

Further Remarks on Bellow, Steiner, and Barfield

I have often thought that it took courage for Bellow to put Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy at the center of one of his most important novels, *Humboldt's Gift*. Published in 1975, the novel probably introduced more readers to anthroposophy than all of the activities of the Anthroposophical Society of America in the preceding fifty years. Charlie Citrine, the narrator of the novel, is an avid reader of *Knowledge of Higher Worlds*, *Between Death and Rebirth*, and a host of other Steiner books, lectures and pamphlets—not to mention the volumes produced by Steiner's interpreters and biographers. And for once, readers are correct in assuming that the interests of the narrator reflect those of the author. According to the second volume of Zachary Leader's biography, *The Life of Saul Bellow: 1965-2005*, Bellow took an active interest in anthroposophy late in his life, even if his interest diminished in the final decade.

Why was it brave to give anthroposophy such a prominent place in the novel? Because Steiner considered himself a "scientist of the invisible," and made claims about the history of the human race that fall deeply into the category of the occult. These would include notions of reincarnation, not only of individuals but of the Earth itself, which has had previous incarnations and is destined to have more; knowledge of past "epochs" of human history stretching back thousands of years, to civilizations with telepathic powers extending to plants and animals, and the ability of people to move heavy weights on the strength of willpower alone. Astral bodies and etheric bodies; hierarchies of angels; the Akashic Record, that hidden history of the entire human race—all of this and much more has understandably taxed the credulity of his readers.

"I keep my doubts behind a turnstile and admit them one at a time, but the queue is long and life is disorderly." That is how Bellow tactfully offered his reaction to anthroposophy to Owen Barfield, the leading interpreter of Steiner in the English-speaking world. The author of *Saving the Appearances*, *Romanticism Comes of Age*, and *Unancestral Voice*, Barfield was an English barrister and scholar, and his books, according to Leader, drew Bellow's attention to anthroposophy and ultimately led to a correspondence between the two men. This started in 1975 and lasted for several years. Bellow and Barfield met in London in the summer of that year, and their relations remained cordial until the guru began publishing hostile reviews of Bellow's work. But before they parted, however, Bellow was writing that "Three or four years of reading Steiner have altered me considerably." This appears in a note from November 1979. "Some sort of metamorphosis is going on, I think, and I am at a loss for words when I sit down to write to you."

It was after their first meeting in London in the summer of 1975 that Barfield put Bellow in touch with the Chicago branch of the Anthroposophical Society in America. Bellow began attending a weekly discussion group that met in the evenings at the Lincoln Park home of Peter Demay. A model for the character Dr. Scheldt in *Humboldt's Gift*, Demay was a retired engineer in his seventies who attracted a small number of men to his home for discussions of anthroposophy. Bellow's involvement, according to his biographer, lasted for about a year, but declined after he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1976. The group itself seems to have broken up

after Demay's health deteriorated, and his death in 1983 apparently brought Bellow's involvement with the Chicago chapter entirely to an end.

Leader claims, very plausibly, that Bellow never formally "committed" himself to anthroposophy. I assume this means that he never declared himself to be anything other than a wide reader of Steiner who practiced the meditation exercises that can be found in *Knowledge of the Higher Words*. Bellow never seems to have formally sought membership in the Society, which is in itself a formal step in participating in anthroposophy, and one can understand his doubts. Bellow seems to have believed in reincarnation and pursued evidence of the existence of worlds beyond the threshold of the visible. But other elements of anthroposophy kept his interest in check, and the most important of those was the role of Christ in the evolution of human consciousness. Barfield describes the subject at length in the essay "From East to West," reprinted in *Romanticism Comes of Age*. Steiner's interpretation of the Incarnation is inevitably esoteric and quite unacceptable to the Catholic Church, which put his books on its *Index* of forbidden publications. But Steiner considered it a central experience in the history of the development of human consciousness, always the central issue for him.

Writing to Rudi Lissau, a Viennese Jew who produced a book on Steiner, Bellow discloses what seems to have been his chief difficulty in embracing anthroposophy:

I have always had peculiarly Jewish difficulties with Christianity in all its forms. . . . I have read much and thought much about the Jewish side of life during two Christian millennia, about being one of those on whom so much evil has been cast, and I can't help but trace some of this evil back to the Gospel themselves. On this question none of the Steiner literature has satisfied me.

In the same note, Bellow adds, "I can't blame you for saying that my interest in anthroposophy is waning. All doctrines have to be squared with my own outlook—I nearly said my innate outlook. It was in fact that same outlook that led me to find Steiner so compelling."

Rudolf Steiner seems to drop out of Leader's biography by the time he is writing about Bellow's seventies, which would be in the late 1980s. He lived until 2005. Elements of anthroposophy persisted in Bellow's mind and work until at least 1990, and I offer as evidence one of Bellow's last published short stories, "Something to Remember Me By." A mysterious and melancholy composition, the final page presents some of the ideas presented in a high-spirited form in *Humboldt's Gift*.