

If I'm Laughing, It Can't Be Serious

Humboldt's Gift, Humor and the Health of the Soul

To read *Humboldt's Gift* is to be inundated with ideas, information, and impressions in a way that is comparable to the way in which cultural history seems to engulf the narrator, Charlie Citrine. What keeps the reader's head above water is the humor. Laughter enables one to be buoyed up by the relentless energy of the writing rather than swamped and overwhelmed.

No one likes to have to explain a joke. If the hearer gets it, there is no call for explanation; if the hearer doesn't get it, explanation may enable them to see why, but it rarely restores the full effect of the joke. A joke explained is a joke deflated or even spoiled. Analyzing the humor of Bellow's novel may seem to be an unnecessary and misguided response to the experience of reading it, but to write any sort of commentary on the book which does not do justice to its humor seems an even less appropriate response and risks being a complete misinterpretation. If a reader did not laugh out loud while reading the book, I would question whether he understood it properly, even if he seems capable of providing a very sophisticated explication of the mythic elements or cultural implications of the characters and situations. Just as the meaning of the book can not be reduced to any subset of the philosophical forest fire that seems to be raging uncontrollably in Charlie Citrine's mind, it can not be adequately described by an explanation of the characters and relationships in terms of myth or cultural paradigms. Citrine may be Orpheus as Alvin Kernan points out (187), but he is also a character in a wonderfully funny comedy.

In most forms of popular culture, comedy is its own justification. A movie-goer, who might complain about a lack of believability or fully developed characters in an action film or drama, will feel he got his money's worth from a comedy if he laughed often enough no matter how the laughs are evoked. If it is funny, it is entertaining; and the audience rarely cares what it means.

Saul Bellow is clearly interested in doing something more than entertaining his audience. There is passion and a high-minded moral earnestness driving his writing. He did after all receive the 1976 Nobel Prize in Literature "for the human understanding and subtle analysis of contemporary culture that are combined in his work." His acceptance speech, delivered about a year after the publication of *Humboldt's Gift*, is a call to artists to return to their proper vocation. Aligning himself with those other great stand-up comics, Dostoevski, Tolstoy, Conrad and Proust, he says

Only art penetrates what pride, passion, intelligence and habit erect on all sides—the seeming realities of this world. There is another reality, the genuine one, which we lose sight of. This other reality is always sending us hints, which, without art, we can't receive. Proust calls these hints our "true impressions." The true impressions, our persistent intuitions, will, without art, be hidden from us and we will be left with nothing but a "terminology for practical ends which we falsely call life."

Charlie Citrine expresses this same concern in his typically more flamboyant manner:

The greatest things, the things most necessary for life, have recoiled and retreated. People are actually dying of this, losing all personal life and the inner being of millions, many many millions, is missing.

...Mankind must recover its imaginative powers, recover living thought and real being, no longer accept these insults to the soul and do it soon. Or else! (241)

The soul is that indefinable part of the human individual which gives it access to this "genuine reality," which permits it to receive the intuitions or "true impressions." Bellow is well aware of the difficulty of talking about the human soul these days:

The essence of our real condition, the complexity, the confusion, the pain of it is shown to us in glimpses, in what Proust and Tolstoy thought of as "true impressions." This essence reveals, and then conceals itself. When it goes away it leaves us again in doubt. But we never seem to lose our connection with the depths from which these glimpses come. The sense of our real powers, powers we seem to derive from the universe itself, also comes and goes. We are reluctant to talk about this because there is nothing we can prove, because our language is inadequate and because few people are willing to risk talking about it. They would have to say, "There is spirit" and that is taboo. So almost everyone keeps quiet about it, although almost everyone is aware of it. (Nobel Lecture)

And this, believe it or not, is the ultimate source of much of the laughter provoked by Humboldt's Gift -- this discrepancy between "genuine reality" and the "seeming realities of this world." Charlie Citrine and his life are funny because of their absurd contradictions. There is a constantly shifting perspective between the worldly, all-too-human world of a Chicago-based celebrity and the other-worldly Life of the Mind or Spiritual reality. Either looks (and is) absurd from the vantage point of the other as in the following exchange between Charlie and his mistress, Renata:

"...I couldn't have a love affair with the daughter of a man who was teaching me so much."

"He fills you with such bunk," she said.

"Renata, let me quote you a text. 'Though you are said to be alive you are dead. Wake up and put some strength into what is left, which must otherwise die.' That's from the Revelation of Saint John, more or less."

Indulgently smiling Renata rose and straightened her miniskirt, saying, "You'll wind up with bare feet in the Loop carrying one of those where-will-you-spend-eternity signs. Get on the phone, for God's sake, and talk to this man Huggins, Humboldt's executor. And for dinner don't try to take me to Rumpelmayer's again." (309)

The only place there is in Chicago for the revelations of St. John is on a sign carried by a homeless mental case. Even Citrine fumbles the ball with a "more or less" accurate citation when he attempts to introduce St. John into the middle of a sexual entanglement. The full impact of the humor in this depends, of course, on the reader giving some credence to the validity of St. John. Otherwise the only wit belongs to Renata's barb, and certainly one of the great sources of humor in the book is how witty Citrine's detractors can be. The wit of his opponents pulls the reader into their world and bolsters the validity of its claims on Charlie. And Charlie himself is a card carrying member of this world who can be equally caustic in his own assessments of himself as in his hesitation to open himself up to Humboldt's ex-wife, Kathleen:

I felt that Kathleen was a woman to whom I could talk. But the position was an embarrassing one. An old chaser who had lost his head over a beautiful gold-digging palooka, a romancer who was going to fulfill the dreams of his youth, suddenly wanting to discuss supersensible consciousness and democracy's great poem of death! (364)

The dreams of Charlie's youth are the metaphorical heart of the novel. He is referring here to erotic dreams but there is one moment when his intellectual or spiritual aspirations are tellingly described in erotic terms:

...the individual has no way to prove out what's in his heart -- I mean the love, the hunger for the external world, the swelling excitement over beauty for which there are no acceptable terms of knowledge. True knowledge is supposed to be a monopoly of the scientific world view. But human beings have all sorts of knowledge. They don't have to apply for the right to love the world." (352)

Charlie's ultimate goal is an erotic relationship with Reality. This reality must include the gritty physicality of Chicago as well as the "supersensible" world. The relationship involves the soul or the "Life of the Mind" as well as the body and the checkbook.

Intellectual pursuits are as essential to Charlie as skirt chasing. As his brother Julius says:

"...You were always spouting some theory to us at the table -- Marx, or Darwin, or Schopenhauer, or Oscar Wilde. If it wasn't one damn thing it was another. You had the biggest collection of Modern Library books on the block. And I'd bet you fifty to one you're ass deep in a crank theory this minute. You couldn't live without it." (375)

Even as late as the Fifties or Sixties it was possible to have what might now be described as a fetish for the Modern Library. It was difficult, but not impossible, to read every book in the collection and to feel that this was the definitive canon. Everything else was peripheral. It was still possible to imagine that there was a small slippery rock jutting above the surface on which one could stand a few feet above sea level and get a perspective on all of Western Civilization. In the ensuing decades the water level has risen to the point where we are all swimming now with no land in sight. This is part of the modern crisis to which Bellow is responding and part of the reason why the novel has the urgency of a heated conversation. As Charlie puts it:

In the past, thoughts were too real to be kept like a cultural portfolio of stocks and bonds. But now we have mental assets. As many world views as you like. Five different epistemologies in an evening. Take your choice. They're all agreeable, and not one is binding or necessary or has true strength or speaks straight to the soul. It was this paper-taking, this passing of highbrow currency that had finally put my back up. (3780)

Even this sense of urgency is not immune to a satiric perspective. Both George Sweibel and his secretary, Sharon, "dig" emergencies, and George is "always looking for something basic, 'honest' 'of the earth,' primordial." (56) Somehow in the description of Sweibel even the incident in which Sharon's throat was slit takes on a kind of humor. It is horrifying, but it is also ludicrous in some awful way and it becomes telling in the context. What it "tells," it seems to me, is the same thing that the relentless pressures on Charlie tell us. People are after him and into him for all kinds of reasons and things. In some ways he is in dire straits, but it is absurd -- partially because he has cooked his own goose in so many ways and partially because there is this enormous discrepancy between the realities of his life and the reality of which he dreams in his intellectual flights.

George Sweibel functions as a kind of parody of Charlie Citrine. In some ways the novel is structured by means of analogies between worldviews embodied in characters. George is to Charlie as

Charlie is to Humboldt; Cantabile's wife is to Cantabile as Charlie is to Denise or Renata, etc. Charlie describes George:

He denounces eggheads, but he really loves culture. He spends whole days trying to read difficult books, knocking himself out. Not with great success. And when I introduce him to intellectuals like my learned friend Durnwald, he shouts and baits them and talks dirty, his face gets red. (57)

George, of course, has his own perspective on Durnwald:

He's the professor's professor. And nobody can interest him. He's heard it or read it all. When I try to talk to him I feel that I'm playing the ping-pong champion of China. I serve the ball, he smashes it back, and that's the end of that. I have to serve again and pretty soon I'm out of balls. (57)

Renata's assessment of Charlie is not too different from this:

"...You're not really such an idealist--you're full of hostility, dying to attack a lot of people in your very own magazine and insult everyone right and left. Thaxter's arrogance is nothing compared to your. You let him think he's getting away with murder, but that's really because you can double his arrogance in spades." (240)

When Renata challenges Charlie to explain why he is pouring his money into Ark, the magazine venture with Thaxter, Charlie responds:

"The idea of the last few centuries are used up."

"Who says! See what I mean by arrogance," Renata interrupted.

"But so help me, they are used up. Social ideas, political, philosophical theories, literary ideas (poor Humboldt!), sexual ones, and, I suspect, even scientific ones."

"What do you know about all these things, Charlie? You've got brain fever." (241)

Humboldt was carted away in a straight jacket. Charlie is still balanced on the razor's edge trying to reconcile two incompatible worlds.

While Charlie devoured the Modern Library his brother took the opposite approach in a way that explicitly summarizes the cultural evolution of America:

Our serious Old World parent certainly had produced a pair of American clowns--one demonic millionaire clown, and one higher-thought clown. (378)

Rather than try to stand above the water level on the rock of cultural history Julius built a high powered boat to cruise on the surface. His approach is underscored by his professed lack of memory:

He wished to be a man entirely of today, and he had forgotten or tried to forget the past. Unassisted he could remember nothing, he said. For my part there was nothing that I could forget. He often told me, "You inherited the old man's terrific memory. And before him there was that old bastard, his old man. Our grandfather was one of ten guys in the Jewish Pale who knew the Babylonian Talmud by heart. Lots of good that did. I don't even know what it is. But that's where you get your memory." The admiration was not unmixed. I don't think he was always grateful to me for remembering so well. My own belief was that without memory existence was metaphysically injured, damaged. (235)

Charlie's memory is not just exhaustive details of his own childhood but also the overwhelming residue of Western civilization which he has consciously tried to assimilate and which determines his identity as well as his thought. His growing conviction that the dead are still with us is a reflection of his need to extricate himself from the "failed ideas of three centuries." (241)

The problem is that he must pull himself up by his own bootstraps, and it seems impossible to know whether his meditations promise a breakthrough or a breakdown. When Thaxter rebuffs Renata saying that he is interested in the way Charlie's mind works, she responds with what amounts to a definition of the kind of cultural studies which have taken center stage in the world of academia:

"Charlie's kinky theorizing puts together the way the US Congress does its business with Immanuel Kant, Russian Gulag camps, stamp collecting, famine in India, love and sleep and death and poetry. The less said about the way his mind works, the better." (351)

Charlie's ex-wife Denise agrees with Renata's diagnosis:

"When you get solemn you're a riot, Charlie. And now you're going in for mysticism, as well as keeping that fat broad, as well as becoming an athlete, as well as dressing like a dude--all symptoms of mental and physical decline. I'm so sorry, really. Not just because I'm the mother of your children, but because you once had brains and talent. you might have stayed productive if the Kennedys had lived. Their kind of action kept you responsible and sane." (218)0

All of this seems to imply that *Humboldt's Gift* is a staged philosophical debate, a kind of Platonic dialog in which it is the ideas that really matter rather than the form in which they are being expressed. But just as the ideas in Plato's dialogs are really subservient to the process which is being presented so the ideas here are only one element in the work. What is being communicated is the urgency and absurdity of our situation along with a powerful expression of hope, a conviction that in absurdity there is a connection with what is best in human nature. The laughter frees us temporarily and opens a door to our true selves.

In his Nobel acceptance speech Bellow said, "Conrad was right to appeal to that part of our being which is a gift." Humboldt's gift to Charlie is Charlie's soul. Humboldt is a martyr whose connection to Charlie enables Charlie to be "saved." The literal gift is a preposterous leveraging of the workings of the world which rescues Charlie financially. It is like a divine intervention for which there is no sane, rational explanation. Humboldt's life itself is a haunting inspiration to Charlie; it is a wake-up call for his soul. And *Humboldt's Gift* is Bellow's gift to us of what we already have within us

Works Cited

Bellow, Saul. Humboldt's Gift. New York: Avon Books, 1976.

---.Nobel Lecture: December 12,1976. <<http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1976/bellow-lecture.html>>

Kernan, Alvin B. "Humboldt's Gift" Saul Bellow: Modern Critical Views. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1986. 179-194