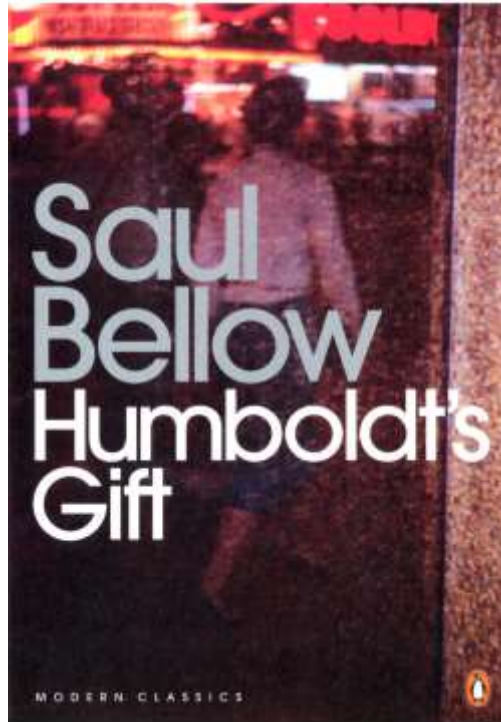


Befriending Death: Death, Soul and Eternity in Saul Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift*

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Abstract

Saul Bellow (1915-2005), winner of many awards including Pulitzer Prize and Nobel Prize, seriously discusses the theme of death along with its interrelated concepts of soul and eternity in his well received novel *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), which earned him a Pulitzer Prize. He harmonizes various perspectives, ideologies, thoughts, and reflections of different writers such as Heidegger (phenomenology of death), Whitman (death), Plato (soul), and Rudolf Steiner (anthroposophy) together with traditional religious outlook to enhance his own stance on death. Just like his novels, short stories, and essays, Bellow's handling of death too deserves special attention and remains purely conspicuous.

The Riddle of Death

The riddle of death, existence of soul, eternity, and all such notions stand before living beings as real predicaments and unsolved problems. Among them the unavoidable nature of death and its enigmatic character puzzled humanity from time immemorial, and the more they try to bridle and conquer death the more evasive it proved to be. Majority are

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afraid of it, some adore and love it, a few glorify and love it, and the rest reject and take it as it occurs. Philosophers conceptualised death, intellectuals idealised it and sages and saints spiritualised the divine relatedness of death.

Amalgamation of Ideas



Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saul_Bellow
Saul Bellow (1915-2005)

Saul Bellow, a master craftsman, brings together various ideas on death, soul and eternity in his novel *Humboldt's Gift*. One can see here an amalgamation of manifold philosophy, spirituality, ideas which are diverse in their perspective, but bear some sort of similarity, regarding death, soul and eternity. Even though they appear to be natural and pacific for an intellectual giant like Bellow, a keener probe into the depth of these ideas would take one to the realms of Hinduism, “anthroposophy” (Dugan, n. p), Buddhism, Christianity, and specific notions of Martin Heidegger, Plato, and Walt Whitman. Bellow does not hesitate to express his indebtedness to these and many other writers who had a specific interest in the theme of death. He comes out with some of his beautiful, genuine recollections of death, which is a horrendous and at the same time an unavoidable reality in organic life.

Impacted by the Common Trends

Bellow does not belong to the so called club of writers of death, but he often seems to be concerned with the theme of death. Convincing and challenging ideas of death occur recurrently in his novels and short stories and such reflections must be influenced by certain common trends of his era such as existentialism and absurdist concepts. He becomes so optimistic and takes up the line of Heidegger and Whitman who were very much taken up with the notion of death and they liked to see it as a jubilant idea and an inevitable reality.

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A Reality, Devoid of Any Choice

Bellow often refers to death as a reality devoid of any choice except in suicide (*The Victim 163*). Sarcastically in *Herzog* the protagonist wants to end his life as a means of elusion from the suffocating experiences of exile and alienation, but he does not go for it.

Ditching the Bondages of Earthly Life

In *Humboldt's Gift* the author instigates the readers to take death easily and seriously of course and ditch the bondages of aspirations, physical cravings, victories, credentials, and anxieties of earthly life or in other words beware of “Maya” (202) according to Indian philosophy. Obviously he takes death as the leveller and such an insight must have prompted him to state that “The hospitals didn't want him now, so they carried him on to the morgue. At the morgue there were no readers of modern poetry. The name Von Humboldt Fleisher meant nothing. So he lay there, another derelict” (16).

Healthy Detachment

Throughout the novel, *Humboldt's Gift*, a reader finds a healthy detachment to life and its passions and sardonically the protagonist, Charles Citrine, even when he enjoys and desires for erotic pleasures and the gratification of the senses nurtures a sense of death and broods over the boredom of life. The irony of life and the inescapable nature of death are portrayed in the novel with the splendid victory of the famous poet Humboldt, and that is the opening of the novel, and the reburial of the same poet marks the novel's end. By reading such a novel one is forced to ponder over the vainglorious, shallow, trifling nature of human achievements and dreams.

Platonic Idea of the Protagonist

Bellow, in *Humboldt's Gift*, draws his beautiful word picture of death; he says: “You could be sure that when you were dreaming your best somebody would start banging at the door – the famous Butcher Boy from Porlock. In this case, the kid's name was Death” (395).

The protagonist, Citrine, is always overwhelmed with the Platonic idea of the existence of an ideal world and sees death question “which Walt Whitman saw as the question of questions” (*Humboldt's Gift 66*) which always help him to overcome the

predicaments and excruciating pains of mundane existence. Obviously he is not a saint who discards every sort of pleasure from his life; instead, the reader witnesses a gradual transformation and a desire for the perennial rapture emanating from the everlasting existence of the soul. Besides, his inclination towards anthroposophy combined with Heideggerian phenomenology of death helps the hero to abandon “thought of death in the horrendous old ways” (220).

Heidegger and Bellow

By bringing the hero in terms with death, Bellow takes up the line of Heidegger where the latter proclaims in an article titled “*What Did Martin Heidegger Say about Death*” that “If I take death into my life, acknowledge it, and face it squarely, I will free myself from the anxiety of death and the pettiness of life-and only then will I be free to become myself” (n.p) and develops this thought further in the novel. One confronts a vacillating hero, who is susceptible to the fluctuations of the earth-bound life, when he says that “the thought of the life we are now leading may pain us as the thought of death pains us now” (*Humboldt’s Gift* 336) still he sounds optimistic and announces the exuberance of eternal life. He knew that this pain would be the result of one’s “ignorance of death” (350) which may lead to humanities destruction and wanted to “go through the bitter gates of death” (335).

Whitman and Bellow

Bellow, by describing the life of a great poet Humboldt in *Humboldt’s Gift*, imbibes the death thoughts of Whitman, who glorified and celebrated the notion of death as the “Strong Deliveress” (Chamundeswari Devi, n. p) in his poems. Bellow too thinks along with Whitman “who was convinced that democracy would fail unless its poets gave it great poems of death” (*Humboldt’s Gift* 376).

The quintessential Whitman who takes a different position by saying “that something is the All, and the idea of All, with the accompanying idea of eternity, and of itself, the soul, buoyant, indestructible, sailing space forever, visiting every region, visiting every region, as a ship the sea” (Chamundeswari Devi, n. p) is reverberated in Bellow when he reflects that he “wasn’t experiencing the suffocating grave or dreading an eternity of boredom, nowadays. Instead I often felt unusually light and swift paced, as if I were on a weightless bicycle and

sprinting through the star world” (*Humboldt’s Gift* 220-221). He also imagines that the departed soul of Humboldt would be watching humanity from the other world.

Usefulness of Death

The inevitability and usefulness of death are relished in the imagery of a mirror – a mirror of thought – which reflects everything, and he compares it to the earth and the reflected figures as the “embodied thought” (262); and his meditation goes on: “death is the dark backing that a mirror needs if we are to see anything. Every perception causes a certain amount of death in us, and this darkening is a necessity” (262). The Heideggerian concept of the Dasein that is, “being-in-this-world” (Peters, n. p), and its possibility of death because of its “thrownness” (Peters, n. p) into the world are explicitly mentioned here through and through. Heidegger opines that ideas connoted by death are nothing but suffering, pain, misfortune, sorrow and the list goes on. Unless one conquers such a fear of death one cannot have a genuine existence. In his own words “The awareness and acceptance of death is a requirement for authentic existence” (Peters, n. p). So the Bellowian idea of death is corroborated by and correlated with the Heideggerian phenomenology of death.

Two Different Attitudes, Two Different Characters

In the novel, *Humboldt’s Gift*, Bellow portrays two sets of characters who actually represent two different attitudes to life and death, and interestingly this becomes a common element in almost all his novels, definitely in varying degrees of expression and embodiment. One group indulge in all sorts of pleasure just like Mrs. Harkavy in *The Victim*, who strongly believes that “someday science will conquer death” (Bellow, 209), and they behave like the inauthentic human person mentioned by Heidegger who tries to hide death by convincing themselves that even if people die right now it has nothing to do with them and believes that death is not yet present at hand (Peters, n. p).

Heidegger’s suggestion is somewhat similar to the reflection given in *Mahabharata* where Yudhishtir was quizzed by Yama and gets the answer relating to life and death.

The other group, death conscious, doubtlessly a few in numbers, takes into their hearts the invincible nature of death and the passing nature of human achievements and happiness. They anticipate death, take it positively and prepare for it wholeheartedly and remain

unmoved at all sorts of misfortunes in life. Here these characters reflect death thoughts of Whitman who sees death as a path to eternity and not as a chaotic experience. One, who reads *Song of Myself*, where Whitman lauds the soothing effect of death, really feels how confident he is with death:

“It is not chaos or death – it is form, union, plan - it is eternal life – it is Happiness” (McMichael 1: 2064).

The Hero's Thoughts on Death

The more ruined the hero the more vivid and higher are his thoughts on death. Even when he finds himself penniless, forlorn, exasperated, and dejected, Citrine tries to be unaffected and collected. Even at this juncture he forms his idiosyncrasy with much more clarity and consciousness. He says how he had set himself for a “final and ever higher achievement, namely, an indispensable metaphysical revision, a more correct way of thinking about the question of death” (*Humboldt's Gift* 408).

Boredom of Life and Tedium of Death

In the novel *Humboldt's Gift* one sees a progress, haphazard in style, or rather two different steps in the protagonist's conception of death, soul and eternity and he takes up the role of an intellectual in the beginning when he broods over the tedium which he equals with alienation (203) and extensively on the tedium of life and death.

Through the hero, Bellow speaks elaborately, which expresses his eloquence and erudition, on the all pervading nature of boredom of life, a common phenomenon shared by entire humanity, which would disseminate terror and blooms in death. According to him this boredom goes hand in hand with terror, may be terror of death (about which he is almost silent), and sees a nexus between boredom and power in the modern world. He posits himself by saying that “This combination of power and boredom has never been properly examined. Boredom is an instrument of social control. Power is the power to impose boredom, to command stasis, to combine this stasis with anguish. The real tedium, deep tedium, is seasoned with terror and with death” (201).

Gradually the tedium of death takes up the position of the boredom of life. He imagines as a common man who is after all sorts of pleasures of life “how boring death will

be! To lie in the grave, in one place, how frightful” (202). He must be speaking about the unbearable experiences of alienation accompanied by constant and haunting death thought faced by millions of people in this world, and those who are devoid of any faith in life after death and who go after an active life would naturally be afraid of the boredom of death. What is exposed here is the pessimistic side of death and the eternal doom followed by it.

Thus the terror discussed by Bellow can be the outcome of an idea of death and its tedium and again he traces back the causes of such boredom either as “the lack of a personal connection with the external world” (202) or the seat of boredom can be “the self conscious ego” (203). A similar one, like that of tedium and terror, is echoed in Heidegger too where he speaks about the dual nature of death that causes anxiety. According to him the quest for death leads one to its very nature, that is, an uttermost possibility which is certain but indefinite, and such a duality creates anxiety and fear.

Esoteric Outlook

From such an imaginary and intellectual realm, Bellow comes out to an esoteric outlook towards death, soul, eternity, reincarnation, karma, and rebirth and assumes the position of a clairvoyant.

Bellow admits the influence of anthroposophy (*Humboldt's Gift* 223) founded by Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) in 1912, and he comes across the indestructible and perennial nature of the soul and its pre-existence and the idea of rebirth which are closely associated with Platonic philosophy, Hinduism and Christianity. One can easily trace the deep influence of anthroposophy on Bellow throughout the novel. The protagonist sounds as if he is pretty sure of the eternity of the human soul when he confirms the idea that the “soul belongs to a greater, an all embracing outside. It's got to go” (332). He expresses the miseries of a layman, a representative of the entire humanity, who is after love, glory, passions, and yet hopes that the soul would be free “in the life to come” (356) and there he expects “no such personal or erotic bondage. You won't have to bribe another soul to listen while you explain what you are about, and what you had meant to do, and what you had done, and what others had done, et cetera” (356).

Drawing Closer to the Dead

Bellow discards traditional and ordinary spiritualism and tries to “draw close to the dead” (*Humboldt’s Gift* 438), something which is discouraged by ordinary spiritualism, and he is so sure about the possibility of communication with the dead, may be due to anthroposophical influence. Here Bellow takes a further step unlike Whitman or Heidegger and deals with a more enigmatic and metaphysical conceptualisation of eternity which is purely intuitive and to a great extent intellectual.

Citrine is not reluctant to admit his earlier hesitancy and disgust to concede the idea of soul after death which he treated as distortion; then there comes a gradual recognition of such thoughts and ideas in his life and thinking. In his opinion, such contempt for a spiritual line of thinking must have been the turnout of an empiricist formation. Later he recognises how he had learned to stand apart from his own frailties and absurdities of his character and goes to the extent of saying that “I was a little dead myself” (439). He evaluates with satisfaction how this “detachment was a sobering kind of experience” (439) in his life. Again such an experience strengthens him to progress more spiritually and begins to feel the presence of a force within himself, and he writes: “At the best of times, separations and departures unnerve me and I experienced great anxiety now but felt I had something reliable within” (379). One further witnesses a remarkable assumption and a belief that unfurls in the hero and he agrees that his “postulate was that there was a core of the eternal in every human being” (438-439).

Different religious and anthroposophical ideas are embedded in his meditation about the dead and the dead ones such as the sufferings of the dead and their pain, unfulfilled desires of the dead, rituals required for their eternal repose, visitations of the departed souls to the living ones, purgatory, and their desire for the completion of truth (*Humboldt’s Gift* 440-441). Even when he expresses his desire to go beyond the traditional spirituality he comes closer to it when he says that the “painful experience of life sometimes does qualify some people to advance more rapidly in spiritual development” (440).

Befriending Death

One who knows a thing is not an alien to it, need not fear it, and even can be a friend in potency. Bellow befriends death, no longer fears its timorousness, and even goes to the level of conquering the invincible, hideous, grotesque nature of death, not a real subjugation but of course a metaphorical one. He takes death very much into his heart and there is this

death consciousness in each of his novels; he assumes the role of a seer and a pedagogue in his relation with death and helps humanity to get rid of the fear of death and welcome it positively. He comes closer to the metaphysical notion of death by John Donne who defied it by not permitting death to be pride. Nevertheless his influence by other thinkers and ideologies, Bellow left his own contributions on topic of death and tried to propagate them through his novels.

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