

Bellow, Barfield, and Boredom

Nature has her proper interest; & he [the poet] will know what it is, who believes & feels, that every Thing has a Life of its own, & that we are all *one Life*. A Poet's *Heart & Intellect* should be *combined, intimately combined & unified*, with the great appearances in Nature--& not merely held in solution & loose mixture with them, in the shape of formal Similies. (Coleridge, letter to Sotheby, 1802)

Any number of critics, following Schelling and Coleridge, have dealt with imagination as an ultimate mental activity that opposes, and transmutes in a kind of aesthetic and mystical contemplation, that absolute dichotomy between perceiving subject and perceived object on which our practical everyday experience (Coleridge's "lethargy of custom") is necessarily based. (Owen Barfield, Introduction, *Romanticism Comes of Age*, 1966)

Humboldt's Gift is not Bellow's best novel--that distinction belongs to *Herzog*--but it is my favorite, perhaps the book of his that I know best, and when I opened it up the other day for the umpteenth time, I came upon a familiar passage that I read in a new light. It appears near the end of the novel, when Charlie Citrine, the narrator, is having the second of his two conversations with Kathleen Tigler, an aged widow he knew when they both were younger and living in Princeton in the 1950s. Charlie's affair with Renata has come to an end, and he has chosen to room in a Madrid *pension* while minding Renata's young son, Roger, and waiting for his mother to retrieve him. Meditating and reading anthroposophy, reading anthroposophy to the dead as well, Charlie is living as cheaply as possible and imagining a new life for himself in Europe. Kathleen is in the film business and has come to Spain for production work on a new movie. The conversation, like many in Bellow's fiction, becomes the platform for a disquisition on modern life, a lecture in miniature, if you like, a characteristic of his work that attracts some readers and dismays others.

Charlie describes the order of beings (or angels) in the universe that he has learned about as a student of anthroposophy. "The fact is, I suspect," he tells Kathleen, "that we occupy a point in the hierarchy that goes far far beyond ourselves. The ruling premises [of modern rationality] deny this and we feel suffocated." People have moral impulses, he says, that cannot be explained by everyday rationality--science, that is--and have been persuaded by the ruling orthodoxy that death represents an absolute termination. Stripped of any larger spiritual significance, life becomes a race for the glories and gains that will be taken from us by age and death. "On the present premises, the fate of mankind is a sporting event," Charlie continues. "Most ingenious. . .Fascinating. When it doesn't become boring. The specter of boredom is haunting this sporting conception of history." (Bellow makes a similar claim in a July 1987 letter to the poet Karl Shapiro, when he remarks that "our souls are gasping for oxygen.")

As I was reading this passage it occurred to me how often Bellow takes up the subject of boredom, especially in this novel but also in his later work, in his fiction and essays alike, and that his description of boredom is attended by a concomitant attack on popular culture. Bellow composed a long and arresting passage on boredom that appears early in *Humboldt*, and the editors of the *New York Review of Books* found it sufficiently interesting to publish the entire section under the title "Bellow on Boredom." The excerpt ran at the time *Humboldt* was released in the summer of 1975.

The co-editor with whom Charlie is working on the development of a journal wants "a major statement," and he sets about preparing an essay that explores various types of boring experts, in education, politics, therapy, and other specialties, a comic approach that is in keeping with the comic tone of the novel. Humorous, but also very serious. Bellow has prepared the reader for this lengthy passage; one hundred pages earlier in the novel Charlie has declared to the

reader that "Chicago was the ideal place in which to write my master essay--'Boredom.' In raw Chicago you could examine the human spirit under industrialism." Later in the novel, he will complain that he is simply "mitherated" by the experience. (That Bellow found the city as dull as Charlie does is evidenced by a January 1968 letter to Edward Shills, his colleague at the University of Chicago, where he describes Chicago as "sodden, mean and boring.") In yet another early comment on the subject, Charlie asks himself what he might communicate to the men he meets at his health club in the Loop. "Could I say that I had been thinking about human consciousness with special emphasis on the question of boredom? Could I say for years now I had been preoccupied with this theme. . . ?" The question of course is rhetorical, for no such communication is possible with men whose interests, like those of most Americans, run to money, law, politics, the markets and so forth.

Finally, Charlie mulls his interpretation in a government building as he waits to do jury duty--certainly an easy place to feel bored. He considers and rejects the usual explanations of boredom, including religion's *tedium vitae*, capitalism's organization of labor and alienation, the leveling associated with the sociology of democracy, declining religious faith and the erosion of charismatic powers, Max Weber's vision of "disenchantment," the rationalization of life and so forth. "It seemed to me, however, that one might begin with this belief of the modern world, that you burn or you rot." Citing William James, he observes that people really lived when they were "living at the top of their energies," and that the pain of boredom was "the pain of unused powers." People endowed with gifts of invention, of spirit and mind find themselves "shunted" into dull "careers" that assure their material survival but neglect the full range of their faculties. This will remind readers of the "ennui" that other modern writers claim has captured modern life.

Charlie regards the matter in historical terms, mentioning writers imprisoned during the centuries of French monarchical rule, including Manon, des Grieux, and de Sade. "The intellectual future of Europe was determined by people impregnated with boredom, with the writings of prisoners." On the eve of the French Revolution, it was writers, provincial writers and scribblers "from the sticks" who "captured the center of interest." Borrowing from a comment of Nietzsche's,¹ Charlie remarks that "Boredom has more to do with modern political revolution than justice has." He goes on to consider the lengthy banquets held by Stalin and Hitler, when their minions were obliged to listen attentively to the boring conjecture of tyrants while "they expected shortly to be shot. . . .What--in other words--would modern boredom be without terror?" Charlie remarks:

The present demand is for quick forward movement, for a summary of life and the speed of intensest thought. As we approach, through technology, the phase of instantaneous realization, of the realization of human desires or fantasies, of abolishing space and time, the problem of boredom can only become more intense. The human being, more and more oppressed by the terms of existence--one time around for each. . .--has to think of the boredom of death.

This last comment--references to the boredom of death, the boredom of the grave--is a double joke that recurs throughout the novel and conceals deeper meanings. If death is boredom, then boredom is a manifestation of death, a betrayal of one's higher nature, a nullification of faculties. Another meaning is that *timor mortis* encourages people to exploit all the possibilities of life before death cuts them short, a baneful influence for an author who interprets the striving as a pernicious evasion of higher demands. The public should be pursuing not opulence and ease but the question of what might be done with a society whose fundamental material needs have all been met. "With our advantages," he tells Renata in an early passage, "we should be formulating the new basic questions for mankind." "Ignorance of death," he declares in a later discussion

¹ Section 56 of *The Gay Science*

with her, "is destroying us." (Charlie makes the remark in *Humboldt's Gift*, but Bellow repeats it in a 1986 interview with Michael Ignatieff. "*Timor mortis*," he says, is "very natural. What's unnatural is to blank it out altogether and dismiss it from your life in the gay whirl."²) A truly profound matter, and how much unhappiness might be avoided if people gave it some thought. For Bellow and other serious writers, awareness of death should deepen our experience of life.

To return to that long passage on tedium: Bellow summarizes his conclusions by identifying in himself the sources of boredom: "The lack of a personal connection with external world," and the fact that "the self-conscious ego is the seat of boredom. This increasing, swelling, domineering self-consciousness is the only rival of the political and social powers that run my life."

The analysis should be read against the background of an essay Bellow published three years earlier, in 1972, "Culture Now: Some Laughs, Some Animadversions." It appeared in the short-lived quarterly *Modern Occasions*. Bellow usually aimed for a detached, neutral tone in his essays, but this one is uncharacteristically emphatic, not to say angry, which may explain why the piece was excluded from *It All Adds Up*, his essay collection from 1994. "Culture Now" is a sharp attack on a new class of what Bellow calls "publicity intellectuals," scholars who started their careers in the 1940s and '50s but acquired public visibility in the 1960s, when they began touting ideas Bellow considered safe, fashionable, and entertaining, ideas that diverted the public and seem like an precursor to the age of political correctness. Their approach flattered the young and the new; it often demeaned the classics and took popular culture seriously; it titillated readers with threats of decline and collapse. This work appeared in organs of journalism like *The New York Times* and *Playboy*, publications that were read then as well as now by a highly trained and professionally successful audience that lacks true education and has no interest in it.

² *Conversations with Saul Bellow*, p. 229.

The writers that Bellow indicts include Marshal McLuhan, Leslie Fiedler, and other now-forgotten figures; their fundamental offense is to weaken the status of serious art and appeal to a large public. Literature in their hands is less a matter of "contemplative reading" and more a tool for "movement, action, politics and power struggles." (By the next decade, in the 190s, Bellow's academic adversaries would try to efface the distinction between high and popular art entirely. At the end of the essay, he comments that "The present standard [for public interest] is the amusement standard: more accurately the amusement-boredom standard." And later: "A powerful nation of unparalleled energy and practicality created an industrial society without precedent," Bellow concludes. "The accompanying ugliness, boredom and spiritual trouble are also without precedent. . . . This society, like decadent Rome, is an amusement society."

Mr. Sammler's Planet, published two years before, has a similar feel, and ushers in the phase of his career when Bellow began to fall out of favor with the academic left and liberal critics, including Alfred Kazin. Bellow started work on his next novel, *Humboldt's Gift*, published in 1975, in which he develops the problem of boredom at much greater length. I do not know when he began reading in anthroposophy, but I do know that by the early 1970s, he was attending group discussions of Rudolf Steiner at the North Side Chicago home of Peter DeMay. By July 1975, just before the publication of *Humboldt*, Bellow began corresponding with Owen Barfield, the English lawyer-scholar and the leading interpreter of anthroposophy in the English-speaking world. Bellow was planning a trip to London and appealed to Barfield for a private meeting. "I am not philosopher enough to argue questions of rationality and irrationality," he writes in his initial note, "but there are things that seem to me so self-evident, so markedly self-evident and felt that the problem of proving or disproving their reality becomes academic." A few months later, after meeting him over the summer, Bellow writes a second

letter, regretting that "the interest of much of life" that was described in books had become "exhausted." "But how," he asks, "could existence itself become uninteresting. I concluded that the ideas and modes by which it was represented were exhausted, that individuality had been overwhelmed by 'sociality,' by technology and politics. " (This remark is repeated nearly verbatim in the long passage from *Humboldt's Gift* that I referred to earlier.)

Bellow took a special interest in *Romanticism Comes of Age*, one of Barfield's better-known collections of essays published in 1966. The essays consider a number of literary and philosophical questions from an explicitly anthroposophical angle. Barfield, like others in anthroposophy, came to regard modern science as the true opponent, a manifestation of the "materialism" that the disciples of Steiner always identify as the bane of modern thought, an event originating with Bacon in the sixteenth century. The phase, anthroposophists argue, has left mankind trapped with a conception of itself as nothing more than the sum total of biochemical and bioelectrical forces. Psychology has become neuroscience. "There are millions of men," writes Barfield in the essay "From East to West," "who take it for granted today that matter is the only reality and that spirit is--an illusion, nothing." But in fact the emergence of modern science is merely a stage--the development of what Steiner calls "the consciousness soul"--on the path of human evolution. The consciousness soul (in Barfield's words) is a phase in which the human person acquires a "separate and independent consciousness, a separate mental existence." Hamlet, the character as well as the play, quintessentially represents the modern experience of "loneliness, isolation, materialism, loss of faith in the spiritual world, above all--uncertainty." "The soul," Barfield says later in the same essay, "has to make up its mind and to act in a positive way on its own unsupported initiative."

The Romantics of the nineteenth century, with "a philosophy as well as a literature," broke away from the subject-object distinction, and the claim that there exists an external reality free of subjective impressions that is available to scientific investigation. Or perhaps one should say that they tried to break away from this and failed. Barfield argues that Romanticism is not simply a stage of art history that followed Classicism and was succeeded by Modernism. It was, rather, "a permanent step forward in the history of human consciousness" that "foreshadows" the work that Steiner published at the turn of the twentieth century. Coleridge makes the critical step by asserting in his autobiography that "all the organs of sense are framed for a corresponding world of sense. All the organs of spirit are framed for a correspondent world of spirit." The Romantics rejected the claim that the on-looking self can only watch the external, and sought to nullify the distinction between mind and body and spirit and matter. The self seeks "to sink itself entirely in the thing perceived," writes Barfield, through an act of the imagination, "the most precious of all our possessions." *Imagination properly understood is direct contact with reality.*

Barfield continues:

What, then, is the really characteristic thing about the "creative imagination" for which the Romantics claimed so much? How does it differ from any other human faculty and experience? I think that the true *differentia* of imagination is that the subject should somehow be merged or resolved into the object. Talent may copy nature, but genius claims to create after the fashion of nature herself. Thus Coleridge called imagination *organic*.

"The historical problem," he continues, in "Of the Intellectual Soul," "was the problem of the resurrection--the problem of establishing a living umbilical connection between microcosm and macrocosm, in order that life might pass from one to the other." But the "Romantic Movement never properly crystallized into a theory of knowledge." "Either it [imagination]

must go boldly forward," he says, "and turn itself into clairvoyance--for clairvoyance *is* a partial reunion with the macrocosm--or it must fall back and become at best idle fancy."

In *The Mirror and the Lamp*, M.H. Abrams describes the Romantic objective this way:

It was. . . an attempt to overcome the sense of man's alienation from the world by healing the cleavage between subject and object, between the vital, purposeful, value-full world of private experience and the dead postulated world of extension, quantity and motion. To establish that man shares his own life with nature was to reanimate the dead universe of the materialists, and at the same time most effectively to tie man back into his milieu.

Ideas like this naturally drew the attention of an American writer at work on a book encouraging readers "to break free from the universal tyranny of selfhood." "For some time now," Bellow wrote to Barfield in July 1975, "I have been asking myself what kind of knowledge a writer has and in what way he deserves to be taken seriously. He has imagination where others have science, etc. But it wasn't until I read your book on romanticism that I began to understand something about the defeat of imaginative knowledge in modern times!"

Charlie, the narrator of *Humboldt's Gift*, like Bellow, has become a careful student of Steiner. He labors conscientiously with basic anthroposophical texts to reanimate a dead world, to break through the limits on consciousness imposed by natural science. "I was convinced," he tells the reader in *Humboldt*, "that there was nothing in the material world to account for the more delicate desires and perceptions of human beings." But Bellow knows that few people are going to study anthroposophy, and he himself had doubts about Steiner, doubts that can be readily found in *Humboldt's Gift* as well as in his letters to Barfield. Charlie, like Bellow, practiced the "intimate contemplation" of nature that Steiner recommends as an exercise in meditation, but it seems from his letters that Bellow never achieved the promised results, which would have been an experience of uniting himself with the object of contemplation. ("Keep

trying," was the unvarying response of senior members of the Anthroposophical Society when members complained of modest or non-existent results. The writer Gary Lachman, who produced a somewhat disbelieving book-length study of Steiner, claims some success in this effort.) Bellow continued to work with the basic texts nonetheless. He sensed validity in anthroposophy, what he called an "illuminated fringe" of understanding, and conscientiously sought to advance to a higher state of spiritual development. "The imagination must not pine away," he writes in *Humboldt's Gift*. "it must assert again that art manifests the inner powers of nature."

And this for Bellow is where the problem of boredom comes in. Especially in later texts, he sharpens his challenge to popular culture, falsely seen by the public as a means of diversion and a method of curing its boredom. Contemplating little Roger, the young son of Renata whom he is minding in Madrid, Charlie writes that he can almost sense that the little boy "was conceived by some wonderful means before he was physically conceived." For now, he remains a delightful young tyke--Bellow was always fond of children--but with time "the master-building" would stop, he would grow and mature, act as badly or crassly as the rest of the race. "This is very possibly when boredom sets in," writes Bellow, "the point of advent." (Attentive readers will see evidence of Wordsworth here, and in particular the "Immortality Ode.")

Even before *Humboldt* was published, Bellow was beginning to express dismay over the spreading appeal of popular culture and the declining public interest in serious art; that is part of what the essay I cited earlier, "Culture Today," is all about. Charlie's fortunes, literally, are raised by film scenarios that he had penned at Princeton with Humboldt Fleischer decades before; the movie *Caldofreddo* is attracting a world-wide audience. It is not by accident that near the end of the novel Charlie leaves Madrid for Paris, for three centuries the seat of western

culture, and where generations of American writers, from Henry James to Bellow himself, had gone to drink from the sources. He goes there in the novel to claim his stake in a movie that is attracting large crowds all over the world, a film Charlie describes as "piffle," a mere diversion, self-entertainment that he and Humboldt contrived for themselves while working separately in Princeton on more important matters--their manuscripts. Bellow's last novel, *Ravelstein*, opens with the narrator and Abe Ravelstein celebrating the glories of a Paris morning. The narrator and Abe are staying at the hotel *Crillon*, sharing it with Michael Jackson and his entourage, the dancer-singer who, the narrator tells us, "performs nightly in some vast Parisian auditorium." The police have erected a barrier to keep crowds of his admirers from overrunning the hotel. It seems fair to assume that the numbers Ravelstein attracts to his scholarly lectures in Paris are far smaller.

"What Kind of Day Did You Have?," a long short story from 1984, derives from Bellow's friendship with the art critic Harold Rosenberg, renamed as Victor Wulpy. Bellow introduces a secondary character, Wrangel, a minor figure from the Greenwich Village of the past, who has gone on to make millions producing *Star Wars*-type science fiction scenarios; it was a variety of popular culture Bellow especially disliked. Before his success with that, he produced pornographic films, and at the end of the story, Katrina Golliger, the central figure of the story, remarks that "Star Wars flicks corrupted everybody, implanted mistrust of your own flesh and blood." But Bellow's most critical treatment of the subject appears in his penultimate novel, *More Die of Heartbreak*, where he devotes several pages to the Layamon family. The novel was published in 1987, when video cassette recorders were bringing "feature films" into the home. The Layamons fill their evenings watching poor movies with incoherent plots, and when Benn Crader, a major character in the story, complains to the young Kenneth Trachtenberg of how

disorienting the films are in their badness, the latter replies, "You know, Uncle, that bad art will ruin a man." Mrs. Layamon spends her leisure time reading poetry into a tape recorder so that elderly residents of nursing homes can listen to Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens, which is Bellow's comment on the declining status of high art.

"Plenty of people would say movies are the art form of our time," declares an interviewer for *Playboy* in a 1997 discussion with Bellow. "That's like mixing up the sign over the hock shop with bowling balls," he answers. "Just because the things are round and look as though they might roll doesn't mean they are what they seem, OK? . . . The novel as high art has been demoted by the movie as high art, and the movie people are promoting this view."

What Bellow saw in the latter decades of the twentieth century was a growing population of on-lookers, powerless themselves to affect great public events, but boorishly self-assertive in response to their powerlessness. They were like "unemployed extras" with nothing to do but "work" and observe great public events (largely incoherent and never more than partially understood) that are treated by the media as public spectacles contrived for entertainment. "It is the deep conviction of vast numbers of people that they have no proper story," he writes in an undated remark from near the end of his career. "Their personal experience of storylessness, and hence of valuelessness, is very great." The adventures of the post-Elizabethan world, which Bellow names as "loves [that] no one believes in," the opening of colonies in distant worlds, great exploration, "wilderness campaigns," and the like--all this has been taken away from an expanding public living "in a new man-made world"--which Bellow considers spiritually dead. He refers to *Ulysses*, and concludes that "art--the fresh feeling, new harmony, the transforming magic which by means of myth brings back the scattered distracted soul from its modern chaos-- art, not politics, is the remedy."

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