelings turn from compassion for her pain towards the romantic love she feels for him.

#### A BETTER PATH IN MORE DIE OF HEARTBREAK

Altruism prompted by family loyalty is the better path of worldly harmony the soft-hearted and guileless Benn Crader seeks to elicit from relatives whose hearts have been hardened by wealth. It is an anachronistic remnant of a time when difficult immigrant circumstance, fleetingly, brought out the best in my family a century ago. Saul’s fond memories of the closeness of those early days formed the basis of my father’s tenacious connection to his family of origin. Saul’s parents subscribed to the benefits offered by American society. The message to wise up and get with the non-immigrant program was forcefully brought home to Saul by Morris, his oldest brother, who so fully adopted

American values as to be a walking parody of the best and worst materialism had to offer. My father knew himself to be unworldly and in almost every Saul Bellow novel a gullible romantic is reminded of his folly by a hard-boiled relative or friend. Like Benn Crader my father clung to his strong feelings about family despite his chronic failures to re-awaken the old altruism that had become a minority position retained by my father and his brother, Sam.

The wish for true, pure, and romanticized forms of love never dies. But that does not make it easy to find on earth, either in 1300 or today. Despite their fevered personal and philosophical conversations laced with references to Kenneth's study of mystical texts – including Swedenborg's notion that pure spousal love continues in Heaven – neither character is fundamentally altered. The source of happiness continues to reside outside of themselves and beyond their control in a very particular kind of woman. Kenneth, at least, can recognize Dita's warmth and avail himself of her unselfish love. His implied narrative of stable love very much parallels Saul's unlikely marriage to his fifth wife who supplied a kind of warmth my father had long craved and, if as I believe Saul Bellow's metaphors reflect my father's state of mind as his sixth decade ended, nearly despaired.

## CRISES OF THE SPIRIT

Dante returned from Heaven imbued with the virtues of faith, hope, and love that prepared him to try to encompass its harmony in an epic poem. My reading of these three novels, my father's preoccupation with the afterlife, and his being racked with questions and doubts to his last days prompts my conclusion that Saul, the man, felt himself to have failed in his spiritual quest. Despite these differences in outcome I find marked similarities, parallels, and divergences worthy of consideration.

Still living in exile yet now armed with his pen, Dante was determined to emulate the courage of a crusader by writing a poem that offered a glimpse of the celestial amity he hoped would confront

and remedy the evils tearing Italy and the Catholic Church apart. In the thirty-five years granted him after the publication of *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Saul Bellow insisted on placing similar "big questions" before his readers. In a world dominated by scientific thinking, riven by philosophical nihilism and war, accusing mankind of turning a blind eye to manifest evil and allowing itself to be dulled into complacency by material plenty certainly qualified my father as a crusader with a pen.

Schooled in reason but acutely aware of its limits, Dante and Bellow directly addressed the difficulty of finding words suitable to capture matters beyond the restrictions imposed by human rationality. By this I mean phenomena accessible perhaps alone through what we have come to term the spirit, the soul, or the human heart.

I cannot gauge Dante the man's level of personal certainty about the future of his spirit after death. But Dante the poet's account of his pilgrimage offers a moral path necessary to attain the admission to Heaven that was, in the fourteenth century Christian world, the shared goal for one's eternal soul. By 2005, seven centuries of emphasis on the ambiguities of individual identity had made questions about the spirit continuing after death personal and eminently debatable. Saul Bellow's narrative creations pondered matters of the spirit deeply - as did my father for the rest of his days.

The *Commedia* ends with Dante the pilgrim, seemingly at peace, as he hands the pen to Dante the poet at the dawn of a Renaissance we know he abetted. Saul Bellow, the writer, took up his pen in an age of anxiety. His impact on the "big questions" he posed is, to employ his phrase about pilgrimage from *The Adventures of Augie March*, much too "near at hand" to be assessed.

Dante's heavenly vision of unity within what appear to be contradictions on earth (personal, political, and theological) stands in sharp contrast to my father's insistence on driving a cerebral wedge that pushes apart matters of good and evil and of generational attitudes. Saul's inclination to bifurcate as well as his persistent self-doubt emerged in his death bed conversation with Eugene

Goodheart, my father's long-time friend. Saul asked Gene to render his opinion on whether he was "a man or a jerk." The key distinction was between being a decent human being or just being selfish. It is not Gene's answer but Saul's question I find most revealing. Even on the cusp of eternity Saul did not conceive of himself either as a jerk with admirable qualities or as a decent man with a selfish side. My father was still drawing hard distinctions I believe Dante would have considered divisive absolutes both heretical and antithetical to the harmonies he sought to promote.

The causes of this wide divergence in what each man came to think of as the better path may lie in: different levels of personal change Dante and Bellow reached after experiencing a crisis of the spirit; living in times separated by 700 years of history; that Dante was a Catholic and my father a Jew; the transformation of a spiritual crisis from a private matter into a commonplace of popular culture; and or a plethora of causes I have not even imagined. But the connections and the divergences do make one think.

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